

Post Sport Programme Journeys: Evidence for Longer Lasting Effects of Sport for Social Change Programmes

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Article Info

Article History:

Received: 28 January, 2022

Accepted: 02 February, 2022

Published: 05 February, 2022

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Abstract

Despite valid criticism and queries related to the long-lasting effectiveness, monitoring, and evaluation of sport (social) intervention programmes, there persists an almost unarguable perspective that sport inevitably contributes to the positive development of young people. These claims are, admittedly, substantiated by a relatively wide body of work that demonstrates the effectiveness of these types of programmes on a more immediate, lifespan scale of many projects' (and oftentimes the more prompt, almost instant after-effects) measured capacity. The literature pertaining to longer lasting success, however, is sparser, and it is in this sense that this paper/mini review explores this subject and outlines more recent, emerging evidence related to exploring the long-term effectiveness of these types of interventions.

Keywords: Interpersonal relationships; Resilience; Social capital; Positive youth development (PYD)

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Introduction

Internationally, the field of sport-for-development (SFD) has now accrued a well-established body of literature, supported by political and institutional support, that places and outlines how and why sport can have a positive influence on a range of social policy factors. Explicitly using sports-based systems and programmes to service social policies has a wide and varied history, with the UK in particular demonstrating specific conceptual engagement with these principles since the 1960s with the Wolfe den Report [1]. Extending from this, a natural progression occurred in the 1970's with the increasing provision of local authority sports centres [2-3]. Moreover, the 1970's introduced the 'Sport for All' campaign, legitimised by the publication of the Cobham Report Sport and Leisure [4] that placed sport within the welfare state spectrum, and that signalled a policy change from the previously held themes of social order and elite sport success. However, the 'Sport for All' campaigns were, at some level, effectively policies designed to reach disadvantaged groups. Perhaps key to any lingering doubt that sport was taking on a combined social-philosophical and social-political use to address wider policy issues, came with the manner in which 'Action Sport' schemes were set up to address the unemployment and disillusionment evident within inner cities (in particular with regards to police brutality), characterised by urban unrest (riots) during the 1980s [5-6]. Similar schemes in France in the 1990s demonstrate the increased scope in which sport, within policy frameworks, took on the guise of palliative application to their own issues with urban unrest [7]. Indeed, approaches to

providing sport [8], in conjunction with empowering local communities and improving welfare services, and subsequently personal aspirations [9], demonstrated a commitment to combining sport and social policy. Key to many contemporary SFD or sport-for social-change (SFSC) programmes, are the tenets of engaging and educating young and/or at risk/vulnerable/disadvantaged people. In many respects this mirrors, complements, or works in partnership with various state interventory processes, institutions, and professionals such as youth justice, social work, and interventory education [10-11]. The conceptualisation and subsequent rationales for promoting sport as a vehicle to address these wider social issues draws heavily on a variety of theoretical constructs. The development of life skills, positive youth development (PYD), social learning, and social capital are all examples of the underlying philosophical and theoretical discourses that promote, and explain, the use of sport in what is – effectively – a psychosocial developmental process. The first, life skills, sees a premium placed on the accrual of skills such as planning, working with others, and developing personal, social and everyday skills suited to participants' environments. The second, PYD, is primarily a concept that encapsulates how activities can be used to effect positive changes in individuals, such as encouraging resilience. Social learning theory [12-13], helps explain how, in sports projects and sports participation, social reinforcement of valued behaviours (perhaps, for instance, extolled or demonstrated by SFD/SFSC professionals) can be learnt from others and then imitated [14-15]. The last, social capital, effectively encapsulates how positive, helpful relationships and social networks can be

accrued through participatory activities, for instance, sport [16-17]. When contemplating a programme's intentions, delivery, and strategy, and the philosophical and pragmatic approaches of SFD and/or SFSC projects, there are perhaps two key tenets that can be taken into consideration. The first is that in design, many adhere to the principles and explanation that Coalter [14] put forward with his Sport Plus and Plus Sport conceptual approaches that explain, respectively, how agencies will use non-sport objectives in SFD and/or SFSC initiatives or how agencies add sport to existing non-sport activities (for instance, employment programmes) so as to "hook" participants. The second is that the development of positive relationships between key workers and participants is inevitably, as evidenced by the consensus of research [18-19], seen to be essential in facilitating change within participants. Indeed, all of the aforementioned theories mentioned above are, whether intentionally and/or implicitly mentioned at times or not, hinged upon the successful bridges built between practitioner and participant. Overall then, 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 sport is seen uncritically as a medium for eliciting positive development. However, despite the significant amount of research available that purports or proves the usefulness and success of using sport in SFD and/or SFSC projects, there is a more limited body of work pertaining to any possible longer-lasting success for individuals beyond their participation in SFD and/or SFSC programmes. The next section will now present the findings from two recent papers that have sought to address this issue, and discuss and explore a range of behaviours, lifestyle, and career trajectories presented from the perspectives of both coaches and participants.

Discussion

The first article, Autonomy, pro-social behaviour, and working to the future: how coaches in the community can model "Next" practice for their participants [20], one written by the author, used a qualitative approach and undertook semi-structured interviews with six experienced community sport professionals/coaches (CSPCs) in the UK. Importantly, given the rationale of the paper was to investigate the extent to which individuals engaged in sport intervention programmes experienced longer-lasting success, these six CSPCs had all worked (whether full time or part time) at some point on the same, long established, sport development project. Their views, recollections, and understanding were analysed through a grounded theory approach, and resulted in three major themes that are outlined below. The first theme, Hard Beginnings, demonstrated the initial difficulties that the CSPCs had encountered with many young people when they started on programmes. For context, the programme that the CSPCs had all worked on was (is) situated within an area that has consistently sat high on national indices of social deprivation. Unsurprisingly then, this socio-economic setting perhaps explains some of the more challenging behaviour (for instance, at times having to mediate violence between participants, and dealing with some threatening

or defiant conduct), and the CSPCs all highlighted what they saw as the critical need to establish firm boundaries and supportive relationships. The first theme, admittedly, acted in a more confirmatory fashion in that it highlighted what other research into community youth sport coaching and projects illustrates, namely that relationships are key [21]. However, the second theme, changing lives – transformational impact, reinforced and extended this idea of developing supportive relationships even more. Here, the CSPCs ultimately felt that they had achieved a longer lasting impact through facilitating changes in behaviour and, crucially, aspirations. The manner in which this occurred was through a committed process and deliberate attempts to act as positive influences, irrespective of whether they were there to lead sport or not. The informality of sessions, the opportunity for young people to ask questions and seek advice related to their lives, and the creation and promotion of spaces where critical reflection could take place (including occasionally challenging the participants' behaviours, impacts, understanding, and ambitions to more positive social behaviours and outcomes), illustrate how meaningful, supportive relationships could, much like the practice of youth work, positively impact the participants. Informality and support then, highlight the impact and practice of the CSPCs in this second theme. The final (third) theme, Austerity and challenges, effectively illustrated some of the barriers that the CSPCs felt were placed against them. Of no surprise, reduced fund was a particularly evident challenge and one, when placed in juxtaposition against the long-term sport intervention project that all the CSPCs had worked on and that had a lifespan starting before and during the context of UK austerity, was relatively self-evident in its impact. As would be reasonably expected, the CSPCs stated that lower resourcing in welfare state provision and community sport spend, in particular for young people with limited support systems and at times what would be considered chaotic backgrounds, negatively influenced any possible positive impact and support. Moreover, increased demands on the CSPC workforce through rationalisation (cost efficiencies) impacted their ability to focus and work effectively. The second article this paper seeks to outline, Cunningham et al.'s [22] Young People's Perceptions of the Influence of a Sport-for-Social-Change Program on Their Life Trajectories, explicitly focused on 20 former participants of an SFSC change programme in Australia named Football United [FUn]. Key here, particularly in relation to the author's [20] work outlined above that centred on community sport professionals/coaches' recollections, is that the sample interviewed in this study had all been involved in the FUn programme as participants at least six years before being interviewed, and all were at time of interview – at least – young adults. This allowed the participants in the study to reflect on the degree to which their life trajectories had been influenced by taking part in the FUn programme. Notably, the majority of the participants had refugee status when they came to Australia, and many of them had chaotic life histories prior to establishing themselves in Australia. Fundamentally, the findings demonstrated considerable success for the participants in terms of acclimating to Australia, and in

particular moving on to higher education, professional vocations, and taking part in community matters. Of note, the longer the time that the participants had stayed within the FUn programme, the higher the chance they had also contributed to the programme as youth leaders. In terms of the participants' recollections and thoughts relative to their experiences of taking part in the FUn programme, the data showed how the programme had supported them, and helped foster new friendships and support networks between the participants. Crucially, given their refugee status, it also allowed them to associate and socialise with other cultural and ethnic groups, and develop an understanding of other cultures. What was of note related to the FUn programme staff, was that the participants' felt that they had considerably impacted on them through raising expectations and aspirations relative to educational and professional pathways. In short, the Fun programme staff had essentially acted as mentors, and although informal in many respects, the constant positive reinforcement and support had significant influence. Interestingly, many of the participants were now also involved in various forms of community matters (for instance, through involvement in supporting similar programmes, or within professional fields such as welfare and justice), as well as longer-term leadership roles in their professional lives. Conceptually, all of these findings were explored and explained through the lens of social capital. The increased friendships, the bridging of cultural divides, the understanding shown by the programme staff, the key pathways to educational and professional development they were shown, and the subsequent accrual of motivations to support others in supporting programmes when they were older (the social capital concept of reciprocity, and oftentimes with leadership skills gained through their own Fun participation) all demonstrate the essentiality of accruing and developing social capital [23-24].

Conclusion

As stated previously, there is a relatively considerable academic body of work and significant governmental policy and papers supporting the use of sport as a social administrative tool. However, whilst much of this work has focused on more immediate programme benefits and outcomes, there is comparatively less authoritative, empirical, evidence demonstrating (or assessing) the longer lasting effects of taking part in sport intervention projects for individuals. Admittedly, there is a body of work related to community regeneration, developments, enterprise initiatives, and community cohesion, both academic and policy based. Examples of these in academia include the work of Hylton and Totten [25], Coalter [14, 26], and the author [27], for instance, that illustrate the extent to which, whilst maintaining a criticality in terms of understanding and an emphasis on wittingness and ancillary elements [such as the importance of relationships], empowerment, and conscientisation, sport can contribute to wider areas of psycho-social development and community matters. And in the context of governmental policy, the impact of Game Plan [28] that showed the UK Government's then vision of sport to address wider social issues and community regeneration, and the more recent 10-year Pubtexto Publishers | www.pubtexto.com

strategy from Sport England (released in January 2021), Uniting the Movement [29], that whilst nominally focused primarily on health, also still includes individual and collective development, increased aspirations, and social cohesion as key elements, are testimony to attempts to use sport for community matters and personal self-improvement. Moreover, as this paper has also outlined, there is also an implicit reinforcement of interpersonal relationships and processes of community (even friendship groups) development evident within concepts such as PYD, social capital, and social learning, all of which explain how sport can be used within the psycho-social development of young people (through learning life skills, resilience, etc.). However, whilst this paper has outlined (with two detailed examples) some of the more emerging evidence that specifically details longitudinal success, it is the author's position that there is clearly a need to more rigorously examine the extent to which sport intervention projects can create lasting change in young peoples' behaviour and positively influence their life trajectories.

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