A Framework for Lifelong Involvement in Sport and Physical Activity: The Irish Perspective

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Abstract

Contextualised within physical activity policy (Schoppe, Bauman & Bull, 2004) this paper presents a critical review of current sport development pathway models, (including the pyramid concept, long-term athlete development and the development model of sport participation), acknowledging a number of issues that we should be cognizant of when working with models (Lyle, 2002). Along with a review of the existing situation in Ireland with regards to the governance of sport and patterns in sport (non)participation, the paper discusses the need for a broader and more encompassing framework that encourages lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity. The paper reviews the Irish lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity (LISPA) framework as a policy ‘for’ complementing both a performance-oriented and participation-oriented model and addressing the particular physical activity and sporting requirements within the Irish context. The LISPA framework has been adopted by the Irish Sports Council as the model to underpin all its work aimed at improving participation rates in sport in Ireland, although the Council have yet to identify how best to promote the LISPA framework. Suggestions on how to maximize the implementation and success of the framework are discussed.

Key words: active lifestyles, system alignment, sport development
Introduction

An international review of national physical activity policy (Schoppe, Bauman & Bull, 2004) provides an insight into countries that have developed and implemented physical activity policies at national level. Similarities regarding the methods and approaches adopted to develop and implement national physical activity policy were evident. These included developing policies after consultation with key stakeholders, developing partnerships between the public and private sector and an integration of physical activity promotion with agendas such as health and education. However, there was a lack of role delineation and accountability between partners and a difficulty in determining concrete timeframes related to the funding and implementation of strategies (Schoppe et al., 2004).

In reviewing the extensive interpretations that exist for policy and policies related to physical activity promotion, Schoppe et al. (2004) provide a definition that describes key components of policies related to physical activity promotion. This is the preferred definition for use in this paper:

‘Physical activity policy is a formal statement that defines physical activity as a priority area, states specific population targets and provides a specific plan or framework for action. It describes the procedures of institutions in the government, non-government and private sector to promote physical activity in the population, and defines the accountabilities of the involved partners’ (p. 9).

Many countries have recognized organizations with a remit to promote and invest in policies and programmes that provide increased and improved participation in physical activity and sport. A report of such policies and programmes, as well as related evaluations, has been completed by Schoppe et al., (2004). Organisations with such a
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remit include Australian Sports Commission (ASC), Health Canada, Sport and Recreation New Zealand (SPARC), Sport England and sportscotland. A number of common practices are shared across these countries and organizations. Firstly, all aspire to create opportunities for people to become involved in physical activity, to retain involvement and to experience success, with an overall concern to see more people participating in sport and enjoying its (health) benefits. Secondly, there is an acknowledgement that this is only possible if stakeholders work in partnerships forming a ‘joined up’ approach to encouraging people to ‘start, stay and succeed in sport’ (Sport England, 2004). Thirdly, there is national investment and commitment to acknowledging (and addressing) the many benefits that lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity can reap for the individual and society in general.

While numerous countries pursue and invest in encouraging lifelong physical activity patterns in their populations, this is delivered through numerous programmes and targeted at different populations. These programmes are proactive in highlighting the benefits and fun associated with sport and physical activity and in encouraging individuals to stay involved in physical activity. Such programmes include club development (sportscotland), ‘Healthy school’ strategies (DoH / DfEE, 2000; Ontario / Ontario Education, 2006), Active Schools (Australian Sports Commission, Sport England and sportscotland), Active After-school Communities (Australian Sports Commission), Active Movement (Sport and Recreation New Zealand), TOP Tots and TOP Start (Youth Sports Trust) and a Junior Sport Framework (Australian Sports Commission).

A proposal ‘for’ an Irish framework for lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity (LISPA) has been developed and, while not formally implemented, is
acknowledged in the most recent strategy statement from the ISC (2006). In 2006 the ISC adopted the LISPA framework and are currently involved in discussions with relevant Government departments regarding how best to promote the LISPA framework (ISC, 2007). The LISPA framework is broad and ambitious in attempts to promote lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity, tackle sedentary lifestyles and foster joined-up policy and decision making. The framework evolved in a bid to address two main concerns related to creating an environment that enables Irish participants to continue lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity. Firstly, such a framework would look to counteract the concern for sedentary behaviour by promoting more physically active lifestyles form a young age. While the Irish population may be aware of the risk of inactivity and of its related illness (Health Promotion Unit, 2002; National Taskforce on Obesity, 2005), such knowledge does little to promote physical activity, as knowledge alone is insufficient to bring about a change in behaviour. The task ahead is to reshape Ireland’s context to one that facilitates, reflects and promotes lifelong physical activity during childhood, through adolescence and into adulthood. Secondly, such a framework is an attempt to establish a cooperative and coordinated approach by all stakeholders (public, private and voluntary) involved in promoting and delivering physical activity and sport in Ireland, acknowledging that this is only possible if stakeholders work in partnerships forming a ‘joined up’ (ISC, 2005; National Obesity Taskforce, 2005) approach to encouraging people to remain physically active. These specific Irish context issues are re-visited, with others, later in the paper. 

In the context of this paper and discussion of a lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity model, it is important to clarify the definitions that are used for the terms
‘sport’ and ‘physical activity’ throughout this paper. Sport refers to all forms of physical activity that, through casual or regular participation, expresses or improves physical fitness and mental well-being and forms social relationships (ISC / NCTC, 2005).

Physical activity involves any bodily movement produced by contradiction of skeletal muscle and subsequently increases energy expenditure (Caspersen, Powell & Christenson, 1985).

This paper is divided into three main sections. Firstly, the paper presents a critical review of current pathway models, drawing on strengths and weaknesses, to inform the need for a broader and more encompassing framework that encourages lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity. Secondly, the paper will focus on the existing situation in Ireland with regards to the governance of sport and patterns in (non)participation that a lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity framework aims to resolve. Finally, we report the LISPA framework as a policy ‘for’ complementing current pathway models and addressing the particular physical activity and sporting requirements within the Irish context.

Critical review of current pathway models

There are a number of useful current pathway models that look to advance the sports development continuum, each with strengths and weaknesses in respect to addressing specific populations and the social and cultural context in which they operate. Lyle (2002) defines models as ‘representations of phenomena, the complexity of which is difficult to represent solely in words’ and that subsequently it is difficult to ‘represent complex interactions, continuity of process, variation in scale and variations in practice’
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(p. 81). Lyle (2002) highlights a number of issues that we should be cognizant of when working with models and these include the acknowledgement that models are generic representations, components within a model cannot always be quantified, that the relationship depicted between the components of a model imply causal, simplistic and conditional qualities, that environmental effects are difficult to control and measure and that there are a significant range of variables that impact of the model.

In reviewing coaching process models Lyle (2002) distinguishes between the operational model (model ‘of’ the coaching process) and the ideal model (model ‘for’ the coaching process). The model ‘of’ is usually derived from practice or research, with a clear operational structure. The model ‘for’ is based on assumptions which are developed into a more idealistic model for practice, ‘The model builder may not expect the model to be found in practice in exactly its idealized form, but it provides a useful analytical tool for identifying the issues that are worthy of further attention’ (Lyle, 2000, p. 82). Lyle’s (2002) distinction between model ‘of’ and model ‘for’ is useful when discussing models of participation in sport and physical activity.

A number of current pathway models are evident. The ‘pyramid’ concept, also known as the sports development continuum (Houlihan, 2000; Kirk and Gorely, 2000), supports the ideology that by encouraging access to a broad base of positive participation across the whole population, i.e., through opportunities linked with physical education, extra-curricular sport, recreation and leisure, there is a direct correlation with the decreasing number of people who will look to develop their sporting abilities at a performance stage before committing to elite performance (ISC, 2003). The pyramid design conveys the implication that the broader the base of participation the higher the
pinnacle of achievement, at the expense of those who reach the top of one level but are unable to progress to the next. The pyramid way of thinking does not make explicit where such individuals can go within sport (Kirk and Gorely, 2000). Two pathways are identified in the pyramid concept – progress through the foundation, participation, performance and elite levels or exit from the system. A restriction of the pyramid design is the identification of only one experience that regulates progression to the next level. There is no detailed relationship between stages of the model, i.e., how an incremental improvement in one level establishes a link to the next, and this may be contributed to the difficulty in illustrating the relationships between levels in a diagram (Lyle, 2002). Subsequently, it is a model ‘for’ involvement in sport as it is not derived from empirical studies on sport development.

A Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model is heavily supported in Canada, Ireland and the UK (referenced by Canadian Sport for Life, 2005; DCMS Strategy Unit, 2002 and NCTC, 2003 respectively). The LTAD pathway is a series of phases that underpin the balanced and long-term development of high performance athletes. It is classified as a ‘specialisation’ model with the intention that, from the ‘FUNdamentals’ phase, athletes / participants will strive to move through a number of phases until they reach the final phase of ‘Training to Win’. These intermediate phases are ‘Learning to train, ‘Training to train’ and ‘Training to compete’. A sixth phase ‘Retirement and retainment’ caters for those players / athletes who retire from competition permanently. The model also identifies key capacities (physical, mental, technical, tactical, lifestyle and personal) that regulate progression from one phase of the model to the next. A strength of the model is the empirical evidence, particularly in the
area of developing talent in young people, which has informed its formulation. Evidence includes optimal trainability, maturation process and levels, onset of peak height velocity and trainability windows (Balyi, 2001). Subsequently, it is a model ‘of’ sport development, providing sport specific pathways. The pathway looks beyond short-term results and identifies the relevant physical, psychological and social capacities that athletes need to possess in order to maximize their potential at all stages. A restriction of the LTAD model is the focus on a linear progression that suggests all athletes should strive to reach the ‘Train to win’ phase, with involvement and improvement in one phase automatically leading on to the next. Continuous movement through the model is further pressurized by the lack of exit points in the model other than ‘Retirement / Retainment’, which is seen to be occupied by those who have retired from competition permanently. Another restriction is the commitment to movement through these phases being closely tied to age, implying that by a particular age you should be performing at a certain level. There is no acknowledgment that it is acceptable for individuals to remain in one phase and not strive to progress through the remaining phases of the model. Linear models, such as the ‘pyramid’ concept and LTAD, have weaknesses that make them unsatisfactory as singular frameworks to encompass the richer concern of lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity for all. In contrast to linear, prescriptive models, Côté and Hay (2002) propose a model of (young) people’s socialisation into sport. The development model of sports participation (DSMP, Côté, 1999; Côté & Hay, 2002; Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007) accommodates a progression from the ‘sampling phase’ to the ‘specialising years’ and then to the ‘investment/recreation phase’, acknowledging that at any stage of involvement
young people can choose to move to take part on a recreational basis or drop out. The key features of the sampling phase are that young people participate in a range of sports, that their key motivation is fun and enjoyment, and that the emphasis is on structured or deliberate play rather than training or deliberate practice. The specializing phase involves more deliberate practice and a reduction in the range of sport activities while still retaining fun and excitement as central elements of the sporting experience. The investment phase signals a likely focus on one activity and a commitment to intensive training and competitive success. The recreation phase is when young people participate regularly in sports without aspiring to reach an elite level of performance. The DMSP model is less prescriptive than the LTAD model in identifying when individuals should be encouraged to move from one phase to another. The DMSP model is a model ‘of’ involvement in sport as it was built on research with elite and recreational athletes in a variety of sports.

A number of elaborated developmental frameworks are very closely aligned with the Irish framework that will be discussed in due course. The Queensland Junior Sports Council model of lifelong involvement in sport illustrates how people can stay involved in physical activity and sport at varying levels of performance and across the lifespan. It also identifies clear pathways across performance stages – recreational participation, developmental, talent and high performance – providing a ‘map of possibilities’ (Kirk & Gorely, 2002, p. 125) to encourage retention in physical activity and sport. The Draft Long Term Participant Development Pathway is proposed by sports coach UK as a central principle of the UK Coaching Framework, ensuring that participants are supported at all stages of their development by skilled coaches (Duffy, 2007). The generic route
map for Scottish sport development (sportscotland, 2006) strives to promote an integrated development structure within Scottish sport.

A distinction can be made between performance-oriented models and participation-oriented models. Performance-oriented models tend to have a scientific background (including research evidence) and are classified by a particular sport while participation-oriented models cater for all levels of investment and abilities in available sport and physical activity opportunities. The LTAD model is a performance-oriented model, providing sport specific pathways that athletes/players progress through in respect to their developing competencies. While performance-oriented models cater for a minor percentage of participants in sport they are similar to participation-oriented models in being underpinned by fundamentals, that is, encouraging multi-skill and multi-sport experiences in the early years. Both the LTAD and DMSP models acknowledge that in some sports where peak performance is reached at a young age (e.g. women’s gymnastics) early specialisation is often necessary to reach elite performance (Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). The challenge for early specialisation sports, whose participants usually skip the early ‘sampling’ years is to amalgamate the early phases of sports development appropriately to lessen the negative impacts associated with early specialisation e.g. burn-out, over-use injuries and lack of enjoyment (Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). The extent to which Ireland has addressed the inter-relationship between the LTAD and DMSP model, with ‘some mixture of prescription (…) and the more ecologically informed approach grounded in the reality of young people’s sport socialization experiences’ (MacPhail & Kirk, 2006, p. 73), has been mooted elsewhere and is re-visited in more detail in this paper.
Consultation and feedback on the performance-oriented LTAD model in Ireland resulted in support for a development model of sports participation, initiating the LISPA participation-oriented framework. Consequently, LTAD provided the initial step towards the LISPA framework being the favoured framework for sport and physical activity participation in Ireland. This does present a problem in the Irish context in that there is no apparent link between performance and participation. While the Irish Sports Council (ISCs) promote the ‘pyramid’ concept there is limited evidence that individual sports allocate money to allow a broader base of participation to result in more people committing to elite performance. It is difficult to see the alignment between performance and participation in the Irish context with national governing bodies (NGBs) being given the autonomy to proportion their allocated state funding towards performance or participation, in most cases with no percentage agreement on how much is allocated to each.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of any model for Ireland is the alignment and integration of all agencies involved in providing sporting and physical activity opportunities. Currently there appears to be no national and local alignment or integration between government departments with a role to play in the promotion of sport and physical activity, the ISC, Sports Council Northern Ireland, the Irish Institute of Sport, Coaching Ireland or the NGBs. All agencies need to identify and uphold their roles and responsibilities as part of a national and local alliance to promote a sport development model which engages the Irish population in participating in sport and physical activity.

While there are a number of national initiatives that promote physical activity (Sport for
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All, Women in Sport) they do not have shared outcomes or do not identify how they can
make best use of staff expertise or facilities across initiatives.

Specific Irish context

With a view to appreciating the context in which there is need for a wider sport
development framework in Ireland, a number of related issues in the Irish context are
shared. These include the influence of the main Irish amateur sporting association, the
execution of sport policy in Ireland, rates of participation in physical activity and concern
with the likely rise of premature deaths in Ireland attributed to obesity.

The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) was founded in the late 1800s to preserve
and promote the Gaelic games of Gaelic football, hurling, camogie, handball and
rounders. The GAA is the largest and most popular amateur sporting association in
Ireland with an estimated 700,000 members and active supporters, accounting for 15% of
the overall population (Fahey, Layte & Gannon, 2004). The effectiveness of the GAA
(the cultural dominance of Gaelic sports and the provision of GAA facilities) partly
explains the absence of direct state intervention in sport until comparatively recently due
to the government encouraging the GAA to organise the sporting life of the country, with
the privileged position of the GAA inhibiting debate on national sports development
strategy (Houlihan, 1997);

‘(…) the Irish government has, only from the late 1970s, begun to refine its policy
on sport and, more importantly, establish an administrative capacity backed by the
commitment of significant public funds for policy implementation. But while
much of the increase in the prominence of sport within public policy has been
stimulated by government, it has not been possible to establish neat administrative
arrangements (…) the diffuse nature of the sport and recreation policy area has
produced a fragmented administrative structure’ (Houlihan, 1997; 87).

The GAA is not structured or does not operate in the same way as other NGBs due to its
size and participation levels. With respect to the appropriation of funding, the GAA,
along with the Irish Rugby Football Union and the Football Association of Ireland,
dominate the Irish landscape, funded independently of other NGBs.

The execution of sport policy in Ireland is primarily the remit of the Department
of Arts, Sport and Tourism (DAST), a central government department. DAST’s mandate
is the (a) formulation, development and evaluation of public policy to support and
influence increased participation in sport, (b) improvement in standards of performance
in sport and (c) development of sports facilities at national, regional and local level
though sports capital funding and funding of the Irish Sports Council (ISC). The DAST
appointed the ISC as a statutory body in 1999 to ensure the promotion of increased
participation in sport and implementing better ways of promoting, planning and
delivering sport. The provision of sport tends to fall to National Governing Bodies
(NGBs) of sports, i.e., individual bodies responsible for the coaching and promotion of
specific sports. The ISC supports the work of the NGBs with annual grants towards the
costs associated with the development and promotion of their sport (ISC, 2000). More
recently, there has been pressure on the DAST / ISC to take a more active role in
providing facilities, support and funding with an intensification of pressure on the
government to participate more effectively in sport policy (Houlihan, 1997). With this
has been a change in emphasis from a focus predominantly on elite athletes, with funding
being allocated to initiatives that encourage opportunities for mass participation.

A higher than average number of Irish young people is reported as being
physically active in comparison to 34 World Health Organisation (WHO) countries
(Office of the Minister for Children, 2006). Numerous studies report the pervasive nature
of sport and physical activity participation amongst young Irish people (Collier, MacPhail
& O’Sullivan, 2007; Connor, 2003; de Roiste & Dineen, 2006; Fahey, Delaney &
Gannon, 2005; Kelleher et al., 2003), sports participation among Irish adults (Fahey et
al., 2004) and a strong economic and social value of sport (Delaney & Fahey, 2005).

International sports participation trends are also evident in the Irish context and include a
significantly higher proportion of active males to females (Fahey et al., 2005), dramatic
dropout rates of teenage girls (de Roiste & Dineen, 2006; www.womeninsport.ie) and
dramatic drop-out rates of 30- to 35- year olds who have given up team sports (Fahey et
al., 2004). The impact of gender on frequency and type of participation in physical
activity (Fahey et al., 2005; Fahey et al., 2004; Woods, Foley, O’Gorman, Kearney &
Moyna, 2004) is beyond the remit of the paper.

Research has indicated that most adults do not wish to participate in organised
structured physical activities, particularly as they get older (Fahey et al., 2004). They
wish to pursue activities that improve physical health and increase social opportunities in
a cost-effective environment without too much pressure on time. Within Ireland, Fahey et
al. (2004) highlighted the dramatic dropout rates of 30- to 35- year olds who had given up
team sports and this informs the type of experiences and activities (Woods et al., 2004;
Connor, 2003) that are necessary to re-engage this population.
Along with other countries, the prevalence of overweight and obesity has increased in Ireland, with reports that 39% of adults living in Ireland are overweight and 18% are obese (National Taskforce on Obesity, 2005). The report suggests that physical inactivity has made a significant impact on the increase in overweight and obesity and encourages the public, private, community and voluntary sectors to work in partnership to promote active living and the required amount of minutes of moderate physical activity per day necessary to prevent excess weight gain.

In Ireland, there is a lack of an integrated and coordinated framework to support and coordinate the introduction, retention and re-engagement of individuals striving to pursue lifelong involvement in physical activity and sport. In some cases, organisations are vying for the same young people to play their sport at the school / and or club level with minimal regard for the developmental needs and interests of the individuals involved, such as encouraging the development of generic skills and knowledge required to engage in and appreciate all forms of sport and physical activity (sportscotland, 2006; Whitehead & Murdoch, 2006).

As Ireland moves towards the further development of its sports system, the need to clearly map out a framework for lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity has become evident (ISC, 2006). The need for a wider, all-inclusive LISPA framework within Ireland was first proposed in April 2004, following a wide consultation on ‘Building Pathways in Irish Sport: Towards a plan for the sporting health and well-being of the nation’ (NCTC, 2003). This consultation document drew heavily on the work of Istvan Balyi and outlined a proposed Irish model of Long-Term Player/Athlete Development. Feedback from the consultation (NCTC, 2004) highlighted the need to
cater for recreational and lifelong participation in physical activity and sport and that the
basic principles of a person-centred approach to suit individual needs and the role of
agencies in the delivery of such lifelong participation needed to be further explored. The
ISC commissioned a working group to develop a consultation document to guide the
development of a LISPA framework. The ISC is a statutory agency that is mandated to,
among other responsibilities, develop strategies for increasing and promoting
participation in sport and physical activity (ISC, 2006; 2003; 2000). The working group
was also to identify agents and agencies that have a role in promoting lifelong
involvement in sport and physical activity. In October 2005, the consultation document
(ISC / NCTC, 2005) was launched at the ISC / Sports Council Northern Ireland
Conference in Dublin. The consultation period ran from October 2005 to January 2006.
Feedback from the consultation (NCTC, 2006) was received and collated and
recommendations from the feedback informed and refined the thinking behind the LISPA
framework. The refinement of such a framework is the focus of the remainder of this
paper.

The Council’s most recent strategy statement (ISC, 2006) states that ‘it is an
appropriate time to revisit the national strategic framework for sport and the Council is
prepared to contribute fully to a national debate on a new national strategy for sport’ (p.
16). The LISPA framework addresses this ambition by providing the foundation to
underpin all ISC strategies from participation through to high performance. This
encourages the ISC to pursue (1) a review of the programmes and activities in line with
promoting lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity and the devising of
appropriate interventions and (2) the coordination and promotion of essential working
partnerships between all Irish bodies involved in promoting physical activity, sport and recreation. The issue of alignment between all agencies is revisited later in the paper.

The Council announced the creation of a new Participation Unit, responsible for the implementation of the Council’s plans for participation in sport and the essential role of a LISPA framework;

‘The highlights of that strategy [implementation for participation in sport] include the implementation of the Lifelong Involvement in Sport and Physical Activity model across all sports. This model for physical activity caters for recreational and lifelong participation that will be child centred, open to all sports and adaptable to individual needs. It must provide a quality introduction for young people and continue with different interventions throughout the life cycle’ (ISC, 2006, p. 24).

In 2006 the ISC adopted the LISPA framework and are currently involved in discussions with relevant government departments regarding how best to promote the LISPA framework (ISC, 2007). In June 2008 the LISPA framework became an all-Ireland initiative, with the Sports Council Northern Ireland ‘buying into’ the framework. Up until this point it has been difficult to see how the LISPA framework was to be promoted effectively and implemented. The ISC referred to LISPA in their latest strategy document (ISC, 2006) but not as a framework which raises the concern regarding it not being positioned to form the basis of their policy areas. There is hope that with the on-set of the LISPA framework becoming an all-Ireland initiative that this will provide the impetus for
the necessary promotion, funding, development of policy and implementation in a participation-orientated model.

The LISPA framework

The LISPA framework strives to ensure that every person (regardless of age) has the opportunity to enjoy playing, participating and competing in the activity or sport of their choice at a level appropriate to their ability. This results in a number of key foundations, or what Lyle (2002) terms ‘building blocks’, that we believe are essential for an adequate sport development framework including (1) a person-centred approach to involvement in physical activity and sport, (2) a quality introduction to physical literacy (sportscotland, 2006; Whitehead & Murdoch, 2006) and, (3) accommodating particular needs of populations that require to be addressed if they are to become lifelong participants in physical activity and sport, including disability, pre-school aged children, adolescent girls and older people (Coalter, 2005; Fraser-Thomas, Cote & Deakin, 2005; Nicholson, 2004).

The movement within the LISPA framework is fluid (see Figure 1), i.e., continual movement between different physical opportunities to suit the individual is encouraged rather than a prescribed set of stages which individuals are guided to pursue. There is an acknowledgement that the same person can occupy different opportunities in the framework as reflected in their engagement in different activities. For example, an individual may be operating as a high performer in basketball and also choosing to swim recreationally twice a week. The framework also accommodates exit from, and re-
engagement with, physical activity, aware that not all individuals will have had the
opportunity to experience the foundations of the framework at an early age. It is
anticipated that the fluidity of movement within the framework will attract and retain a
greater number of participants from different target groups.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Movement through the LISPA framework

‘Active Start’ focuses on infants, toddlers and preschoolers being provided with
opportunities to participate in daily physical activity that promotes fitness and movement
skills (Canadian Sport for Life, 2005).

The objective of the FUNdamental phase is to learn fundamental movement skills
(running, jumping, throwing and catching, and confidence in water skills), experience
social and mental attributes associated with physical activity and develop physical
literacy through a positive fun approach. All skills should be developed using basic,
appropriate and enjoyable activities. Participation in a wide range of physical activities
and sports is encouraged at the FUNdamental phase.

The LTPAD pathway resides within the LISPA framework and acknowledges
high performance success (see Figure 2). Figure 2 is not dissimilar to the twin track
approach for mass participation and international success proposed by the UK based
DCMS / Strategy Unit (2002; p. 124). The Learning to Play and Practice phase should be
about developing skills, playing a range of sports and becoming familiar with the habit of
practice and playing. Specialised movement skills are developed after fundamental skills
have been acquired. Bypassing the fundamental and specialised skill development phases
is likely to have a negative effect on the child’s future engagement in sport and physical activity (Côté & Hay, 2002).

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Opportunities for Continued Involvement

Many opportunities are afforded in the LISPA framework to accommodate an individual’s preference to the extent they wish to continue and develop their involvement in physical activity and sport. Opportunities are not necessarily discreet from each other, and individuals can occupy more than one at the same time and can move wherever and whenever appropriate. ‘Active living’ is a way of life that values physical activity as an essential part of living, characterised by the integration of physical activity into daily routines, e.g. walking. ‘Active recreation’ is the use of leisure time for activities that require moderate energy expenditure and produce health and/or social benefits, e.g. going to the gym. ‘Organised sport’ is participation in sports that have a significant element of planned and purposeful physical activity with competitive goals, e.g. local leagues in basketball. ‘High performance’ is long-term commitment to training and competing at the highest standard in pursuit of excellence at national and international levels.

The promotion and delivery of lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity

The framework is not intended to impede the current work of those involved in promoting and delivering physical activity opportunities, e.g., national governing bodies (NGBs), schools and coaching bodies. Rather, it is to support those involved in the
promotion of long-term involvement in physical activity and establish a more collaborative approach in pursuing a commonality in approach and objectives. The success of the framework depends on teachers, coaches, administrators, officials, volunteers and other individuals who create opportunities that motivate young people and adults to lead a physically active lifestyle (Leargas / DES, 2005).

Many individuals and organisations have a role to play in creating, promoting and maintaining lifelong involvement in physical activity and sport. Irrespective of the extent of involvement and responsibility, the LISPA framework provides a way in which each can invest in pursuing a common strategy. While organisations have, through their own strategies, identified physical activity and/or sport as important to their organization’s aims (perhaps with a particular focus on either addressing access, training and/or support), the LISPA framework will allow such agencies to be cognisant of how their work can relate to planning and implementing a common strategy towards lifelong involvement in physical activity and sport, pursue and maintain strong links between organisations at national and local level and continue to provide opportunities for involvement in physical activity and sport throughout an individual’s life.

It is possible to group stakeholders who have similar vested interests in endorsing lifelong involvement in physical activity and sport and being involved in its delivery and promotion. Such stakeholders include parents / guardians, play and childcare organizations and community groups, GP referrals, schools (particularly primary and post-primary physical education), third-level institutions, coaches and sports clubs. In the Irish context, particular stakeholders include the ISC and the National Governing Bodies. It is important to acknowledge that stakeholders may be involved in a number of stages
and that they may have different roles at different times of an individual’s involvement in physical activity and sport. For example, coaches and clubs would be seen to have a role to play during the ‘FUNdamental’ and ‘Learning to Play and Practice’ stages as well as in the promotion of active recreation, organized sport and high performance. The LISPA framework encourages groups of stakeholders to pursue and maintain links. The framework is most likely to be effective if stakeholders can identify at what particular phase(s) of the model they can provide a quality experience and equal access for involvement in sport and physical activity.

Conclusion

The LISPA framework is informed by, and presents a modified version of, current pathway models. The intention of the framework is to be more comprehensive and detailed than previous models, acknowledging that ‘the twin ideas of sporting excellence and mass participation are not mutually exclusive’ (sportscotland, 2006, p. 3). The LISPA framework set out to emulate a similar concern to that of the previously mentioned developmental frameworks (Duffy, 2007; sportscotland, 2006), where everyone is free to choose to participate at any age and at a stage that is appropriate to their level of development. The LISPA framework embeds LTAD within the more ecologically informed approach grounded in a developmental socialisation perspective of sport experiences (Côté & Hay, 2002).

It is imperative to understand that ‘models can never reproduce the subtlety and nuances of real life and there is a danger of expecting too much’, acknowledging that, ‘model building and use should be a dynamic affair’ (Lyle, 2002, p. 91). With this in
mind, Lyle (2002) proposes a six-stage process for refining models. The first two stages, ‘begin with assumptions’ and ‘develop the model’, is currently as far as the LISPA framework has progressed. The aptness of the model by comparing to practice, the modification of initial assumptions, the re-designing of the model and retesting is yet to be pursued. It may well be the case that the model is stronger in structure than function (Lyle, 2002) and it is anticipated that this will be explored in examining how best to promote the LISPA framework (ISC, 2007).

The LISPA framework is currently a model ‘for’ lifelong involvement in sport and physical activity, with an expectation of becoming refined as empirical findings become available, particularly with respect to identifying the extent particular environmental factors have on individuals’ interest and investment in remaining physically active. The LISPA framework acts as a template for research with respect to this issue and, as empirical findings become available, can be used to analyse and contextualise the likely patterns of lifelong involvement for different populations. There is more research informing the stages of participant development in performance-oriented models than the key experiences, processes and transitions involved in participation-oriented models.

In reviewing studies of policy implementation, Houlihan (2005) reports that there is a need for precise prescriptions for effective management of the implementation process, acknowledging the importance of the central government departmental location of sport. The essential pre-condition to the implementation and success of the LISPA framework is government support. The ISC now need to lobby for an infrastructure that will enhance the implementation of the framework as well as capital investment in resources and
training. A collaborative approach between all agencies involved in the promotion of long-term involvement in physical activity needs to be established. Implementation requires the investment of time and effort by all stakeholders to buy-in to the ethos of the LISPA framework, i.e., to attract, retain and re-engage individuals into lifelong physical activity. The extent of ‘degree of discretion’ (Houlihan, 2000) encouraged from the different stakeholders in the implementation of the model ‘on the ground’ is yet to be determined. An overarching implementation group will be essential and there have been a number of calls for the establishment of a national alliance that would be best placed to build connections between the various stakeholders involved in promoting long-term involvement in physical activity (Leargas / Department of Education and Science (2005); National Taskforce on Obesity, 2005). It is the interaction between the stakeholders/interested groups that provide the important dynamic in the process of implementation (Houlihan, 2005).

While there has been a tendency within Irish sport to focus on the promotion of discrete areas of participation, performance and physical activity, it is envisaged that the ISC and SCNI are now in a position not only to convincingly align the work of the two organizations but to hold a stronger position in Ireland to encourage buy-in with all related agencies and promote alignment between all agencies along with linking to related government objectives such as health, education and physical development. It is envisaged that an all-Ireland initiative certainly enhances the likelihood of this happening with both organizations being accountable (to each other) for the implementation of the framework. Allocated funding to the roll-out of the framework and a lack of coordination between the ISC and SCNI could impede implementation. While a lack of available funds
for the implementation may be a concern in the current economic climate it is anticipated that the implementation of the LISPA framework will, in the long term, through shared resources and a coordinated approach, be a more efficient and effective way to resource sport and physical activity. If funding for NGBs was linked to whole sports planning through the LISPA framework it is suspected this would encourage buy in from the NGBs. By matching their commitment and involvement in the LISPA framework NGBs are being provided with a marketing strategy that encourages them to be inclusive of all those who wish to be involved in their sport, whether at the ‘Active Start’ level or high performance. Performance indicators of successful implementation would be more people involved in sport and physical activity and a more aligned sports system, from schools, clubs and NGB’s to government departments. While such performance indicators have been achieved internationally (Bergsgard, Houlihan, Mangset, Nodland & Rommetvedt, 2007), it appears unlikely that Ireland will move towards delivering these performance indicators unless there is a strong driving force behind the implementation working towards a coordinated approach that is policy driven. Such a driving force needs to be positioned to impact the system not only by encouraging buy-in from all related agencies but having direct access to inform and work with those individuals and organisations that oversee the implementation of an all-Ireland sport and physical activity framework.

The LISPA framework strives to provide an inclusive approach to the relationship between all opportunities for involvement in physical activity and sport throughout an individual’s life, a broad and ambitious goal. The framework has been adopted by the ISC as the model to underpin all its work aimed at improving participation rates in sport in Ireland, although the Council have yet to identify how best to promote the framework.
What happens to the LISPA framework beyond this stage of formulation is an area of concern, acknowledging that ‘arrangements for implementation are integral to what policy becomes’ (Kay, 1996). It will be interesting to observe in what way the current framework evolves through the implementation phase and the related process of contestation this entails.

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