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PARTICIPATION AND YOUTH SPORT COACHING GOOD PRACTICE - AN OVERVIEW AND REFLECTION OF THE ACTIVE SUSSEX COACH SUPPORT OFFICERS SCHEME

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Summary. In order to meet a wide variety of social policy objectives (such as health, educational attainment, community cohesion etc.), ensuring wide access to community and youth sport programmes remains an objective of many governments. In the UK, the post 2012 Olympic Legacy Strategy, overseen by Active Partnerships under the auspices of Sport England, promoted Sportivate and Satellite Clubs programmes (aimed at increasing participation levels) through most of the rest of the decade. In order to ensure minimum standards of operation and to develop the skills of the local coaching workforce, Active Sussex (one of the Active Partnerships) commenced a Coach Support Officer (CSO) scheme with the support of the University of Chichester from 2013 to (through various iterations) time of writing. Through a longitudinal reflection/summary of the various interventions and data collection points over the last nine years, we present an overview of this scheme. Further, we outline a clear philosophy, guidelines, and accompanying set of values that extol what can be considered good (best) practice for sustainable community sport and physical activity programmes.

Key Words: Community programmes, participation sport, coaching, mentoring, interpersonal skills

Introduction

Whilst there is an international viewpoint to take account of, the UK perspective and history of using sport to address non-sport objectives has a long history. From the key recommendations (principally to start the then Sports Advisory Council in 1965) and explicit reference to using the institution of sport to engage with social problems within the 1960 *Sport*

and the Community - Wolfenden Report (Central Council of Physical Recreation [CCPR], 1960), to the creation of sport development officers through the 1980s 'Action Sport' schemes (after that time period's urban unrest and riots that addressed unemployment and disillusionment within inner cities) and beyond, the UK has championed the instrumentalist possibility of sport within communities (Bloyce & Smith 2009).

Currently then, while definitions of the role, function, and quality of sports coaching are oftentimes aligned to ideas of skilled and competitive performance, there is also a growing use of sports coaches within a variety of projects that advocate the use of sport to address non-sport policy objectives. These community sports coaches, ones that sit outside of traditional youth and recreational sport objectives that still prioritise better performance, oftentimes focus on outcomes that emphasise community regeneration, raising aspirations, improving health, and developing life skills (Pierce et al. 2018).

However, despite a growing body of work (i.e. Bradbury & Kay 2008; Ikramullah et al. 2018**),** there are still questions related to the different levels of coaching knowledge, expertise, and experience necessary to deliver sport in community type settings (Crisp 2020a). In light of this, this paper seeks to contribute to good (best) practice within this field by presenting an overview/reflection of the fundamental community coaching principles and recommendations that have arisen through a partnership project between the University of Chichester and the Active Sussex Active Partnership (AP - although at the commencement of the partnership it was called a County Sport Partnership - CSP) – APs are sub-regional/local agencies under the stewardship of Sport England, Active Sussex is the AP for Sussex. APs were previously known as County Sport Partnerships (CSPs) until 2017/18).

This partnership entailed developing coach support systems for community sport projects over a nine-year period, and the paper operates as an aggregation of various incidences of data collection, synthesis, and resultant findings and recommendations, as well as a wider, overlapping narrative that summarises how the project ran and (presented in broad guidelines) the implications and recommendations for community coaching practice.

Community Sport Coaching, Increased Participation, and Sport England Funding

In the UK, the explicit use of the term community sports coaches gathered pace within the early 2000's with the provision, after the 2002 *Coaching Task Force report,* (Department for Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS], 2002), of funding for 3,000 posts using this umbrella term. The *Coaching Task Force report* recommended that each National Governing Body (NGB) were to appoint a Director of Coach Education, that each CSP should also 'house' regional Coach Development Officers to be appointed, and that 3,000 'paid' coaching roles

were to be created, all through a three year £30m investment. Designed to increase the number of people delivering coaching sessions, and subsequent participation numbers, the use of (and funding for) the community sports coaches continued under the then Labour government, which was particularly apt given their public service agreements that asked for five hours of sport per week for young people (Bloyce & Smith 2010). However, with the world economic crisis in 2008 and the subsequent impact of austerity measures imposed on various services after the election of the Conservative - Liberal Coalition government in 2010, community sport funding was reduced (Parnell et al. 2017).

However, overlapping the transition period of the two governments, the Sport Unlimited scheme (funded by Sport England between 2008 and 2011) sought to bring together school and community sport through using hybrid type sports and/or unconventional settings for ten-week programmes/sessions that focused on motivating young people towards longer-term participation in sport and physical activity. And the Coalition government's commitment to the Olympic legacy programme ensured that Sportivate, a lottery funded successor to the Sport Unlimited programme (in that short projects of six to eight weeks for young people were funded) that ran between 2011 and 2017, and Satellite Club Projects (clubs run as 'extensions' of existing sports clubs/organisations, normally within educational settings and focusing on improving grass roots participation), running from 2013 to date. Both of these projects were and are, respectively, managed and distributed by the AP network, and this sets the scene and context for the last nine (and counting) years' working relationship between the University of Chichester and Active Sussex. What follows next is an overview of the work undertaken in this partnership, outlined in part to set the context within which the paper operates, but also, importantly, to provide a lasting record of the projects and impacts for future reference.

Active Sussex, Participation Sport, and the Coach Support Officer (CSO) Scheme

The authors of the present paper, Philippe Crisp (University of Chichester) and Anthony Statham (Head of Operations [although his title would have been Sports Development Manager for most of the time of the CSO schemes] for Active Sussex,) are the principal architects behind the relationship/partnership between the University of Chichester and Active Sussex having started the 'project' and continuing to time of writing. The beginning of the 'project' started in 2011 with planning and an agreement to research and develop local coaching matters, and in 2012 several forums/workshops with local NGB officers and Local Authority Sport leaders were held. These focused on exploring local issues related to community & participation coaching, how to develop and retain coaches, reflecting on the effectiveness of existing coach deployment, and identifying coach needs and requirements for community programmes and

participation sport. The results of these forums and workshops were disseminated to the attendees and made available as an online resource (see Crisp & Statham 2012). This initial 'scoping' of the local workforce and their needs was followed, in later 2012, by research investigating the impact of a coach bursary fund on recipients' coaching practice (see Crisp 2013a). One of the central recommendations in the ensuing report was that a coach mentoring strategy/project, led by the then CSP (now AP), would be valuable in terms of ensuring good practice and a more effective, local, coaching workforce. Given the AP's responsibility of overseeing significant funding for Sportivate projects in the region, with a wide variety of coaches, these recommendations directly led to the development of a county wide mentoring scheme that would support Sportivate projects.

This CSO scheme started in early 2013 with the recruitment (and subsequent training) of six coaches/practitioners who were highly experienced in the fields of participation, community, and youth sport (alongside other specialisms). A number of Sportivate projects were then allocated to each of them, and each CSO then contacted and met with the individual project leads and a number of site visits were undertaken from which advisory feedback in terms of delivery, execution, and occasionally how best the Sportivate projects could be established was given. Formative feedback then, and inevitably centred on coach needs, requirements, and good practice for community and participation coaching, particularly in terms of youth, disability, and young adult participation. In terms of national policy and recognition, the Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU - The CPSU is part of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), the UK's leading children's charity that works with the government to strengthen the rights, through policy and legislation, of children) overviewed the CSO system as a good-practice example – in terms of monitoring and safeguarding requirements (CPSU 2013). Moreover, the programme was well received at the October 2014 CSP Coaching Conference and, following this, over the next few years 12 CSPs implemented (or intended to) similar schemes. Of particular interest from the (then called) CSPs at the conference was how an effective mentoring scheme could be implemented within an informal community setting, as the impression (from the CSP attendees) that existing mentoring schemes tended to be focused and aligned more to NGB schemes that operated in a more traditional (sport specific, oftentimes performance related) environment.

For the Active Sussex CSO scheme, these site visits continued in this fashion until end of 2016, and also incorporated overseeing online communities of practice as well as supporting a talent foundation programme. In 2017, the CSO project shifted priorities to a) ensure that Sportivate and Satellite Clubs projects under the remit of the AP were representing the

necessary requirements for safeguarding and b) collect data on other key participation coaching principles. In 2018, in part due to cost-cutting measures and economising under further reductions in community sport spend from the UK government, there was a shift to inhouse (full time members of staff at the AP) quality assurance of ongoing satellite projects, although there was also a move to ensure that CSO external/self-sufficient communities of practice continued. Throughout 2019 and, despite complications resulting from continuing project work through various lockdowns held to suppress Covid-19, at time of writing, the first and second authors of the paper are developing a new mentoring project looking to support coaches and leaders who focus on increasing activity levels within a region of the AP.

Youth and participation sport - good practice

There are a number of existing models and frameworks that highlight good practice for youth and participation sport, such as those seen in the work of Martinek and Hellison (1997), Nichols (2007), Bradbury and Kay (2008), and Vierimaa et al. (2017). In sum, this kind of research and their findings advocate, broadly, a focus on encouragement, developing supportive adult relationships, empowering the participants, and inclusivity. However, the CSO scheme and the nine-year partnership between the University of Chichester and Active Sussex project that this paper outlines, also helps synthesise a range of interventions that have taken place over the long-term. As practitioners, with significant field experience, we believe we have, in some ways considering the importance of good practice within youth and community sport, a duty of care to share what we consider to be meaningful data, interpretations, and recommendations, that could contribute to socially worthy youth and community sport practice and objectives.

Indeed, and whilst this paper does not operate in a standard study fashion (it does not use a standard literature review, and takes a reflective, archival stance), there is a dearth of literature available relative on how to effectively support projects operating within short timespans, with short lead in times, and with (at times) limited expertise due to a reliance on underdeveloped (at times volunteers, and other times with newly qualified staff) coaches as a consequence of the sector. It is in this context then, that the purpose of our paper (to review the various actions, programmes, and interventions which constitute/have constituted the CSO scheme) is located. As such, the findings, recommendations, and implications for community coaches from this project are hoped to contribute to the body of work representing participation and youth sport.

Methodology

As stated previously, this paper operates as a overview/reflection of various interventions and data collection points, focusing on fundamental community coaching principles, over a nine-year partnership between the University of Chichester and Active Sussex. In this respect, the method for this paper can be summarised as a longitudinal reflection/summary using an aggregation of a range of data from the following: forums/workshops undertaken with NGB leads; a research report/project on a coaching bursary project; a comprehensive research report detailing the impact of one year of Sportivate projects for the county; the three year period (and consistent training and reflection within) whereby the CSO scheme directly oversaw/complimented the delivery of circa £ 600,000 of investment and approximately 500 completed projects; the feedback received from a further round of Sportivate projects that were assessed and supported; and, at time of writing, a new mentoring scheme supporting the development of coaches and leaders focused on activity levels within a region of the AP. In essence then, through focusing on experience over time and using a variety of data collection types and methods, this research took on a longitudinal qualitative research (LQR) approach (Calman et al. 2013; Sheard & Marsh 2019). However, the research approach also sits well within the context of action research guidelines, given that this method (action research) typically uses a critically reflective approach, and explicitly focuses on improving understanding, practitioner competence, and professional practice (Somekh 2005; Thomas 2013). This combined LQR/action research stance then, whilst essentially an effort to express the essential features related to youth and participation coaching practice that the last nine years of the partnership established, was designed to ensure that the aims of the partnership (to support coaching requirements and develop skills relative to the fields of youth, community and participation through coach support systems) could be encapsulated succinctly. In more detail, the various interventions/data collection points that were reflected upon and analysed for this paper are outlined below:

Forums/workshops undertaken with NGB Leads

At the beginning of the partnership two forums/workshops were held with NGB, Local Authority, and local University leads within the area (13 in total including representatives from cricket, football, netball, basketball, badminton, and angling). These forums/workshops were led by the first and second author, and centred on what the participants felt was generalised coaching practice, excellent coaching within different contexts, and how learning could be enhanced by experience and different environments.

Coaching Bursary Project

Between 2011 and 2012, an Active Sussex Coaching Bursary sought to increase participation for young people by providing 75 % funding support towards NGB coaching qualifications, with recipients of the award asked to coach a number of weeks to determine eligibility. To help understand the impact of the bursary on these coaches, the first author undertook a qualitative research report with a number of the coaches (Crisp 2013a)

2013-2016 CSO Support System

In response to the recommendations within the Active Sussex Coaching Bursary report (Crisp 2013a), a coach mentoring strategy led by the then CSP (now AP) was created to help develop a more effective local coaching workforce for funded Sportivate projects. These three years consisted of a process of continual training, mentoring, and evaluations for both the mentees (the local coaching workforce) and the mentees (the CSOs). As part of this system and to ensure a consistent approach was undertaken and that monitoring and evaluation could continue to take place, the CSOs continued to meet as a group with the first and second author on a regular basis over the time period.

2015 – One-Year Impact Report: 'Sportivate - best practice and support: An Active Sussex case study'

During the time period of the delivery of the CSO system, a research report, *Sportivate - best practice and support: An Active Sussex case study* (Sims & Crisp 2015), was undertaken to ascertain good practice for Sportivate projects and the CSO system. The research report used a range of data accrued from April 2013 to March 2014. A mixed method approach was undertaken, including surveys, case studies, the statistical data that the projects had to provide, and data from meeting notes and focus groups. In the one-year timeframe, 221 projects were planned, of which 176 were implemented and completed, and 4080 individual participants attended projects.

2017 CSO Project Analysis and Data Collection

In 2016 and 2017 the CSO scheme shifted priorities (in part due to economies), and the CSOs oversaw online Communities of Practice and supported a talent foundation programme. The scheme also continued to visit Sportivate and Satellite Clubs projects to collect data and ensure minimum standards of operation. Much of this last element of data collection took place between April and July 2017, with over 30 site visits (with the first author undertaking 12 visits and the second author undertaking nine visits). These visits sought to extend and reinforce existing knowledge of the local coaching workforce, and also extended to mirror the principles

of safeguarding and quality assurance. The data collection and analysis helped shape annual responses to Sport England requests for data from the AP.

2019 + Active Workforce Development

At time of writing, although interrupted by the impact of Covid-19 on sport participation and sport workforces, the first and second author are overseeing a new mentoring scheme focused the development of coaches and leaders who prioritise increasing activity levels within a region of the AP. Several meetings and a group workshop have already taken place, and local sport development officers in the targeted region are currently continuing with the project initiative. For the present paper, the data generated from all of these interventions/data collection points and their subsequent results, findings, and recommendations was aggregated and analysed as a whole. This was undertaken in a narrative/reflective fashion (allowing a broad perspective to be given), and a determination of the key points, fundamental principles, and core messages regarding good (best) practice over the last nine years were summarised. Throughout the data analysis and chronicling of the cumulative points of reference and interventions, three broad themes were generally highlighted as the key qualities that provide a strong foundation to community sport work. These were, respectively: *Communication and Interpersonal Skills*; *Practical Delivery: Novel and not necessarily competitive;* and *Support, empowerment, and accelerated mentoring opportunities,* and they are presented in the next section.

Results

As a reminder, the purpose of the partnership between the University of Chichester and Active Sussex was to support local youth, community, and participation coaching requirements through coach support systems, and this paper looks to outline what the partnership highlighted as fundamental principles and recommendations for community sport coaching. The three broad themes related to these areas found throughout the various interventions/data collection points are discussed below.

Communication and Interpersonal Skills

A central element within all of the various interventions that took place over the nine-year period was the emphasis placed upon the importance of communication and interpersonal skills for coaches. All of the interventions, analysis, and their subsequent recommendations outlined the importance of communication. In the context of community coaching, this oftentimes centred on how coaches should interact with others (e.g. eye contact), establish

guidelines for discipline, the value of engagement, and how to react to differences between values, beliefs and behaviours in order to avoid miscommunication and misunderstandings (and even conflict resolution). This is illustrated by some of the key recommendations that arose from the first forums and that were subsequently embedded into the CSO scheme, that emphasised that 'Coaches needed excellent communication skills and also needed to be demonstrably enthusiastic in order to enthuse and engage those participating in the sessions' (Crisp & Statham 2012, p. 21).

Indeed, consistent feedback throughout the entirety of the CSO scheme called for coaches to work with and listen to their participants and, in order to maximise efficiency, emphasise verbal and nonverbal communication skills when working on projects. This kind of communication and understanding was considered necessary for positive interaction and, crucial to project success, the ability to motivate participants. Effective communication then, was called for throughout the projects.

Yet whilst it is evident that the necessity and impact of positive communication skills are found throughout the academic literature pertaining to sports coaching (i.e. see Lyle 2002; Jones 2006; and Robinson 2010), in the present paper, some elements were extended. In particular, the *2015 – one-year impact report* highlighted the importance of using inspirational or highly competent coaches to inspire participants was 'uniformly seen as a positive element within the delivery of sessions' (p.12). Competence in demonstrating sport skill to facilitate inspiration, whilst intuitively correct, was seen as particularly important to both younger client groups and groups participating in alternative (non-traditional) sport sessions. Similarly, promoting new friendships and social elements, through communication, was seen as a key positive outcome for the projects in terms of engagement, retention, and facilitating transition into regular participation post project completion. In sum then, emphasising communication and making/facilitating new group friendships were considered key component necessary for project aims at their outset.

With respect to interpersonal skills, interpersonal sensitivity, and the ability to recognise emotional needs, every intervention/data collection point demonstrated similar recommendations. All of them confirmed that developing coach-participant relationships was highly beneficial, and ensued in greater adherence to projects. The first forums and subsequent CSO delivery, for instance, demonstrated that beyond what were seem as the classic skills necessary for communication (i.e. clarity and voice projection), interpersonal skills were also considered to be essential, in particular: 'The ability to understand other people's backgrounds and behaviours (contextual understanding), and to be aware of how to empathically engage

were considered to be fundamental to the community coach role' (Crisp & Statham 2012, p. 21). As a matter of fact, the complexity of working with different groups (for instance, minority and hard-to-reach groups such as those with learning disabilities, or those from low social economic status or deprived areas), something that many community projects focus on, certainly necessitated an awareness of the need for good interpersonal skills. This was particularly evident throughout the tenure of the CSO scheme between 2013 and 2017, and as the *2015 – one-year impact report* highlighted, coaches 'Appeared to require a blend of skills to ensure that these projects achieved success, and it was important to accept that these projects are part of a wider agenda of preliminary engagement for these client groups' (Sims & Crisp 2015, p. 14).

In this context, and recognising that some participants would bring behavioural issues, coaches needed to be experienced with, or have knowledge of, target client groups and also have been aware of prospective challenging behaviour traits that might arise. However, it is important to point out that, in the context of developing skills for community sport coaching, communication and interpersonal skills did not necessarily just need to focus on the interpersonal relationships (i.e. becoming 'friends') between coaches and participants, but also the interpersonal dynamics of practice (i.e. the delivery style, interventions, group management, leadership, and awareness of cultural differences) and coaching style.

Practical Delivery: Novel and not necessarily competitive

Just as 'communication' and 'interpersonal skills' are qualities that good coaches need to have developed a level of expertise in (Lyle 2002; Jones 2006), the same is also true of how coaches need to have a skillset that allows them to deliver sessions. There is a range of literature that supports the use of less competitive activities (Coalter et al. 2000; Coalter 2005), or at the least the management of competitiveness in community sport (Burton et al., 2011), and every intervention/data collection point this paper draws upon demonstrated similar thoughts. One of the ways participants were seen to gain confidence was through the supportive nature of the activities. This involved decision making that placed, in the first instance, an emphasis on informal sessions and making sure that participants knew they did not need to commit. In this respect, using non-threatening (i.e. not overly competitive) and friendly sessions to promote fun-based engagement with activities proved fruitful in terms of project success, and fostered enjoyment, inclusivity, and allowed participants to experience sessions in informal, fun sessions.

It has to be said, however, that coaches still needed to be mindful that there were some exceptions to this idea of a non-competitive trend within some of the reports that were

submitted and used within the *2015 – one-year impact report.* Moreover, the CSOs were also conscious that some sessions would invariably recruit lapsed, competitive participants and that they also needed to be catered for. One of the ways that this could be, and was, tempered, was through the use of variations of competitive games, involving either reduced numbers playing or new adapted formats that would cater for both competitive and non-competitive participants. Other methods of competition were also introduced, such as 'challenges' rather than strictly competition-based sessions, that allowed participants to practice and master a skill in an informal game and fashion. Of particular note, using this kind of approach was also seen to facilitate differentiation. These approaches, such as using graded challenges and new/innovative activities, were seen to be a key element of success for many projects and coaches. Outside of the way that these types of activities could offer participants a more level learning experience, they also offered more unique ways to engage with sport. And it was not necessarily just the offer of new sports, but also at times 'a 're-packaging' of a traditional sport (e.g. Last Man Stands cricket)' (Sims & Crisp 2015, p. 11).

More often than not, however, whilst this type of coaching provision was considered to be positive, coaches were required to be 'comfortable and confident in the differentiation of meaningful activity for a variety of skill-levels within the same session' (Sims & Crisp 2015, p. 13). This required a good understanding of the difficulties and expertise necessary for coaches in order to promote meaningful and positive experiences for participants

Support, empowerment, and accelerated mentoring opportunities

The third broad theme that was found strongly suggested a unique style to supporting projects and their key workers within the community/participation sport context, and broadens thee literature and practice available that pertain to sport coach and project mentoring. As mentioned previously, when the mentoring programme was created there was a wider industry (coaching) tendency for mentoring schemes to be aligned to NGBs who focused more so on the performance related environment, and oftentimes aligned to specific outcomes determined by individual sporting bodies (for instance, targeted coach support). Moreover, mentoring schemes were normally applied over longer periods of time in order to effect change, with communities of practice often used to facilitate agreed expectations and goals, and to maintain learning and support over agreed durations. The general consensus of opinion is that this 'normative'/standard, long term application of mentoring schemes primarily persists today (Koh et al. 2014; Sawuk et al. 2018). The unique element to the CSO scheme was that the mentoring support was highly focused to the needs of many of the programmes, which were oftentimes just six to eight weeks as a complete lifecycle. As a rule, the CSO supported schemes

showed a significantly higher success rate in terms of satisfaction, and completion. An example was set, and followed, in the first tranche of delivery, where a success rate (measured, in this instance by taking place) against those that were not mentored) for the mentored projects of 11 out of 12 projects, compared to the 18 out of 29 that were not mentored. These are rates of approximately 92 % and 62 %, and the one mentored project that did not run was deferred till the final quarter of yearly delivery (Crisp 2013b).

As a rule, the characterisation of effective practice for the CSOs was through a series of interventions: first, an input into what should constitute the aims of projects, and within this a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities that people had. Second, and most importantly in that it allowed real-world advisory feedback, two specific site visits per project would take place. This allowed specialised coaching advice, such as helping with facilitating a move from 'instruction' to coaching, ensuring/promoting the idea that coaches should continuously reflect on their coaching – including beforehand, and more contextually specific (in many instances, youth, community, disability) advice. Moreover, project support through advice on recruitment, retention, networks, exit routes, and advice on supporting other coaches/leaders took place.

Discussion/Implications

The major finding of the nine-year partnership is that to coach and run community sessions effectively, three areas were considered paramount: firstly, good interpersonal skills, secondly, the use of novel, and not necessarily competitive activities, and lastly, that accelerated mentoring opportunities within an in-situ, practice-based context. were hugely beneficial. In the first instance, interpersonal skills of coaches were highlighted throughout the data collection/interventions and seen as integral to the success of projects. One of the central elements here was that in community sport, oftentimes there are beginners, lapsed participants, or participants who have not gone through what might be considered 'normal' sporting pathways (i.e., school, clubs, etc.). Here then, the ability for coaches to create a welcoming, fun, friendly and informal atmosphere was seen as particularly important. Interpersonal skills were then, throughout the nine-year period, always mentioned as a fundamental requirement when working with participants of lower socio-economic status or other disadvantaged groups. In much part, this was seen through the recollections and experiences of the CSOs and other coaches who felt that challenging behaviour need to be understood (contextual understanding and interpersonal empathy) whilst also handled in an appropriate manner. There are existing,

broad, theoretical concepts and values that outline how effectively working with others necessitates managing the dynamics of social interaction. The demands of nursing (Stein-Parbury 2017), social work (Kaprowska 2010), the military (Wisecarver et al. 2007), and business (Bedwell et al. 2014), for instance, all demonstrate that there is a large body of research linking interpersonal skills to interpersonal competence, the ability to read behaviour, and bring about desired outcomes. In health and social work, interpersonal skills such as communication and relating well to others, are considered to be essential to facilitate trust (and expedite responsiveness and openness), to determine how the people they work with feel (integral to diagnosis and clinical reasoning), and to ensure a greater chance of competence and expertise in therapeutic care (Kaprowska 2010; Stein-Parbury 2017). In the context of military and business, there are shared connections between how both domains covet people with advanced interpersonal skills who can structure interactions and facilitate change through anticipating reactions, and choosing the most appropriate means of empowering or advantaging both sides of interactions whilst to meeting their objectives (Hayes 2002). These skills are considered particularly useful when bridging or navigating different cultures, such as workplaces or in the instance of military, peacekeeping contexts and missions (Abbe & Halpin 2009).

These kind of conceptual approaches regarding the importance of interpersonal skills for various domains focus on relationship building and fostering cultural cognition, something not that dissimilar to what was found over the nine-year partnership the present paper outlines. Projects consisting of combinations of new, lapsed, and hard to reach groups were invariably seen to necessitate approaches to coaching that recognised how to develop relationships and also identify differences, thus mirroring the core tenets that underpin the use of interpersonal skills in other fields when used to understand and ultimately bridge differences (between groups and people) in order to work together effectively. Participants within the community sport projects this paper has looked at had oftentimes historically struggled with engaging in mainstream sports activities. As participation in sport is an important facet of many peoples' lives, oftentimes for the social benefits that can be accrued, this could be mitigated for and new habits could be formed through the virtue of trying newer activities within non-competitive environments. Here then, and with regards to the second general theme that was considered paramount, the delivery of novel and not necessarily competitive activities was considered helpful. This was particularly so if the coaches could provide a context of support whilst also being able to iterate between the differing demands of groups (i.e., between those who value competitiveness and skill development, and those who would like wider social groups [an

additional extension of community] and motivation). This type of approach reflects existing theory and recommendations that sometimes-conventional sports, with their focus on achievement and results, can be counterproductive in terms of attracting some groups, particularly those that are hard to reach (Coalter 2005). Here, activities that are somewhat less institutionalised, have fewer restrictions, and at times perhaps allow for more individual expression, are considered to be helpful (Beedie 2009). Emphasising the need to reduce formal rules and regulations, or adopt a more egalitarian approach to fostering newcomers or lapsed participants by offering novel activities, can also be explained through Super et al's. (2018) work. Here, they outline the idea that many participants in community sport may lack the requisite experience and psychological tools to deal with competitiveness and losing/failure.

Just as importantly, Super et al. (2018) also focus on how 'fun' should be prioritised in community sport sessions, both as an outlet for existing problems or perceived mundanity of everyday life, and as a means of maintaining retention. Previous research and guidelines for youth and community sport concurs with this type of approach. For instance, the work of Vierimaa et al. (2017) that focused on best practice in youth recreational basketball and outlines how encouragement, inclusivity, relationships, and fun should be prioritised.

Lastly, the general consensus is that traditional coach learning methods do, at times, insufficiently prepare coaches for 'real-world' practice. In all, the short, accelerated system of mentoring that was used – including the actual site visits and specific advisory support based on real-world observations and applied practice (as opposed to reflective practice), helped distinguish between effective and ineffective principles of coaching and project delivery that were taking place, and demonstrated a positive impact upon coach (and project lead) behaviours. This approach to accelerated mentoring sits central to the modus operandi that the short-term projects required, but also unearthed new professional terrain in that the distinctive practice quite clearly 'worked'. Of note, this manner of reflecting on actual task activities, in-situ and in real time, mirrors to some extent the way in which many students and practitioners learn in the 'real-world' (Crisp 2020b), and find greater use of immediate reflexivity rather than the more reflective pattern of learning that traditional mentoring programmes (longer term, using communities of practice) oftentimes facilitate. This reflexivity, whereby practitioners operate in a contemporaneous manner with their environment and immediate practice (Crisp 2020c), ensures that actions, interactions, and the application of knowledge and theory, can take place in supported environments – and it is this process by which the CSO programme operated, that ensured greater learning, productivity, and success in terms of completed projects.

As a whole, the three areas that have so far been discussed can also be placed under the lens of a singular theoretical framework, one that can encompass the social, practical, and interpersonal dimensions that have been found. Here, the manner in which we systematically contrasted and combined our results from, effectively, a collection of data from different manners, in order to identify patterns that showed a wider 'picture', can also be explained within a theory of change (ToC) framework. This is because aspects of project delivery, leadership, and project evaluation. and subsequent learning that we have highlighted, mirror in principle the key characteristics that separate ToC frameworks from more basic evaluation tools (Hill 1997; Bolton et al. 2018). ToC frameworks then, in the main, place specific emphasis on stringently modelling the practice, planning, and pathways of organisations. In this manner, the more explicit and transparent outlines of our three themes, and our intention to reapply these to future iterations of our work and practice, reflect the way that a ToC framework explores existing assumptions and practice, and calls for implementing changes, policies, or practice based on rigorous exploration of data (Davies et al. 2000; Mason & Barnes 2007). These findings from the nine-year project (so far) then, have clear implications for coaches within community sport projects, and these in turn can be synthesised into a series of recommendations which will now be outlined.

Recommendations

In the above sections, good practice and fundamental community coaching principles have been seen to be shaped and understood through interpersonal skills and also novel activities. To clarify, this paper operates as an overview of a long-term project. However, it is worth mentioning that much of the outreach work undertaken within the combined projects was in towns, or small cities. Given this, there are not any particularly specific characteristics within the Sussex area that might influence the oversight and recommendations of the paper, but it is also true to say that the work cannot necessarily be applied to all social mixed (urban/rural) environments. However, the following recommendations, focused on coach behaviours, offer a framework for wider community sport in the context of attracting and maintaining participants. Note, for simplicity, clarity, and accessibility, the first theme (*Communication and Interpersonal Skills*) directly relates to numbers 1-3, the second theme (*Practical Delivery: Novel and not necessarily competitive*), numbers 4-5, and the third theme (*Support, empowerment, and accelerated mentoring opportunities*) relates to number 6.

1. Focus on relationship building. This was a commonly used piece of feedback and advice, and can be facilitated through activities that look to engage all, and ensuring that registration type actions can be used as a catalyst to conversation and checking on well-being. Of note, the importance of rapport and positive coach-athlete/participants relationships (Martens 2004) needs to be embraced by community sport coaches.
2. Stress friendly behaviours and personas. Emphasise communication, learn names, facilitate empowerment and responsibility (to support trust), and put effort into the minutiae of informal outlines and asking questions of how people feel and 'how they are doing'.
3. Actively promote social interaction within the sessions through recognising and encouraging the skill of the coaches and other staff in ensuring this occurs. Look to bring a coherent approach to facilitating friendships which can, if supported and encouraged, lead to expected future engagement. Focus on this as an aim and a required outcome, over and above activity-specific skills.
4. Build upon this construct and philosophy of informal outlines, and promote atmospheres and environments that actively promote the idea of sport without necessarily requiring participants to compete against each other.
5. Position 'fun' and atmosphere as a function of the session. Consider novel, not necessarily sport-specific approaches (i.e. music during sessions) to promote an enjoyable but informal experience for the participants.
6. Prior to beginning their coaching/sessions/programmes, coaches should be encouraged to engage in self-reflection regarding the work they will be asked to do and the aims of the coaching/sessions/programmes. Specifically, coaches need to focus on meaningful, rewarding, and memorable activity that reinforces the rationale for every project

Conclusion

This paper offers an overview of the goals, strategies, benefits, and challenges, that a number of coaches, project managers, support staff, and the authors of this paper, oversaw and reflected upon across a nine-year period. This nine-year period encompassed the delivery of a range of youth and participation projects, principally under the umbrella of the Sportivate and Satellite Clubs programmes that Active Sussex managed and delivered with a range of key partners - including the University of Chichester - in terms of project oversight and to ensure minimum standards of operation were present.

The paper's findings/categories of *Communication and Interpersonal Skills, Practical Delivery: Novel and not necessarily competitive,* and *Support, empowerment, and accelerated mentoring opportunities* indicate that three, broad, areas should be considered for more in-depth (new) training and good (best) practice for youth and community project organisers, in order to help them become more comfortable with their responsibilities and ultimately be more effective in sustaining participation. More specifically, these three areas emphasised the need to focus on the interpersonal dynamics of practice alongside developing relationships, recommended practical delivery that emphasised novel approaches, whilst de-emphasising competitive activities, and strongly suggested that the use of accelerated mentoring strategies supported development. Whilst the first two themes perhaps work in a more confirmatory (of other research) fashion, we believe the third (centred on *accelerated mentoring opportunities)* is more unique and makes a more distinctive contribution to the field. Fundamentally, however, all three of these areas point to potentially more effective delivery methods and success (good [best] practice) in the context of youth and participation sport.

Interestingly, these findings align quite well with work undertaken by the first author within the time period that posited that leadership and group game engineering positively influenced group cohesion in the community sport context (Crisp 2020a). However, given that the methodology used in the present paper essentially comprised of searching an aggregation of multiple data collection methods for common themes, there are limitations. In principle this is because the paper essentially operates as a reflection/summary of various interventions and data collection points, and arguably no 'new' empirical data is provided to support our claims regarding the CSO project. Whilst the data, findings, and indeed the methodology as a whole, offer critical thought, contextualisation, and explanation they are, perhaps in great part, essentially a dual reflection and interpretation of the data. So in some respects, whilst fully adhering to principles of an LQR/action research stance, it is necessary to fully recognise that the research does lack some scientific objectivity, in that recollections and biases have figured markedly in the researchers' reflections. Certainly, the study/paper has specifically positioned itself throughout as an overview/reflection/summary of a nine-year programme and partnership, and as such there is no 'standard' research focus (i.e. *hypothesis or research question)*...etc.). We acknowledge then that the manner in which the study/paper operates is an overview/story/synthesis with recommendations, not a traditional study.

Indeed, even the acknowledgement of the present study's action research stance, whilst genuinely covering this approach's ethos of participatory investigation and efforts to improve rationality and practices, needs to be seen in the prism of self-reflective enquiry. Understanding

this allows the admission that the study may well lack some complexity and perhaps, objective processes. So whilst we contend that the present paper moves well beyond any superficiality and over-simplifications, particularly in light of the expertise and lived experience we have invested, we cannot discard the notion that this is, essentially, a reflective project in many regards. In essence then, whilst we do consider these reflections to provide insight into the project's procedures and good (best) practice, much of this may well be based upon our own interpretations and 'deep-dive' into what is very much our own 'story'.

Nevertheless, the longitudinal nature of this paper (in terms of aggregating, studying, and reflecting on a nine-year period), the fact that it is essentially an oversight of an applied, at arm's length governmental (sport policy and funding) and academic project with a relatively wide scope, and the applied practice, reflections, and iterations throughout the CSO project merit attention. This is particularly so if we wish for 'sport studies' to acknowledge in-situ training and experiences, and project/work applications that may well be relevant to practitioner training. It is hoped then, that this paper contributes to an understanding of how community sport participation can be supported for both practitioners and academics, and that the results may reinforce training for community type coaches in order to help them become more comfortable with their responsibilities, remits, and practice in this environment.

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