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Engaging an international professional learning community to support underrepresented educators in sports leadership

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This article provides insights from a collaborative grant effort centered on supporting women in sports leadership through the context of a global professional learning community. This grant initiative, called IDEA-SPORT, focused on enhancing the leadership and sports knowledge of girls and other vulnerable and under-served populations in sports-related fields by encouraging leadership and sports collaboration through curricular design and leadership exercises. This article will focus on leveraging an international, bi-directional professional learning community and deliver a collaborative data-informed workshop focused on leadership education for social responsibility.

KEYWORDS

women in leadership, sports leadership, global professional learning community, social responsibility, women in sports

Introduction

Professional development focused on sports leadership for women is largely non-existent in eastern Pakistan. This is not unique, however, to this region of the world, as an examination of sports-related organizations such as the International Olympic Committee (Pape, 2020) indicate continued underrepresentation of women in sports leadership. Cultivating women's leadership in sports is important as sports engagement is often a reflection of broader societal issues (Testard-Valliant, 2019; Gatluak, 2024). Given the societal lens through which sports are perceived and supported, working across cultures can broaden and deepen the sustainable development of women's leadership in sports and sports-related leadership opportunities (James et al., 2024; Nanayakkara, 2012). A cross-cultural team leveraged the notion of a professional learning community (PLC) to thus cultivate a framework of supporting women's engagement in sports leadership through PLC-centered professional development modules aimed at bolstering knowledge of, and engagement in, sports in learning communities that were often underrepresented in terms of women's sports leadership. This effort, titled Innovating and Designing Engaging Applications in Sports Promoting Outreach, Responsibility, and Teamwork (IDEA-SPORT) was built on previous collaborative successes

(see Sterrett et al., 2020; Moallem et al., 2021) and sponsored through a grant by the United States Department of State to meet the call in Pakistan to “promote leadership for women through sports,” to foster “life skills such as problem-solving, conflict resolution, teamwork, and leadership” (U.S. Department of State, 2023, p. 4) and to create greater opportunities in Pakistan through outreach, teamwork, and shared enrichment activities. By leveraging a globally-focused PLC, we sought to bridge gaps for women in leadership, particularly leadership in sports, to impact greater social responsibility.

Considering this work through a corporate social responsibility (CSR) conceptual framework provides leadership insights into how societal and cultural contexts impact the sustainability of the work (Silvestri and Veltri, 2020). The authors suggest focusing on three levels of perspective, including the individual (micro), the organizational (meso), and the institutional (macro) (Silvestri and Veltri, 2020, p. 585).

A globally-minded professional learning community

A professional learning community centers on a group of educators who are ensuring that students learn, fostering a culture of collaboration, and focusing on results in the classroom (DuFour, 2004). Working across societal contexts (as several universities in both Pakistan and the United States were engaged in this effort) can be a challenge. Navigating specific cultural contexts, juggling different time zones, and fostering teamwork, when the team has not yet worked together outside of virtual planning meetings, requires time and trust. Global perspectives can be better understood through the notion of a PLC that seeks to focus on the critical components of understanding what it is that we want our students to learn (learning objective); realizing how we will know when each student has acquired the knowledge and skills (data); and knowing when to respond when students do not learn, while also knowing how to extend and enrich the learning experience for students who have already learned the material (next steps) (DuFour, 2016, p. xii). It’s vitally important to understand that “in new places, people will have different views of what constitutes leadership” (Billsberry et al., 2018, p. 177). Working together in both a face-to-face and through a virtual modality allows for a global professional learning community to foster networking and collaboration (Tulowitzki, 2021). By working together on a relatively tight timeline to design sports leadership workshops, collaborating with partners to ensure we had an inclusive learning environment, and then being intentional in ensuring the sustainability of the project, we fostered a cross-cultural PLC to support underrepresented leaders together. Applying the CSR framework, leadership is thus important in supporting this macro level, being mindful of societal and cultural forces (Silvestri and Veltri, 2020).

Sports as empowerment

Sports play an important role in shaping the way people play, work, and exist together in society as “values that provide a moral context for teamwork in sport are the same as those that provide a similar context in society” (Boxill, 2015, p. 23). Sports provide a sense of identity and social cohesion through the notion of being a part of

something greater than oneself by being a *part of a team*. Yet, women are underrepresented in areas of sports leadership (Burton, 2015; Evans and Pfister, 2021). As Halldorsson et al. (2017) explained, “teams, it seems, are like other social groups characterized by emergent structural properties that shape experiences and constrain behaviors and influence agency” (p. 1281). Boxill (2015) further observed that sports reflected and affected key features of society, including “a sense of belonging and respect” (p. 25). Sports that impact society are not taught in a vacuum but should be taught through the lens of leadership, interaction, and overcoming problems or challenges. Doing so instills salient life skills in students “to discuss their problems (either relational, instructional, or tactical) and find their own solutions to their problems” (Farias et al., 2018, p. 290). Also, when applying leadership lessons from the classroom onto the athletic field, researchers have noted, “the power of the mind in the student-athlete increases, not only academically but also athletically” (Ohlson et al., 2022, p. 86). This could be acquainted with the *meso* level analysis of the corporate social responsibility framework of impacting the organizational level through interconnected teams (see Silvestri and Veltri, 2020). Thus, focusing on empowerment through leadership lessons *and* sports is an opportunity to impact society by reimagining traditional leadership frameworks.

Dearth of women leaders

While professional learning communities and empowerment through sports anchored this work, the notion of supporting female leaders was a vital component that permeated the work of the team. Research shows that there is a dearth of women leaders. Fisk and Overton (2019) note that “despite progress in women’s social standing and legal rights over the past century, top leadership positions remain dominated by men” noting that women struggle at both a macro (cultural) level as well as a meso (interactions and resistance) levels (pp. 319–320). Disturbingly, there are implications for women in sports, as researchers have noticed a trend of women in sports leadership decreasing, a decrease in women coaching, and barriers for taking on leadership roles in sports (Kraft et al., 2020). It has been noted that despite female athletes making gains in the U.S., they are still largely underrepresented in all levels of sports and moreover, “there is still progress to be made in terms of equitable participation opportunities for girls and women throughout the world” (Burton, 2015, p. 155). Supporting underrepresented educators, such as women coaches and teachers, in areas related to sports leadership is important in then uplifting women in various positions of authority and influence (Gagnon, 2019; Gray and Weese, 2023). Women educators in areas of sports leadership effectively play a crucial role in promoting gender equality by further encouraging female participation in sports in Pakistan (Afshi et al., 2020). These women leaders serve as role models, as they challenge traditional gender norms and stereotypes that often restrict women’s involvement in sports (Jahan, 2024; Naseer et al., 2020). By providing leadership opportunities and mentorship, these Pakistani educators empower women to further pursue their aspirations to further serve in leadership roles in areas related to sports (Jahan, 2024; Naseer et al., 2020). However, their potential impact is negatively affected by inadequate funding, professional development and institutional support. This IDEA-SPORT work sought to leverage a professional learning community to address the

gap in women leaders in sports (James et al., 2024; Voelker, 2016). Addressing the macro, meso, and micro levels through the focused lens of corporate social responsibility is necessary to create lasting, systemic change. The role of sports and leadership professional development in building empowerment and community provides a powerful mechanism for uplifting underrepresented groups. On the micro level, leadership traits can emerge, such as servant leadership in which actions that the individual takes, in this case related to leading through sports, can impact the greater community as a “pivotal leader” that is able to face societal and cultural complexities (Silvestri and Veltri, 2020).

Background and rationale for the collaborative innovation

This effort built on a successful relationship between educators at Baylor University in Texas (US), the University of North Carolina Wilmington (US) and the University of Education, Lahore in Pakistan; seven of the collaborators on this grant had worked together a prior State Department grant focused on STEM education, which helped strengthen a working relationship between faculty in both countries (see Sterrett et al., 2020; Moallem et al., 2021). The team worked to add several additional universities in the eastern region of Pakistan to be able to support 10 secondary schools consisting of over 1,000 students and 25 teachers and coaches through a year-long effort focused on collaborative sports and leadership curricular planning, a week-long winter professional development intensive session held in Pakistan, and ongoing virtual professional development to sustain the work of sports and leadership education in Pakistan.

Beginning in the fall of 2023, the team met to identify key areas of leadership (such as teamwork, overcoming challenges, and conflict resolution) and sports areas (such as table tennis, badminton, soccer/football, and warm-up exercises) that were most needed in the context of secondary education in Pakistan. Local stakeholder voices (e.g., university faculty, secondary teachers and coaches) were consulted to ensure alignment with the needs of the established curricular priorities while also striving to foster an inclusive culture centered on a collective responsibility to ensure all students are given sufficient opportunity to high-quality learning (Bombardelli, 2020; Fahrney, 2016). Our planning meetings held virtually at a time mutually beneficial to all (because of the time zones, usually around sunrise for those in the United States, and near sunset for those in Pakistan), ensured that our planning was mindful of our established project priorities, inclusive of the full learning community. We were intentional in facilitating focused activities and lessons that spanned both the targeted sports and leadership areas. These lessons were planned under the notion that while certain individuals may be natural or born leaders, leadership is learnable and can be developed through experiential educational programs (Channing, 2020; Doh, 2003).

Pedagogical framework

Beginning in the fall of 2023, the IDEA-SPORT team met every 2 weeks to develop a design of the week-long workshop conference that was to be held in Pakistan. This would involve travel by the US team as well as on-the-ground recruitment and coordination by the

Pakistan team. Based on feedback from the participating teachers and coaches, the IDEA-SPORT team designed a four-day workshop framework that included the following components (see Table 1).

Learning environment

Our learning environment was anchored in a one-week workshop conference held at the university in Lahore, Pakistan. This mix of conference session style keynotes (with a full audience of about 60 participants), balanced with interactive activities (inside and outside) provided movement and engagement throughout the day as participants learned new competencies in sports activities as well as leadership principles. The mix of speakers, including US professors who taught leadership concepts, university partners who shared success stories from their respective campuses, and concepts from local Pakistan coaches and athletes who shared about lessons learned in their sports careers, provided an engaging palette of topics and pedagogical approaches in both English and Urdu languages. The participants were teachers and coaches in the eastern Pakistan region, who worked in one of 10 participating schools. Additional participants from four Pakistan universities attended also.

The learning environment was further broadened and supported by integrating an online repository (via Padlet) of learning activities, work products, and shared examples of teachers, coaches and students incorporating the sports and leadership activities on their school grounds. This enabled affirmation and shared success stories beyond the workshop to further increase sustained engagement.

Results from the workshops—a look at pre- and post-survey data

The researchers from American and Pakistani universities collaborated in conducting pre- and post-surveys of Pakistani Middle and High School Physical Training (Education) teachers. Data were collected using a group-administered survey approach where the researchers made a “standard introductory statement” (Check and Schutt, 2012, p. 173) and was structured so as not to be too lengthy (see Zimba and Gasparyan, 2023). The researchers explained the survey items in both English and Urdu.

Pre-workshop-conference data was utilized by researchers to better understand the 17 participants’ levels of engagement in and through different sports, and to make any necessary adjustments to the workshop-conference content delivery. A Likert-type scale (1 = Poor/none; 2 = Fair; 3 = Good; 4 = Very Good; 5 = Excellent) was used to gather data for the pre-survey items. The overall average results for the focal sports (i.e., volleyball, badminton, cricket, football, baseball, tennis, table tennis) were compiled for items such as “I know the rules of the sport,” “I know the equipment of the sport,” “I feel comfortable playing the sport,” “I feel comfortable teaching about the sport,” “I feel comfortable encouraging students who are playing the sport,” “I can use this sport to teach teamwork,” “I can use this sport to teach leadership,” “I can use this sport to teach conflict resolution,” and “I can use this sport to teach problem-solving.” The post workshop-conference survey was conducted in similar fashion to the

TABLE 1 Four-day IDEA-SPORT workshop collaborative agenda.

Time slot	Day One	Day Two	Day Three	Day Four
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
	(Leadership)	(Teamwork)	(Problem-solving)	(Conflict resolution)
08:30 a.m.–9:00 a.m.	<i>Registration and attendance</i>			
09:00 a.m.–9:30 a.m. (Greetings, Introductions, warm-ups)	Welcome, introduction, and opening remarks by UE and BU teams	Greetings and recalling previous day’s learning by Drs. Sterrett and Bashir		
		Badminton and volleyball by university partners	Baseball, cricket and problem-solving by university partners	Soccer and conflict resolution by Ms. Hina Abel
		Transition to warm-up activity and icebreaker		
9:30 a.m.–10:15 a.m. (Teaching and learning for sports)	Cricket and table tennis by university partners and PLC by Dr. Bill Sterrett	Volleyball along with team-building by university partners	Baseball, other sports and problem-solving by university partners	Soccer and conflict resolution by Ms. Hina Abel and sharing insights on various games by Dr. Jess Boersma and Sohail Sukerha
10:15 a.m.–10:30 a.m.	<i>Tea break and networking</i>			
10:30 a.m.–12:00 p.m. (What and why of sports)	Sports and leadership by Bill Sterrett	Badminton and volleyball and teamwork by Brooke and Charlie Ramsey	Cricket, baseball and problem-solving by Brooke and Charlie Ramsey	Soccer (football) and other games and conflict resolution by Hina Abel, Jess Boersma, and Sohail
12:00–01:15 p.m.	<i>Group photo and lunch break</i>			
1:15–2:30 p.m. (Interactive conversations with local sports experts and players)	Drs. Ayaz, Ahsan and Aisha along with local experts	Drs. Ayaz, Ahsan and Aisha along with local experts	Drs. Ayaz, Ahsan and Aisha along with local experts	Drs. Ayaz, Ahsan and Aisha along with local experts
2:30 p.m.–2:45 p.m.	<i>Tea break and networking</i>			
2:45 p.m.–4:30 p.m. (Guided exercises)	Video testimonials with Dr. Mar Magnusen and former professional and NCAA Division I athletes			
	Table tennis and cricket & movement breaks	Table tennis, badminton and volleyball and movement breaks	Table tennis, baseball, martial arts and other sports and movement breaks	Table tennis, soccer (football) and other sports and movement breaks and certificate distribution

pre-survey. A total of 16 participants took part in this survey. As noted in Table 2, the post survey conducted at the end of the workshop-conference showed a noticeable uptick for each of the survey item’s results.

Additional post-survey questions asked participants to reflect on what, if anything, they would do differently as a result of their engagement in the workshops. Participants were also asked if being around other sports teachers and coaches influenced their understanding of the concepts taught during the sessions. Excerpted responses capture the following insights:

- “By sharing experiences, we learned a lot. How to solve problems by communication and teamwork.”
- “By sharing, discussing different ideas, strategies, and also by playing with them in the field, we learned more about teamwork.”
- “I have made new friends; I will keep in contact with them after the workshop ... to share and discuss my achievements after this workshop.”

Due to limited narrative responses, we did not organize these comments into emergent themes, yet these samples provide insights on lessons learned and some of the participants’ desire to maintain professional contacts following the workshop. This prompted us to design an online repository through the Padlet application for participants to share pictures and videos of sports and leadership lessons.

Results from the collaborators— perspectives from the researchers

Understanding the way the collaborative professional learning community worked together helps provide insights into the work. Thus, a thematic analysis of the researchers’ perspectives was completed. This approach is helpful for evaluating qualitative data because it includes the identification of important units through data coding as well as the organization of data into relevant and representative categories and themes (Lichtman, 2023). As per Braun and Clarke (2012), this process included several stages. These stages included data familiarization, data analysis, coding, and theme development, evaluation of themes and comparison of the themes to the entire data set, and theme labeling as well as clarifying the reasoning for inclusion within a specified category or group. An independent qualitative scholar uninvolved with the research project also completed a confirmatory coding to ensure the agreement. No theme disagreement was reported.

Perspectives from the researchers

William L. Sterrett served as the lead principal investigator and helped steer the grant through proposal submission through planning, execution, and various reporting stages. “The notion of leadership in sports, particularly in how we support those from underrepresented

TABLE 2 Pre- and post-survey data from IDEA-SPORT workshops.

Survey item	Pre-survey data (Scale of 1–5)	Post-survey data (Scale of 1–5)
	N = 17 respondents	N = 16 respondents
I know the rules of the sport.	2.41	3.29
I know the equipment of the sport.	2.73	3.46
I feel comfortable playing the sport.	2.77	3.63
I feel comfortable teaching about the sport	2.68	3.39
I feel comfortable encouraging students who are playing the sport	2.60	3.44
I can use this sport to teach teamwork	2.73	3.66
I can use this sport to teach leadership	2.54	3.49
I can use this sport to teach conflict resolution	2.31	3.30
I can use this sport to teach problem-solving	2.41	3.40

areas, is so important for society. However, it is not a grant that I would have necessarily applied for, if I was not first made aware of the great interest we have here at Baylor and in our department regarding sports, and if I was not blessed to have worked with a great team from Pakistan and here in the US on prior efforts. We really had a ‘Dream Team’ that first knew the landscape of sports leadership in Pakistan, which had sports leadership expertise, and was willing to work together in a professional learning community to bring different areas of society together in a very positive way.” Prior efforts with the team had taken place just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. “In recent years, we have adapted to use virtual aspects to help bridge the digital divide and share our success stories.

Aisha Mahmood, serving as co-principal investigator from the University of Education, Lahore, made significant contributions to the IDEA-SPORT project, including active participation during the project planning, execution, data collection and different reporting stages. She excelled in creating and organizing online collaborative spaces on Padlet, ensuring effective data collection, and engaging graduate students by offering them invaluable opportunities to participate as research assistants and workshop support team in this international project. Aisha Mahmood placed a strong emphasis on women’s leadership and empowerment through sports, designing interactive conversations with local sport experts and players to foster a dynamic learning environment. Her efforts focused on experiential learning for workshop participants, particularly physical education teachers, motivating them to engage in various sports activities during the workshop. The workshop helped them regain confidence and inspired them to take the lead in encouraging female students for sports. Aisha Mahmood’s collaboration with the US team helped transform her narrative, enhancing her leadership insights and reinforcing her commitment to leveraging sports as a powerful tool for social change and women empowerment.

Mar Magnusen served as the co-principal investigator alongside his Baylor colleague, Dr. William L. Sterrett. He helped design the sport activity and leadership curriculums, recruited collegiate and professional athletes to share video testimonials about the roles of sport in their lives, and analyzed the pre- and post-test data with Sohail Sukhera. “IDEA-SPORT was an incredible, collaborative process between a community of socially responsible partners. The process was centered on the collective good, and it allowed us to not

only build relationships and assist our partners in Pakistan but also engage in essential reflexivity to truly benefit from the cross-cultural PLC. Indeed, a satisfying feature of the experience was hearing about the role of sports in empowering women in Pakistan and then sharing the perspectives of female athletes who had participated in collegiate and/or professional sports in the United States. For example, one participant was a soccer player who was a former member of the U.S. Women’s National Team. Through short, recorded videos, the athletes were able to share how sport participation built their confidence, helped them develop leadership and team building skills, and experience enhanced emotional and physical wellbeing.”

Ahsan Bashir was a key leader in this effort due to his prior work with grant-related efforts with colleagues on the team, his academic leadership as a department chair, and his deep understanding of the regional context that involved partners immersed in sports leadership.

Sohail Sukhera played an important role in planning, implementation and follow-up evaluation check-ins. He developed relationships with partner teachers and coaches and was able to help navigate challenges and opportunities that arose during the grant. Using a formative evaluation approach, Sohail Sukhera seeks for opportunities to improve the project outcomes. “IDEA-SPORT universities’ teams from the U.S. and Pakistan have been dedicated throughout the planning and implementation phase to improve the outcomes of this workshop-conference. It has been my pleasure to be part of and observe this collaborative effort to improve the educational outcomes for women in Pakistan through sports. Participating in exchange of academic ideas as well as the practice of different sports and learning together about the positive societal implications was truly a rewarding experience.”

M. A. Saeed played an important leadership role as the interim Vice Chancellor of University of Education, Lahore. As the host institution of the December workshop conference, M. A. Saeed and his team established partnerships, coordinated logistics, and helped clarify the vision of the university and the IDEA-SPORT work. M. A. Saeed also contributed to developing the agenda and planning the key activities of four-day IDEA-SPORT workshop at UoE, Lahore.

Ayaz Muhammad Khan initially developed a plan to make national players tell their stories in 10min with the title in Urdu language “Meri kahani meri zubani” which means “My story in my own words.” The focus was to inform the audience regarding their leadership skills which included decision making, problem solving,

and conflict management. Similarly discussions among national players, sports teachers from universities and our sports teachers from different schools helped make connections and get motivation from each other's experience Ayaz Muhammad Khan with Aisha Mahmood and Ahsan Bashir organized helpful panel seminars where experts in sports leadership shared valuable insights.

Brooke Ramsey taught important leadership concepts stemming from her work as a principal and her 17 years of lived experiences in South Asia. She made key cultural connections and worked to engage with the participants throughout the course of the workshop to ensure they felt welcomed and confident to share their insights. Drawing on practices which help teachers form healthy, collaborative teams, she encouraged members to nurture humility and joy as they play with students and navigate conflict with peers and administration. "Humans were made for connection, and sports is an important way in which we accomplish that. The participants in Pakistan knew this innately, and I was privileged to participate in ways that fostered and celebrated our common humanity."

Charles Ramsey brought expertise as a historian and years of experience teaching in a higher education environment in both Pakistan and the United States. He fostered a sense of team-building and well-being throughout the year-long effort. "Having taught in Pakistan for many years, I was not surprised to see such vibrant and engaged participation. However, I was reminded by the experience of the power of play. Issues of status and power, even of gender differences, are readjusted in sport. Whether it is playing table tennis or cricket, or football (soccer), university faculty and administrators, along with teachers—male and female—competed, learned, laughed, and built trust from the activities. I saw, and I personally experienced, growth in vision through the learning activities. My sense of possibility was expanded through the hours of shared learning."

Jess Boersma supported the effort through planning and advising, ensuring continuity and alignment. He also produced and recorded a lecture on the role of leadership in conflict resolution. "It's inspiring to see how the collaborative, co-creational approach we have taken to this effort builds on previous successes and helps us both scale the number of participating institutions and extend the positive impact of educational leadership to more diverse institutional types and student populations."

Hina Abel served as a doctoral student and expert with significant experience in higher education in both Pakistan and the US, helping shape curricular planning and leadership instructional implementation. Her deep understanding of Pakistan influenced the social-emotional components of her workshop on conflict resolution, conveying the significance of moving beyond conflict resolution to transformation that empowers teammates to create healthy teams. A significant component of her workshop focused on developing an attitude of care towards team members from marginalized communities and helping them to respond with care when faced with challenges.

Meredith Frey was an integral part of the virtual planning and workshop delivery sessions. As a teacher leader and graduate student in leadership, she designed lessons and applications focused on movement breaks. "It was wonderful to create partnerships across the continents through learning and leading together in sports and leadership. Connections deepened as people engaged together in sports, purposeful movements, and play. I was delighted to participate in various cultures, knowledge, and skills merging to create a powerful time of lasting transformation for all people and universities."

Thematic analysis of the researchers' perspectives

Initial analysis of the data yielded several codes, which were then used as the basis for several broader themes. The initial codes were: (1) Leadership and Collaboration, (2) Empowerment and Social Change, (3) Adaptability and Innovation, (4) Cultural Sensitivity and Contextual Awareness, and (5) Experiential Learning and Engagement. Evidence of the first code can be found with the consistent emphasis on teamwork and collaboration across all the researchers. One researcher (Add Anonymous Identifier such as R1 for Researcher 1) even referred to the group as a "Dream Team," which is a sport reference for a collection of individuals who were chosen to work together because they are great at what they do and get best help accomplish the desired objective(s). The second code, Empower and Social Change, was evident with the researchers' unanimous focus on women's leadership and empowerment through sports as well as their desires to bridge cultural divides and promote social equity. Adaptability and Innovation was another clear code because of the use of technology (e.g., virtual platforms) and adaptive strategies to world events and challenges, such as overcoming potential restrictions due to COVID-19 protocols. The fourth code, Cultural Sensitivity and Contextual Awareness, was generated because the researchers demonstrated in their perspectives a strong understanding of the importance of local contexts and needs as well as a desire to facilitate cross-cultural connections. The last code was Experiential Learning and Engagement. This code was central to the entire project. The researchers used workshops and interactive sessions to foster learning. There was also a strong emphasis on creating opportunities for participants to lead and share their experiences with other participants and the researchers.

Five broader themes were then generated from the codes. These included the following: (1) Community Building and Collaboration, (2) Empowerment and Leadership through Sports, (3) Innovation in Education and Training, (4) Cultural Exchange and Understanding, and (5) Holistic Development and Growth.

The first theme reveals how the research team embodied a spirit of collaboration and coalition building that was not limited by geographic or cultural boundaries. This approach allowed us to span different time zones, learn about each other's sports and leadership focus areas, and to work together to develop a curricular plan to engage the participants and ultimately benefit students. Over time, the team built a sense of shared purpose and teamwork, and were able to navigate challenges, such as a delay in procuring needed sports equipment for the schools; we were able to work together and overcome this challenge. This spirit of collaboration also exemplified a clear sense of community.

The second theme, Empowerment and Leadership through Sports, makes clear the focus of IDEA-SPORT and the researchers. The researchers did not lose sight of key facets of the project, which were women's empowerment, leadership, and how sports, regardless of culture and resources, can serve as a vehicle for social change. This theme was illustrated by the team's work to include local Pakistani athletes and coaches to showcase sports drills, share leadership insights, and provide encouragement to participants in areas of leadership.

Embracing innovation allowed us to engage leaders and to share successes from the field. The utilization of virtual tools and creative

teaching strategies (e.g., recording videos with collegiate and professional female athletes from across the United States) to overcome travel barriers and adversity reflects the adaptability of the team and their coming to enhancing educational outcomes regardless of the barriers presented to them. Though the distance, differing time zones, and language barriers still existed, we were able to overcome them through relying on innovative ways of meeting, sharing, and highlighting wins.

The fourth theme, Cultural Exchange and Understanding, was clearly present given the considerable and purposeful integration of diverse perspectives guided by a commitment to cultural sensitivity and learning enrichment. Our IDEA-SPORT proposal sought to meet the grant call to “support the inclusive development of all aspects of Pakistani society, fostering diversity and inclusion in civil society, empowering women and girls, (and) promoting interfaith and intra-faith harmony” (U.S. Department of State, 2023, p. 4). For example, the Pakistani hosts welcomed the U.S. team with a Christmas cake shortly before the holiday, and shared Islamic prayers at the start of the opening ceremony. Seeking to understand each other’s societal and faith perspectives helped build trust and endear appreciation of each other’s cultural identities.

The last theme, Holistic Development and Personal Growth, was generated because of the research team’s strong emphasis on experiential learning as well as the desire for participant growth and wellbeing enhancement through sport. By including personal narratives from athletes from both the U.S. and Pakistan who drew upon lessons learned as athletes to apply to real-world leadership opportunities helped provide a “big picture” perspective of how leadership and sports are intertwined.

These five themes also exemplify the purpose of IDEA-SPORT, which was centered on improving the sports knowledge and leadership potential of girls and other under-served populations in sport-connected fields through cross-cultural collaboration, co-curricular design, and leadership initiatives. The themes reveal that the researchers understood IDEA-SPORT and its focus and that, upon reflection, they believed they were able to achieve success in key IDEA-SPORT areas such as being globally minded professionals, creating a learning community, empowering people through sports, and combining innovation with collaborative educational efforts. What is more, the researchers’ perspectives are supported by the pre- and post-survey data (see Table 2) that showed improvements amongst the participants who completed the workshop conferences in Pakistan.

Limitations

This research project was focused on a collaborative one-year effort spanning several universities in Pakistan and the United States. The above evaluation data provides a limited perspective that is not broadly generalizable given the unique contexts and focus areas of the grant effort. While the post-survey results showed significant improvement from pre-survey data, more critique from the workshops from participants could be used to shape future efforts. Even so, the findings still offer insight as to how focusing on the objective of supporting women’s leadership through sports in a collaborative manner benefited from a strong professional learning community anchored in an appreciation for social responsibility and cultural humility across diverse cultural contexts. Further study could follow

the progress beyond the one-year window or expand the number of schools participating to ascertain the scope of female engagement in sports over time at the school level.

Recommendations

This cross-cultural, interdisciplinary effort benefited from a clear focus and intentionality in seeking to better understand global perspectives through a professional learning community. While many projects begin and end within their natural life spans, we have worked to focus on sustainability and connections that extend beyond the one-year grant window. Here are three recommendations that our team has found to be of importance:

- 1 *Impactful workshops through planning.* The research team saw great value in being intentional planning workshops that would engage and equip the participants in areas of sports and teamwork. We thoughtfully considered the sport and leadership topics, designed lessons to foster awareness of and confidence in these areas, and then allowed time for practice and play. We monitored progress throughout the week and as the pre- and post-data indicate our PLC framework (see DuFour, 2016) helped ensure that each learner benefits from a clear plan, appropriate instruction and activities, and follow-up reflection.
- 2 *Build in time for play and networking.* When planning for a time of workshop or retreat, we often feel the need to fit in many teaching components (that are often in a lecture or other one-directional format) within our given time frame so as not to waste time. We found that time was maximized by being intentional with scheduling breaks for play (such as table tennis or soccer/ football games amongst participants). Farias et al. (2018) observed that providing time for leadership, problem-solving, and other relational activities “does not reduce curriculum time for the actual practice of sports and activities” but rather “has the potential to increase the authenticity of the learning experience” (p. 290). Building in times for networking, play, or discussion about real-life challenges can help maximize participants’ integration of curricular aspects in a realistic manner.
- 3 *Celebrate success stories in unique contexts.* It is also important to highlight ways in which the collaborative PLC transforms actual practice. Kraft et al. (2020) noted that “sport organizations should consider translating promising practices and lessons learned to their unique contexts and facilitating similar programs to promote gender equity and leadership development for women in sport” (p. 178). Seeing students utilize new equipment or play a new game across continents (through video clips, pictures, or other work products) creates a sense of real-time success that encourages other team members to engage similarly. This can bolster a sense of affirmation and success within the school environment (Sterrett, 2011, 2013; Sterrett and Richardson, 2020). As Ohlson et al. (2022) noted, “empowered women empower other women” and these successes help provide encouragement (p. 90). Sharing highlights from follow-up evaluation visits and staying apprised of additional teaching strategies through a virtual meeting allows for continuous engagement in the work.

Conclusion

A noteworthy feature of the overall grant was witnessing daily cross-gendered engagement in multiple sports, men coming alongside women to work together, equip school teams to teach more sports, and encourage teams in developing future women sports leaders in Pakistan. This learning model incorporated meaningful small group discussions and stressed the necessity of professional learning communities across schools. This work is unique in focusing on women's leadership through different contexts of cultures. The irreplaceable role of the sports teacher as a mentor and model during conflicts was emphasized for the development of a diverse and flourishing Pakistan. Future research could also focus on further outcomes such as women's involvement in sports in their local communities and how they utilize leadership in civic engagement opportunities. Through engaging an international professional learning community, through focusing on leadership education for societal impact and responsibility, the team was thus able to support typically underrepresented educators in a sustainable manner and meet the grant's purpose of promoting "leadership for women through sports," to foster "life skills such as problem-solving, conflict resolution, teamwork, and leadership" (U.S. Department of State, 2023) in a unique and engaging way.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the above referenced research project has been determined to not meet the definition of human subject research under the purview of the IRB according to federal regulations at 45 CFR 46.102(e) & (l). Specifically, this activity does not meet the definition of research because it is not generalizable outside the grant program being evaluated. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to William_Sterrett@Baylor.edu.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent from the participants was not required to participate in this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

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Author contributions

WS: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AM: Writing – review & editing. MM: Writing – review & editing. AB: Writing – review & editing. SS: Writing – review & editing. MS: Writing – review & editing. AK: Writing – review & editing. BR: Writing – review & editing. CR: Writing – review & editing. JB: Writing – review & editing. HA: Writing – review & editing. MF: Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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