



The effectiveness of sport within social intervention projects: a UK case study

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Abstract

In the UK, successive governments have prioritised the use of sport for developmental purposes, a range of broader community matters, and as a purposeful tool to help at-risk youth. However, given the accepted wisdom underpinning the continued investment in sports projects that reflect ideas centred on youth and community development, it is not unsurprising that a number of authors (for instance, Coalter, 2007; Griffiths and Armour, 2011) question the validity and true nature of using sport in this context. This is especially so when some research indicates that it may well be the schemes, people, or ancillary benefits within projects that are the primary factor in any appreciable change in pro-social behaviours, rather than sport per se (Sandford, Armour, and Duncombe, 2008). This study used interviews with eight experienced community sport development officers, coaches, and project organisers in the south of the UK. The findings revealed that sport *and* social intervention projects could develop participants' self-esteem, resilience, and aspirations, and that sport was seen as a helpful tool to help facilitate this. However, the findings also emphasised that any meaningful changes in behaviour were also subject, and subordinate to, the importance of developing positive coach-participant relationships. The implications are discussed within the paper.

Coaching; development; inclusion; anti-social behaviour; youth sport

Why community sport in the UK matters

Despite sustained cuts to UK public services over the last ten years of austerity driven policy¹, sport has continued to receive both financial (although reduced) and political support. Much of this, in the eyes of UK governmental departments, has been predicated upon what is considered to be almost irrefutable positive evidence regarding what is considered its transformative properties. In the context of community and youth type sport this evidence does have some real traction, and much of it posits that the promotion of and participation in community sport has the potential to address a range of social policy issues and contribute to the well-being and health of individu-

¹ Since 2010, the Coalition (2010) and then Conservative governments (2015) have instituted a series of fixed government department spending budgets in an attempt to reduce the public spending deficit.

als (Collins, 2010; Coalter, 2007). These types of propositions are also supported by claims that sport can help individuals with a variety of personal, educational, and even vocational achievement goals and positive outcomes (Theokas, Danush, Hodge, & Heke, 2009). Moreover, the consensus is that broader community issues (such as low educational attainment) can, in part, be tackled through the use of sport (Huskins, 1998; Houlihan & White, 2002; Hylton & Totten, 2008).

Questions remain, however, related to the manner in which sport can facilitate developmental objectives (in both individual and community matters). For instance, Coakley (2011:306) critiques the “anecdotes and unsystematic observations that uncritically support the evangelistic promise that sport participation produces positive development among young people”. It is this viewpoint, and other unrealistic generalizations about the potential of sport to change peoples’ behaviours and lives, that underpins the rationale for this research and why sport development officers, coaches, and project organisers (SDOC&PO) were interviewed to find out whether they thought, with their field experience, that sport is effective activity for solving problems and improving behaviour for individuals.

There does exist, however, a fair amount of evidence supporting the use of sport for developmental and community matters. Much of this is explained through the use of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977; Cox, 1998), positive youth development (PYD) (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), and social capital (Delaney & Keaney, 2005; Hoye and Nicholson, 2008). The first, social learning theory, is used to explain how the behaviour of individuals is learnt through observing others and, in effect, imitating their behaviour (Coalter, 2007). Perhaps the key to understanding it though is the fact that it proposes that this process of learning works best in environments that give praise to valued behaviour. In this sense, if this model and process is applied to the field of sports participation, then the theory stands that it is through social reinforcement that participants in sports programmes improve their behaviour (Hoye, Nicholson, & Houlihan, 2010). This is through observing and imitating the behaviour of significant others, such as coaches and teachers (Collins & Kay, 2003). In essence then, the process of socialization, whereby we acquire our characteristics, values and norms relative to the societies and environments we live in (Bilton et al., 1981), can be seen to be facilitated through those who run sports projects.

What this means then is that those individuals who are not supported by strong family units can find (or be given) alternative sources and role models to develop both emotionally and in terms of support networks (Coalter, 2007). In this context sport, with its perceived positive pro-social elements, such as teamwork, commitment, and discipline can be seen to frame behavioural contexts and learning and, presumably, contribute to increases in self-control, self-discipline, and self-awareness (Coalter, 2005; Buelens, Theeboom, Vertonghen, & De Martelaer, 2015). If we understand this through the lens of community engagement (sport *and* social intervention) programmes then, sport can play a meaningful role in socialising people and offering positive role models (Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011).

A second way that evidence for sport’s presumed effectiveness in the context of psycho-social development is explained is oftentimes through the theory of PYD. In the context of youth sport, the idea that sport has meaning beyond play itself is given credence through the wide claims that it can be used in order to effect changes through engaging and inspiring young people, and focusing on community development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, 2004). The guiding principles of PYD, seeing children and young people as resources to be developed and not as problems to be managed (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2015), are seen by some to be facilitated through the use of sport. This includes, but is not exhaustive to, increased cognitive competence, self-regulation, initiative, and ownership of action for young people (Coalter, 2007).

Social capital too is often used in the context of sport to explain the extent to which, like physical capital can be measured and constructed through the acquisition of material objects, ‘social wealth’ can be measured. This is through, for instance, the acquisition of friendships, networks, and helpful partnerships (Hoye & Nicholson, 2008). In this field, there is a wide range of literature that uses social capital to help explain how social networks in the context of youth and sports participation can increase in size and the range of support available. For example, Bradbury and Kay’s (2008) analysis of the *Step into Sport* programme (a national initiative that trains young sports volunteers), and Bell’s (2007) outline of the success of the Champion Coaching scheme (a national youth sport and coaching scheme which ran from 1991-2000). Additionally, many UK policy documents (see DCMS, 2000/2008; DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002; ODPM, 2004; Home Office, 2006; Cabinet Office, 2015), specifically draw on the concept of social capital.

But it is not always the case that the research explicitly suggests that it is sport itself that has helped facilitate change. Indeed, studies regularly indicate that it is some of the wider benefits of participating in programmes that have assisted and advanced such changes (Blum, 2003). The work of the Positive Futures programme² (2003/9/13),

² Positive Futures was a national social inclusion programme centrally funded by the Home Office from 1999 to 2013.

for instance, shows how similar patterns of relationship building and enhancing social cohesion are evident among different mediums such as arts and music projects for youth. Moreover, much is also made of the necessity of suitable individuals who can provide direction and structure to at-risk youth (Coakley & Pike, 2009).

Community sports coaches and the power of relationships

And so the issue then is not simply whether increased sports participation can be viewed as contributing to the personal development and awareness of young people, as well as the reduction of indices that point to what we understand as social exclusion. Rather, it is whether sport itself has some kind of transformative property, or if any success is in partnership with or a combination of other factors.

Here we can draw upon a wide range of work that points to the role and practice of community coaches as essential to programme success. Examples of this include Martinek and Hellison's (1997) work that recommended approaches to successful programmes that focused on emotional needs and developing relationships. This kind of approach is summarised through a growing body of work, such as that of Bell (2007), Bradbury and Kay (2008), Sandford, Armour, and Duncombe (2008), and Hardman, Jones and Jones (2010), who all surmise that community based sport programmes looking to promote positive development must emphasise positive relationships and the role of the coach. So given that there is continued investment in the use of sport in community projects in the UK, it stands to reason that we look to understand more about whether it really 'works'. Indeed, here it is worth noting that authors such as Coalter (2001; 2007), Bailey, Hillman, Arent and Petipas (2012), and Griffiths and Armour (2011) believe that there is insufficient evidence to fully support the claim that sport can be of use in community development and addressing wider social policy objectives. Moreover, Whitley, Massey, Camiré, Boutet and Borbee's (2019) systematic review of sport *and* social (youth) interventions in the United States found that the quality of reviewed evidence from a 23 year period was "weak and incoherent" (p.17).

In summary then, whilst there is a range of encouraging claims about the positive relationship between sport and social behaviours, there is a continued need to avoid naïve generalizations related to the transformational capacity of sport within community settings, and a further need to generate more theoretically informed and nuanced explanations by researching within the field and the practitioners themselves. This study thus positions itself by asking whether sport has, in an essentialist manner, core attributes that lend themselves well in encouraging pro-social behaviours and wider community commitment and involvement. Alongside this, the present study also queries whether it is the ancillary benefits of taking part in projects, such as contact with others and the facilitation of positive relationships, that potentially outweighs the actual use of sport. It addresses these queries in two ways: (1) By critically analysing data, gathered through asking SDOC&POs, to determine whether claims made for sport as a medium to effect changes in pro-social behaviour are with merit, and (2) by investigating whether the existing understanding of best practice in community sports projects can be added to through the recollections and advice of a number of SDOC&POs.

Methodology

Traditionally, action research is seen as a method by which researchers can focus, through using a critically reflective approach, on exactly how research can be transformed into more substantive action. Typically, action research incorporates cycles of planning, reflection, and finally modifications to existing practice, all through collaborating with practitioners in order to improve understanding and practice (Somekh, 2005). It is in this context that the author acknowledges their past experience working in adolescent care, youth work, and community sport. What this means is that this research, by way of the author's ideas, previous contact with and subsequent use of people 'in the field' known to them (including as part of a wider university approved project), and the continuing post research professional contact they have with some of the participants (through collaborative work), operates through an action research stance (Thomas, 2013).

Broadly, given the aims of the study were to determine whether claims made for sport as a medium to effect changes in pro-social behaviour are with merit, and to investigate best practice in community sports projects, an interpretive research design was adopted. This was in order to determine the perspectives, beliefs, and thoughts of the participants. By working off the assertion that asking practitioners in the field of community sport (who could yield substantive answers based on action and experience) whether sport has fundamental qualities that contribute

to identifiable developmental outcomes, the study used a purposive (Patton, 2002), theoretical (Bryman, 2002; Robson, 2002) sample consisting of SDOC&POs who were known to the researcher from the previously mentioned work in community sport type projects. In order to ensure good levels of understanding and experience could be reflected on, the main criteria for inclusion in the present study was for participants to have a minimum of three years' full-time experience of working in sport *and* social intervention settings and programmes (sport projects that also looked to embed a number of non-sport objectives).

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data. The interview questions were open-ended and, in total, took place over a two-month period at various sites chosen as being convenient for the interview participants themselves. The interviews followed an interview guide which had been developed to ensure that the aims of the study were followed and, where necessary, the interviewer sought to direct the conversations and elaborate on certain points. The interviews took between 30 and 90 minutes each, and were free-flowing and intended to reflect the perceptions of the interviewees themselves. The interviews were recorded verbatim (with permission from the interviewees) and the participants were assigned anonymized names. See Figure 1 below for biographies (anonymised) of the participants.

Jon: works as a football in the community project manager and at time of writing had done so for five years. Previous to this, Jon had worked at another football club in a similar capacity for three years.

Francis: has over ten years' experience working in the community sport setting and at time of writing was working as a local authority sports development officer and a part time sports coach for a local football club.

Sam: has worked for the past eight years for a local authority in a sports capacity. This has included community regeneration programmes that focus on sport as a means to engage participants.

Danny: works in a community development coaching role for a local semi-pro football club. He has been in this role for over three years, but before this worked with young offenders and used sport projects in that role.

Martin: works as a community sports coach. Whilst full-time equivalent, he works for a variety of providers such as his local authority, an outreach programme, and his local professional football club the last four years.

Dave: coaches for a local authority sports development department as part of their community engagement strategy. Alongside this, he works in adolescent care in a sports capacity.

Marc: works as a sport development officer for a local authority. He is an experienced project organiser having set up a very successful series of programmes in his area that have focused on social intervention.

Hamid: works as a community coach and runs various sports qualifications and courses for a local college.

Figure 1. Participant Biographies (Anonymised)

All transcripts were repeatedly reread to draw out recurring patterns and themes through a process of thematic analysis (Bryman, 2008; Smith, 2010). These themes were then decoded and categorised into lower order themes and then subsequently four higher order themes. These higher order themes broadly reflected the aims of the study, and at this point saturation was deemed to have occurred (with no new information occurring) and further data analysis was considered unnecessary. These four higher order themes were then directed into two sections representing distinct patterns and the following two key dimensions: 1) *criticisms and awareness of limitations of sport*; and 2) *skill transference and belief*. The next section will discuss these themes in the context of wider literature.

Findings and discussion

The findings are presented using quotes to illustrate the participants' experiences. This is in order to understand how community sport coaching and the use of sport can be seen through the actions, beliefs, and recollections of the study participants themselves. The data was categorised through four higher order themes which were placed into two key dimensions. These four higher order themes are, respectively, '*imaginative, creative, and interesting*' and '*it's the people not the project*' for the first key dimension, and '*the dregs of life*' and '*sport as the tool*' for the second key dimension.

Criticisms and awareness of limitations of sport

Imaginative, creative, and interesting...to make them come back

Several problems face those trying to promote sport participation in areas of social deprivation. Here, all the study participants indicated that one of the areas that general coaching in sport needed to prioritise in these type of programmes was the issue of creativity. This was considered a perennial problem, particularly in light of the nature and context within which the study participants operate, one where most of the time participation in their sports programmes was a choice, and not mandatory. Underpinning this problem was the way in which the SDOC&POs in this study needed to continually enhance the experiences that the participants had in terms of enjoyment, engagement, and increasing their desire to come back. Any initial motivation to attend was seen as temporary, and developing new skills, strategies, and ways of thinking for the project deliverers was considered paramount to the success of the programmes and sessions. Francis, for instance, explained how PE teachers in schools and club type sports coaches didn't have the same pressure as those in the community:

"They don't have to be creative. Whereas our coaches, whether it be a community coach or someone who makes a living from it, has to be creative, has to be imaginative, has to make it interesting...to make those people come back. So, it's a different skill-set and actually a different mind-set. And I think, one is not necessarily better than the other, it's just different and needs to be different."

Danny elaborated upon this idea. One of his "bugbears" was people trying to impose discipline without thinking of the personal circumstances and backgrounds of the participants:

"I don't think being regimented works within community sport. It can be used, but I just think that it's too much for them. I always say that the difference between a coach and a school teacher is...a school teacher doesn't have to be imaginative."

Sam questioned the way that some coaches operated. In essence, he advocated an approach that repeatedly reinforced a critical analysis of personal values, beliefs, assumptions and ideas:

"I just really think why do we have to have all these things that we're taught to do, why do we have to have all of these prescriptive things. Let's just...send the information this is what you need to do, maybe learn, maybe just have some fun, and bang get on with it. To me there's a lot of bureaucracy and hypocrisy around what we need to do."

Overall then, there was a feeling that typical approaches to delivering sports coaching sessions would not necessarily be worthwhile or effective in the community setting. The SDOC&POs in the present study opined that a particular type of knowledge, one that emphasised a central tenet of creativity in order to engage the participants, was necessary in the context within which they operated. It was apparent then, that any idea of sport being 'worthwhile' needed to be cached within a broader sense of content and contextually specific knowledge. Larson (2006) suggests that this deeper approach to developing adaptability and creativity, and at times management and leadership skills, can be facilitated through constructing an environment that challenges participants. This parallels the way that the SDOC&POs in this study looked to motivate their participants by encouraging "engagement in challenging, task-oriented behaviour" (p.679).

What was also of note though was that all of the study participants felt that there needed to be an understanding of the nature and role of people skills within projects. They suggested that the level, and type, of knowledge needed was one that needed to be more attuned to figuring out strategies that would account for the interactions, responses, and facilitation of relationships within the projects. Of note, this was considered to be as or even more important than the use of sport itself. Jon expounded upon this idea with his statement that:

"I'm a firm believer in making sure that your coaches are the best that they can be. Which is why I spend so much time getting people thinking about things, but also getting them to work with other young people so that they get that other viewpoint, that other feel of what people were doing and what they like to do."

It's the people not the project...

This critical appreciation of the limitations of sport in developing relationships and further advancing the claims of successful projects, is further illustrated by a discussion with Danny who recounted that some administrators or funding bodies might simplify the power of sport:

“I really think that the idea of the project is straightforward, But it’s the people within the team that will make that project successful. I can manage people, I can have a co-ordinator who can manage people, but unless they’re delivering the goods properly and making those relationships with those groups you’re not gonna get them along.”

Additionally, whilst the SDOC&POs felt that empowering those running the sports coaching sessions and projects with their choice of sport and activities was critical, it was more a case of ensuring that the people in charge of the groups were the “right match” and possessed the skills essential to get on with people. Marc identified the importance of learning transferable skills through sport, his quote being representative of all:

“Is sport itself the appropriate vehicle to try and effect changes in behaviour? It is, but I believe that it’s got to be the right kind of sport, and more importantly, the right kind of person leading it, for the right groups.”

In most cases there seemed to be a recognition that sport was helpful, yet secondary to the real interactions and managerial skills that the study participants felt they needed. Martin, from his recollections of starting as a community sport coach, had raised the importance of sport “as a large and important part of what can be done”. These observations were tempered by thoughts such as Hamid’s that “if you can work in the right direction I do feel that it is the people within a project, That’s what makes a project”. This fits neatly with the view that Dave made:

“Sport is not the answer to everything. And it never will be, same as, having a police force is 100% going to give you no crime. It just doesn’t work (like that). But people can have an impact and changes the way they live their lives...”

These views are consistent with the findings of Coalter and Taylor (2009) and Haudenhuysea, Theeboom, and Coalter (2012), which posited that more person-centred approaches within community sport projects, ones bearing relation to youth-work principles and the notion of developing deeper social relationships, are more important than the practice of sport delivery in isolation.

Skill transference and belief

The dregs of life: getting out of ‘large dustbins’ through sport, compassion and understanding

Experience in life, an understanding of deprivation and life chances, and an appreciation of communities with low aspiration were factors that the study participants noted as significantly influential in terms of best practice. In the UK, life in areas that are categorised as areas of social deprivation meant that, for the study participants, they would be working with a diverse group:

“There are those that were on the fringes of being permanent lifetime criminals, to those that have just been unlucky in life and had bits and pieces, to those that were already planning on doing something with their life, but they weren’t quite sure how to do it.” (Jon).

Oftentimes, the lifestyles and background that their participants had experienced impacted how the SDOC&POs operated in the environment of sport and social intervention projects. Here, they described how they realised their approaches to working with young people were underpinned by the broader interactions they had with them: the conversations, relationships, ‘banter’³, and shared interests. Specifically, they discussed the discrimination that the young people in their projects had highlighted as normal within their lives (such as through the education system or exchanges and relations with the police). Perceived or otherwise, this had impacted the way the young people in their projects viewed their world and subsequently the manner in which they interacted with others. Correspondingly, this affected the manner in which the SDOC&POs measured and considered their own interactions in the field. Marc provided quite a pertinent explanation of this:

“It’s great to get on with young people and have some kind of shared interests. But it’s just one of those things that is part of the bigger programme and approach that you have to work with. Oftentimes though, you’re working with young people that others will feel that, they are actually just from life’s large dustbin dregs... you’ve gotta understand that and put yourself in their shoes, understand them, build them up and their self-esteem.”

³ ‘Banter’ is a British colloquial term for exchanging teasing, yet friendly remarks.

Similarly, Dave explained that understanding where participants came from and why they took part in or displayed anti-social behaviour was paramount. He told a story about how his team were able to continue drawing on funding streams because of their success, but emphasised that much of this was down to hard work, empathy, and just “plain believing in them” (the young people taking part in their projects):

“I’m not being big-headed about this, but I get on well enough with them to let them know that they can really do things if they put their mind to it. Mentally, I’ve got to design a programme about how we can use functional skills in sport. Because of the work that we’ve done in the community, and how we developed that through using sport as a means to get them to actually, really believe in themselves it can work. If I’m honest though, it’s more because I’m so passionate about it and do believe in them, and that’s what happens, that’s massive.”

In a study of 249 tennis players in Seoul, Bum and Jeon (2016) found that having fun through physical activity significantly raised ideas of self-worth and value to broader communities, and additionally, that increased positive self-esteem arose from wider social interactions. In a sense, this does mirror what may be one of the basic tenets of the present study’s findings, that participation in physical activity, in and of itself, is a direct influencer in terms of increasing participant self-esteem and thus might possibly contribute positively to their social lives, social support, and resultant life chances.

There remains the question, however, of whether this understanding of self-esteem can fully inform how the SDOC&POs in this study saw the benefits of using sport in their projects for their participants’ psychological benefits. Here then, in this context, the concept of resilience is complementary to our understanding of self-esteem. This is because it is structured as an aggregation of a number of characteristics that includes self-esteem itself. Others include the ability to deal with stress, work with others, and problem solve (Ahern, 2006). Existing research supports this by concluding that resilience can be developed within youth given the right parameters, objectives, and underlying knowledge to effect change (Cooper, Estes, & Allen, 2004). Related to this, the SDOC&POs in this study felt that compassion and developing self-belief in their participants could contribute to the development of the aforementioned self-esteem and resilience.

To fulfil this developmental objective the SDOC&POs felt they needed to appreciate the social circumstances and background of the participants that they were presented with. In short, this means they were required to effectively use compassion in their interactions. Whilst based in the field of executive coaching, the work of Wasylyshyn and Masterpasqua (2018) lends itself well in this manner to the present study’s findings. Their work centres on an approach that values compassion as integral to effective leadership and, indeed, more efficient, fluent, and productive organisations that value social emotions. Similarly, the approaches often being followed here in the recollections of the SDOC&POs, have the virtue of reflecting the value of respect, of honouring emotions, and of reinforcing our idea of compassion as being fundamental to facilitating increases in self-esteem and resilience.

Sport as the tool: hold on a minute, that’s worked and I didn’t realise that was gonna happen

Subtle nuances aside, all eight study participants talked about the importance of using sport in their projects. This was evident from their thoughts that it was an excellent “tool” that aligned well with wider life skills. As Jon said:

“Quite often you find in deprived areas, because it’s the way that it’s always been, they resign themselves to the fact that it’s actually high unemployment here. So I’m gonna be unemployed there’s not really much jobs and they don’t believe in themselves. And I think sport gives them those skills that they probably wouldn’t get otherwise. Team sports, individual sports, give you different skills and you start to learn.”

Hamid provided further explanation. Much of this came down to the idea that sport was seen as a tool; one that is malleable and has a degree of plasticity which the ‘users’ can adjust and make specific to their aims.

“Think social skills, leadership skills. All of this normal stuff you can pick off from being within a group of people, playing sport. And they’re having fun doing it. And it’s an easy way of doing it. Now if I was a computer geek, it probably wouldn’t work for me. But if somebody said ‘here we go, we can do all this social stuff’ while we’re designing a new game, or designing a new system, well, hold on a minute, that’s worked and I didn’t realise that’s gonna happen. So you find the tool. I just think that sport covers so many different areas.”

The ubiquity of sport and its ability to effect pro-social behaviours captured much of what the study participants identified in their reflections. Characteristics of sport that were considered to be essential in the context of community sport included the fact that they felt that it directly contributed to the success of projects, through enhancing participants' concepts of attainment. As Sam explained:

"Y'know, project wise, yes definitely, people wise, yes definitely, because you can actually see that they start making an effort for themselves after they have gotten used to the constraints and benefits of sport."

One of the most significant codes within this theme that the data revealed was "sport as the tool". Here, many of the SDOC&POs talked about how sport was an excellent vehicle to promote certain types of beliefs and behaviours. Jon stated that sport worked particularly well in terms of *"teamwork, teambuilding, and understanding the way that you have to work in life. Sport can be the tool"*. And Martin supported this, adding that *"their social side, their mental side, their emotional intelligence"* could be developed. Danny said that they used sport as they considered it to be *"an effective vehicle to improve behaviour. Because obviously you've got to abide by the rules of the game, you've got to listen to people that are coaching."* Hamid shared this sentiment, stating sport is *"going to give you discipline, which does help as you get older. It helps you make new friends."*

It is worth noting again that the participants in the schemes the SDOC&POs delivered invariably grew up in areas, or households, that had persistent poverty, low incomes, and low educational performance. Added to this, generally the participants in their programmes were either signposted to these sport *and* social intervention schemes through being at risk of offending, or again, were from areas or households where criminality was considered an everyday part of life. The results of this present study indicates that sports type activities positively influenced the sport programme participants' behaviour, discipline, social interactions, attainment, learning, interest in working with others, listening, and their personal development.

Much of this overall development and change in trajectory of the participants' goals might be explained through the previously mentioned social learning theory, PYD, and social capital. For instance, the manner in which the SDOC&POs recalled how working with the young people to improve their behaviours and life 'direction' through person-centred approaches, could be explained through the use of social learning theory. The core attributes of PYD are also highly visible within much of the findings, with the facilitation of the emotional resilience and self-esteem of their participants positioned so high within the recollections of the SDOC&POs. Moreover, the development of deeper social relationships, interactions, some more leadership type skills, and just making more friends, can justifiably fall under the remit that is connected to social capital. Indeed, as Schulenkönig, Sherry and Rowe (2015) attest in their systematic review of sport-for-development (SFD) literature, the majority of SFD research within the community context uses PYD and social capital as guiding theoretical frameworks despite misgivings around the use of these concepts.

So the question remains of how sport itself might be a powerful agent of development and change. Here, we can draw from studies on sports-based youth development programmes that see sport as secondary in priority to the development of life skills (Perkins & Noam, 2007). These posit that the interdependence, influence, and stress that sport programmes can manifest on participants can result in cognitive, social, and emotional changes in behaviour. Similarly, programmes that have focused on developing life skills themselves, such as the Irish life skills programme for deaf adults that Mathews (2015) outlines, use supportive structures (such as lessons, mentoring, peer support and the like) to enhance what are considered to be the knowledge and skills necessary for modern day life. Within this sort of framework, the scope and nature of what life skills are is contestable. Forde (2014), in an outline of how life skills can be developed in HIV prevention curricula contained within SFD programmes, asserts that the term is vague, yet that "life skills programmes tend to emphasize individual responsibility and self-governance" (p.291).

Nevertheless, what we can see is that sports programmes and the use of sport itself can be managed as domains where personal growth and development can be facilitated, and that much of this development relates to broader terminology, use of, and reflections related to life skills. Indeed, the work of Bean, Kramers, Forneris and Camiré (2018), for instance, fully illustrates through their implicit/explicit continuum of life skills development and transfer of youth sport, the way in which life skills can be intentionally embedded. Given this, we can understand how the sport *and* social intervention projects in this study repeated exposure to developmentally rich experiences. We can also acknowledge the necessary role of individuals, relationship building, and empowerment. Through this, we can posit that sport is indeed a medium – from the perspectives, recollections, and understanding that the SDOC&POs testified – that easily allows young people to be engaged through designing activities and games that can foster, more readily, the aforementioned life skills and social competencies.

Conclusion

Throughout the present study, the question of whether sport actually does have some form of inherent characteristic that might help at risk youth has persisted. Specifically, it was considered necessary to ask whether any perceived success of sport *and* social intervention programmes are more a product of non-sport elements. For instance, the ancillary benefits of participating in these types of schemes, such as human contact and developing relationships (Coalter, 2007), as opposed to the fact that sport was used. The aims of the present study then were to a) determine whether claims made for sport as a medium to effect changes in pro-social behaviour are with merit, and b) to investigate best practice in community sports projects. These aims were underpinned by the following notion: If we understand that the additional benefits of participating in sports programmes have the capacity to effect ‘change’, and that perhaps other activities could be used in place of sport (for instance, arts and music), then what is it about sport that might help? What characteristics might sport have that lends itself well to changing behaviours?

The SDOC&POs in this study reported that the sport *and* social intervention projects they were involved in had the capacity to increase their participants’ *self-esteem, resilience, and compassion*. However, this was considered to be more in line with the personal affectations and dispositions of the SDOC&POs themselves, as opposed to just the use of sport per se. Yet the role and nature of sport was considered to be crucial in terms of developing interdependence, influence, and cognitive, social, and emotional changes in behaviour. In short, sport was seen as an extremely effective tool to engage young people in activities and games that facilitated the development of life skills, individual responsibility, and self-governance.

The conundrum that we are left with then is that SDOC&POs in the community context require knowledge regarding the use of sport, within the constructs of rules, practice, skill, and adherence. However, this is tempered by the need for them to grasp the complexity of coaching expertise, relationship building, and interpersonal skills in the context of sport *and* social intervention projects. More specifically, the argument needs to be made that a) sport is, in the right hands, an appropriate vehicle/pedagogical tool that can contribute to the promotion of pro-social behaviors and active citizenship, and b) that SDOC&POs need to be sufficiently qualified, competent, and knowledgeable in terms of their awareness and expertise. This is in order to develop participants’ self-efficacy, to develop potentially successful youth-adult relationships and partnerships, and encourage social support through the use of sport sessions. A key recommendation here then is for coach education systems to actively programme in plans/learning that consider the necessity (seen through this research) of effectively using patience, empathy and meaningful interactions with participants in the community context to effect change. This may present a future research opportunity, possibly using other methods (e.g., surveys or questionnaires) to ensure a more representative sample, that could examine (in more depth) the impact and role that self-presentation, empathy, and interpersonal skills play in successful community coaching.

The author acknowledges that whilst the present study offers several new insights, it is not without limitations. These include the fact that the findings are explained through an aggregation of multiple theories that are used extensively within sport. In this fashion then, the present study works less as a piece of research that contributes new theory, and more as a piece of work that contributes to existing knowledge. Furthermore, the number of participants in the study was limited in terms of scope (an area in the south of the UK), numbers (eight), and reliant on the recollections of the SDOC&POs themselves. Moreover, the fact that the SDOC&POs worked in various programmes means that truly generalising these results is arguably more problematic. The results of this study then may not be applicable to other professionals working in the domain of sport and social intervention. Of particular note also, is the fact that the study’s broad objective was to ask whether ‘sport’ possesses essential characteristics and attributes that support the development of pro-social behaviours, aspirations, and community engagement. In many respects, answering this question was only possible through ascertaining the recollections and views of the sample only, rendering the study in this case as one with a clear limitation in terms of how well the research was able to address this fundamental research question.

Irrespective of this, the present study has demonstrated the extent to which sport, from the perspective of experienced SDOC&POs who have worked in community engagement projects, contributes to improvements in participants’ well-being, pro-social behaviours, and notions of active citizenship. We must be wary, however, of how this reflects what some (for instance, Coakley and Pike, 2009) view as an essentialist view and use of sport, and acknowledge that whilst sport will clearly not solve all of the societal problems that some purport it to do, it does highlight the potential that it has in terms of fostering what the present study sees as the critical building blocks for successful projects: developing relationships and trust between participants and coaches. The caveat is that this can perhaps only happen when sport *and* social intervention projects are managed and overseen by those that can view sport through a more critical

viewpoint, one that understands that to contribute to wider social policy issues, pro-social behaviours, and community engagement, a meaningful understanding of human interaction and compassion is necessary.

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