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Relationships, stability, and authenticity: How being yourself is 'the' key to community sport coaching and youth work

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Abstract

The fields of youth work and community sport development both use participation in sport as a means by which to engage young people and support behavioural change. This is achieved through social intervention programmes (whether part of broader or specific approaches, or individual, group, or community contexts), that specifically address community and psychological wellbeing. While extensive bodies of literature support effective practices in both fields, there are fewer related to the intersubjectivity between them. Given, in the UK context at least, the crossover of funded programmes, objectives, and practice in an applied and policy sense, this study sought to investigate what practitioners in both fields considered best practice relative to how they facilitated appreciable changes in pro-social behaviour and lifestyle trajectories. This study used semi-structured interviews with nine participants who all had experience of working in both community sport coaching and youth work. The findings suggest that youth workers and community sport coaches can fashion effective practice through working climates that actively ensure stability and connections, and that authentic projection of self, one that means practitioners must care and have the interest of the young people at heart, are essential to create positive

psychological change through meaningful relationships. Please refer to the Supplementary Material section to find this article's Community and Social Impact Statement.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the United Kingdom (UK), both community sport coaches and youth workers are seen to be valuable resources in parts of the country considered to have deep-rooted social problems, and also for more tailored approaches to groups or individuals who express some form of societal or interpersonal dysfunction. Workers in both fields (community sport coaching and youth work) use programmed interventions in order to positively impact on individuals' lives, inevitably through some form of promoting wider social policy objectives such as personal and social development of their participants, addressing anti-social behaviours (ASB), and raising aspirations (Coalter, 2013; Ord, 2016).

The degree to which this happens, and the foci of each programmed intervention, varies according to the intended outcomes and to an extent is also parameterised by expertise and some differences in the philosophy of both fields. The community sport coaching field is oftentimes focused on outcomes that are health or participatory related, with youth work more often focusing on impacting individuals' life-worlds, behaviour, and life trajectories. But the two fields oftentimes share both of these outcomes, and use a congruent set of approaches that underline the importance of positive role modelling. These typically look to facilitate changes via processes that are often explained through either positive youth development (PYD) or accruing social capital Indeed, an argument can be made that intersections between both fields are oftentimes blurred yet complimentary, yet both fields essentially operate across both disciplines and territories. This is particularly germane given the fact that, despite continued government public championing of both, funding for community sport and youth work in the UK has suffered significant cuts under the post 2010 austerity policy (Ikramullah, Koutrou, & Pappous, 2018; Walker & Hayton, 2017).

Whether this is intentional or not (and there is an argument to be made that using community sports coaches in lieu of youth workers may well be an effort to manage and mitigate cost and spend), there is essentially a blend of programmes, funding, and subsequent practice. In one sense this is, or should be, unsurprising given the shared objectives of both fields and also the fact that in the UK community sports coaching has its roots in the use of youth workers providing interventions after the significant urban riots and social unrest in the 1980s (Coalter, 2007). Moreover, there is a growing recognition of the intersections between both fields, in governmental policy (i.e., *Get Active: A strategy for the future of sport and physical activity*, Department for Culture, Media, and Sport [DCMS], 2023), Sport England (an at arms-length body subsidised by government that articulates physical activity policy and direction, for instance, *Towards an Active Nation*, Sport England, 2016), and academic literature (e.g., Crisp, 2021; Haudenhuysea, Theebooma, & Coalter, 2012).

However, these links might well be considered more ephemeral in nature, and it is probably fair to say that there is a dearth of literature available that more specifically questions the duality and intersubjectivity of the roles, functions, and practice of both community sport coaching and youth work. Instead, and despite the key messages that position sport and youth work as highly effective methods of addressing social policy issues, in an academic sense both fields have traditionally operated in a more siloed, cross-disciplinary fashion, and thus questions relating to what constitutes effective practice for both fields in a more integrated, interdisciplinary approach remain. Given the remarks made here relating to the intersubjectivity, shared history, and shared intended outcomes between the two

fields, this paper intends to determine—from the perspectives of both community sport coaches and youth workers—what some of the underlying precepts for effective practice in both fields may entail.

The next five subsections outline, in more detail, the contemporary literature and understanding pertaining to both community sport coaching and youth work practice in relation to existing conceptualisations and a psychosocial frame that outlines positive youth development (PYD) and social capital, and positions relationships as a significant mediator through which personal development can take place. The paper consists of an additional four sections, the methodology, the data presented in the findings, a separate discussion section, and a final section summarising the paper and offering thoughts on sharing effective practice between the two fields.

1.1 | Social exclusion and a 'fair society'

It is well worth reiterating that the purpose for community sport coaches and youth workers is to facilitate change, and that much of this change happens within disaffected or disadvantaged communities, a context that social exclusion explains well. Social exclusion is a term that encapsulates the marginalisation of members of society within employment and social networks. However, a more sophisticated understanding can be seen through the manner in which it recognises that there is an evolving cycle of exclusion inherent within society itself, brought about by changing resources and technological, political, and societal developments (Donnison, 2001). When the inequalities of society are understood to be a process, involving both society and the economic system itself, the manner and importance in which policy has to be focused on the outcomes of social exclusion are clearer.

However, whilst the term gained relatively significant traction in the UK and Europe in the early 2000s, in the UK the term has been superseded in current government policy through broader language that places an emphasis on crime prevention and/or '*creating a fair society*, in which everyone always contributes their fair share' (Conservative Party, 2019, p. 59). The fact remains, however, that reduced social mobility, child poverty, and the creation, fostering, and/or even the preservation of existing detached groups and individuals, inevitably leads to a variety of linked social grouping, aspirational, and behavioural problems.

1.2 | Positive youth development (PYD) and social capital

Much of the premise for using sport in targeted youth and community support interventions is predicated on the basis that identified populations and participants are likely perceived as problematic, whether in terms of anti-social or dysfunctional behaviour, and their (perceived or otherwise) inability to productively focus or meaningfully contribute to civic life (Coalter, 2007; Collins, 2010). It is in this context, the use of sport is seen to contribute to the wellbeing and health of individuals, and support the aforementioned wider social policy issues. Perhaps key to identifying exactly how sport might help are the repeated suggestions that posits that it can contribute to young people's esteem, goal setting, personal achievements, and aspirational determinants such as educational or vocational achievement. The conceptualisation of how this process, or the end results, can be explained are oftentimes through the use of PYD and social capital, with both underpinning a substantial element of government policy (Collins et al., 1999; Department for Culture, Media, and Sport [DCMS], 2000, 2001; DCMS, and Sport/Strategy Unit [SEU], 2002; Department of Health [DoH], 2009; DCMS, 2018) and academic literature in both the community sport coaching (Bailey, 2005; Coalter, 2007; Collins, 2010; Zhou & Kaplanidou, 2017) and youth work fields (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; Shek, Dou, Zhu, & Chai, 2019).

The first, PYD, is essentially an approach to working with young people that focuses on their psychosocial development and explicitly outlines the plasticity of young people and, as a consequence, how they can be developed and nurtured through the widely used 6 Cs of PYD (competence, confidence, connection, caring/compassion, character, and contribution). The intentional approach underpinning PYD essentially sees workers focus on the individuals

themselves, as opposed to the problems they may be exhibiting (i.e., anti-social behaviour [ASB]). Essentially a psychosocial conception that has synthesised theories of life development, sociology, and developmental psychology, PYD posits that developmental outcomes such as resilience, esteem, coping mechanisms, and awareness of health can be cultivated through positive interactions and intentional interventions (Lerner, 2009). Following the model developed by Lerner (2009) and Gestsdóttir and Lerner (2007), PYD has been used in various youth work and sports coaching contexts (i.e., the *Coaching Children Curriculum*, Sports Coach UK [scUK], 2011 and the *Participation Coaching Curriculum*, scUK, 2012).

The issue for some is not simply whether these attributes, in aggregation, can be viewed as facilitating personal growth and meaningful connections to others in a conceptual and transformative manner. Rather, taking the viewpoint that it can be more reductionist in nature, some have taken a more nuanced approach. For instance, Scales et al. (2016) further question the focus that takes place at particular ages, highlighting the ranges necessary to carefully calculate young adult development, and Deane and Dutton (2020) argue that these developmental parameters (6 Cs) do not necessarily reflect some individuals, nor take into account particular cultural frameworks. As an example, Hapeta, Morgan, Stewart-Withers, and Kuiti (2022) show that Māori cultural approaches specifically detail how the use and understanding of 'connection' is seen as key to character development in that cultural context. Nevertheless, PYD offers a more strength-based or asset-based approach than ones that simply look to address prima facie problems in some communities or individuals. Indeed, practice in social care, youth work, and the broader welfare that focuses on individuals' strengths and capacities to improve their lives, is seen as more meaningful, impactful, and sustainable (Norris & Norris, 2021).

In much the same manner, social capital is used by the UK government to explicitly highlight some of the positive contributions that sport can make through sport for social intervention projects (Culture and Sport Evidence [CASE], 2015; DCMS, 2001; DCMS/SEU, 2002; Home Office, 2006; Office for the Deputy Prime Minister [ODPM], 2004), and there is a rich history of sport scholarship detailing relationships between participation in projects and increased social capital (Hoye & Nicholson, 2008; Hoye, Nicholson, & Houilhan, 2010) as well as inferences within specific youth work approaches (Jeffs & Smith, 2002; Miller, McAuliffe, Riaz, & Deuchar, 2015). The underlying assertion of social capital is that, much like physical capital (from means of production, cash, goods, belongings, assets etc.) can be calculated, social wealth can be measured through friendships, communities, positive relationships and support systems, and beneficial networks (Bailey, 2005; Coalter, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2007). Accruing this social wealth then, and networks of help, demonstrates how social relations can be determined and ultimately improved.

Whilst acknowledging that both PYD and social capital both contribute to the debate around the relative merits of using sport in social interventions, it is well worth noting that the gist of both is much predicated on a psychosocial frame that positions relations and relational work to influence (positively) individuals' psyches and behaviours. Indeed, when applied practice is considered, the role of relationship building is consistently referred to as of significant importance.

1.3 | Relationships—Commitment, emotional investment, respect, and leadership in (community) sport

Whilst there are a number of nuances and minutiae in truly understanding the nature of relationships from a psychological perspective, the general consensus is that they signify what can be construed as often committed associations between people, and are developed through interpersonal links, bonds, and processes such as empathy (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007). Irrespective of any of these detailed distinctions and any refinement of the term relationships, in the fields of community sport coaching and youth work the reliance on advocating the development of positive relationships is well understood, promoted, and ubiquitous.

For instance, in the community sport coaching context, there has been a recognition within sport policy papers that one of the bedrocks for enacting sport policy initiatives related to a variety of engagement and programme aims

and outcomes, is the importance of relationships. *Game Plan*: *A Strategy for Delivering Government's Sport and Physical Activity Objectives* (DCMS/SEU, 2002), a policy paper that still has relevance to much of current sport activity, made specific mention of 'positive relationships with "significant others"' (p. 58) and encouraged/recommended coaches to 'act as appropriate role models and espouse conventional values and conformist behaviour' (p. 58). This emphasis on the importance of relationships within sport policy is still apparent today, with *Uniting the Movement* (Sport England, 2021) also advocating coaches and sport facilitators to 'create spaces and relationships where people feel able to share ideas and concerns.' (p. 46).

In academic literature, sport scholars also strongly emphasise the importance of relationship building. Certainly, it is generally agreed that developing relationships within sport, and particularly between coaches and athletes, is a process that positively impacts on the experience of sport for participants, and their environments. Indeed, there is a good foundation in this context and Jowett's (2005, 2006) 3C+1 model based on four constructs (Closeness—i.e., appreciation and respect; Commitment—maintaining the relationship over time; Complementarity—similar goals and motivation from both athlete and coach; and Co-orientation—similar thoughts and perceptions regarding each other, that is, trust) exemplifies much work related to the importance of relationship building for coaches and athletes within sport.

It has also, however, become increasingly acknowledged in academia that the context of community sport coaching is just as reliant on relationship building as that of performance sport. Cronin and Bush (2021), for instance, illustrate the manner in which relationships built on empathy, trust, and authenticity can help individuals develop. And a further key recent influence here, for example, is the work of Super, Verkooijen, and Koelen (2018) who in a study of 15 community sport coaches found that they tried to focus their sessions on outcomes related to meaningful activity, and ensuring that the participants felt that they belonged to a group. Indeed, there are a range of researchers that point out that community sport requires a range of reciprocal episodes and practice, and they contend that coaches, leaders, youth workers, and participants in these settings must interact together in approximations of social settings and sharing social ideas and relationships (Höglund & Bruhn, 2022; Morgan & Parker, 2022). When this happens, as Coalter (2013) and Spaaij (2012) argue, the role of adults in terms of social recognition can have a positive mediation in terms of actions and outcomes for young people.

Moreover, some of the perennial issues listed above, such as the reliance on positive relationships and the appropriate role modelling that is considered best in facilitating supportive and trustworthy contexts, are also consistent with much literature pertaining to effective leadership in sport. Indeed, there is a growing body of work that has specifically outlined how community sports coaches should lead participants (for instance, through establishing boundaries and effective relationships, see Crisp, 2020b) and how young people can be empowered with responsibility and leadership roles (Crisp, 2020a; Cunningham, Bunde-Birouste, Rawstorne, & Nathan, 2020). As a whole then, in the context of community sport repeated studies show evidence of relationship building between coaches and participants as a key determinant of increasing community cohesion, keeping young people interested and engaged, and effecting many of the intended outcomes of community sport projects.

1.4 | Relationships—Reciprocity, trust, and respect in youth work

In much the same vein, youth work policy also strongly encourages the essentiality of focusing on relationships in order to effectively function in any collaboration or intervention, with a long history that positions this approach as vitally important. In fact, the use and promotion of relationships in youth work has long been typically cited as indispensable, with Jeffs and Smith (2002) illustrating how by the end of the 19th century, youth work 'was characterized by an emphasis on relationships' (p. 39).

As a particularly salient feature, relationships in youth work then are widely acknowledged and accepted as perhaps the primary mediator of effective youth work (Batsleer & Davies, 2010; Jeffs & Smith, 2010; Ord, 2016). In much part, and similar to the duality of literature and policy that underpins community and youth sport programmes

and interventions, youth work has a history of both (literature and policy) formally, and authoritatively, recognising relationships as a key influence. The highly influential *Albemarle report's* (Ministry of Education, 1960) recommendations of offering better facilities and welfare for young people, and the advent of a professionalised workforce and a National College for the Training of Youth Leaders in 1961, were underpinned by what the report saw as, essentially, best practice for youth leaders depending 'upon the quality of personal relationships' (p. 53).

Without a doubt, this set in motion a continued understanding (and processes) that associational, person centred work with young people that continues to form much of the essence for effective youth work (Clyne, 2018; Coleman & Warren-Adamson, 1992) and, indeed, this type of relational approach and the use of empathy and relationship building is considered essential in other services that deal with people from disadvantaged backgrounds, that is, offenders (Farrow, Kelly, & Wilkinson, 2007). The overriding core message within the wider youth work literature then, is that relationship building is considered essential (Davies, 2015). Indeed, the rationale and purpose of youth work as above, and underscored by the Albermarle report's vision, has been mirrored in subsequent policy and practice since. For example, the influential *Fairbairn-Milson Report* (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1969) that built upon the previous directives to administer elements of youth service to the state sector. Moreover, whilst not just youth work centred but rather multidisciplinary (focusing on management and accountability across local institutions) in response to the Victoria Climbié tragedy, the *Every Child Matters* reforms also illustrated the importance of youth work (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2003), and *Transforming Youth Work Resourcing Excellent Youth Services* (DfES/Connexions, 2002) in the same time period more specifically referring to how the then government could raise standards relative to social inclusion and education for young people.

And despite the disproportional negative effects that disadvantaged communities and young people have felt from UK austerity measures implemented by the Coalition government in 2010 and continued through the Conservative Party since 2015 (Parnell, Spracklen, & Millward, 2017; Stidder, 2022; Wylie, 2015), a direct recognition of the benefits of youth services remain embedded in current political messaging and, although critically considered to be under-resourced, policy. A key recent example here can be seen in the *Levelling Up the United Kingdom* (Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities [DLUHC], 2022) white paper, which maintains reference to the importance of relationships and social capital in building communities and service work in disadvantaged areas.

In short, the success of projects in which community sport coaches and youth workers operate is, according to the evidence across both fields, much down to the way practitioners build relationships with their participants and service users. And considering this as a central theme, we are able to view the position they locate themselves and their method of working as central to the personal development of young people, and that the process of participation inherently requires dialogue, trust, and a person-centred approach. All three of the major tenets of relationships, PYD, and social capital are inherently psychosocial conceptualisations. This means that in and of themselves these can be aggregated through using a psychosocial lens and thus literature, policy, and practice can be examined in this way.

1.5 | A practitioner perspective on effective practice: Youth work and community sport coaching

There remains the question, however, of whether this understanding of these three psychosocial conceptualisations can truly explain and inform some of the assumptions, theory, and frameworks of philosophy which underpin applied practice in both community sport coaching and youth work. Essentially, given the fact that this research effectively (bar some work that positions itself at the interface of both—see Coalter, 2013; Crisp, 2021; Haudenhuysea et al., 2012) sits within the separate, essentially siloed, fields of community sports coaching and youth work, the research related to this developing body of literature can still be extended.

This is especially important in the UK given the aforementioned significant cuts to public services and the manner in which the reach and scope of youth services and community sport have suffered. Indeed, the possibility of

further increasing knowledge of best (effective) practice and the minutiae and everyday occurrences that practitioners consider essential, by asking questions related to the psychosocial conceptualisations that consistently underpin policy, is both topical and apt. It is in the frame that this paper has presented, one that has outlined the socio-economic context, the psychosocial developmental lens within which work takes place, the concept of relationships, and the aligned objectives of community sport and youth work, that this paper's rationale and method take place. Given this, the present study's aims are to (a) investigate, from the perspective of workers who have knowledge of both community sport coaching and youth work, the extent to which intersubjectivity between the two fields exists, (b) to identify any shared strategies that practitioners exercise in terms of work within both fields and (c) to determine what, if any, the essential psychosocial ingredients of practice are and, if possible look to frame these in terms of practitioner understanding and skills.

2 | METHODS

Given the research aims outlined above are centred on exploring the possible intersubjectivity (the interface between knowledge, understanding, and experiences) of the community sport coaching and youth work fields, and 'best practice' as perceived from coaches and youth workers, the present study used an interpretive epistemological approach. Consequently, and in line with previous research related to community sport coaching and youth work professional activity that has questioned what practice is, and how it takes place from the perceptions of coaches and youth workers (Batsleer & Davies, 2010; Crisp, 2020a; Jeffs & Smith, 2010; Nash & Sproule, 2009; Wright, Trudel, & Culver, 2007), a similar qualitative methodology for this study was adopted through the use of semi-structured interviews. These were considered to be the most appropriate method to explore the perceptions of community sport coaches and youth workers, as more information about the way the participants made sense of their practice and meanings related to experience could be revealed (Sparkes & Smith, 2013).

In order to fulfil the study's aims, predetermined criteria for selection was based on (a) that participants had worked as both community sports coach/leaders or youth workers, and that (b) because of the nature of the aims related to best practice, an appropriate base of experience was necessary in order to justify their recollections and understanding. This meant that the sample criteria had to ensure that the participants had field knowledge, experience, and expertise to draw from, and thus required all participants to have had more than 3 years full time equivalent practice in at least one of the fields, and at least 1 year in the other.

The present study used a purposive (Robson, 2002), theoretical (Bryman, 2008) sample using the above inclusion criteria to accurately investigate the aims of the study. Ethical approval for the study was granted from the University of Chichester Research Ethics Board, and all the study participants gave informed consent prior to inclusion in the study. Out of a total of nine community sport coaches and youth workers that were recruited, seven were known to the author due to previous professional contacts and having worked, both primarily and more ephemerally, within both fields. The other two were recruited through snowball sampling (Cresswell, 2007) as they were recommended by several of the first seven participants known to the author. All of the participants worked on projects in the south east of England, and for a full range of the backgrounds (anonymised) of the sample, see Figure 1: *Participant Biographies* below.

2.1 | Data collection and analysis

The semi-structured interviews were undertaken in order to understand how the workers understood or considered any possible interface and sharing of practice and philosophy between community sport coaching and youth work fields. In order to do this, an interview guide was used that sought to maintain focus on issues related to working practice, any interpersonal strategies the workers used, how they understood any relations between the two fields,

> *Jamie - community sport coach/youth worker: at time of the study interviews was a community sport coach with managerial responsibility and over 15 years' experience in this particular field – although the role meant that he worked in cooperation with various youth services, Prior to this, he had significant experience working in probation and correctional services, and also had over three years' experience as a specific youth worker for four years,*
>
> *Luke - community sport coach/youth worker: A community sport coach and line manager (football in the community [FitC} for over 14 years, he was also a full-time youth worker for three years and has had managerial responsibilities for a large programme for 13 years.*
>
> *Simon - community sport coach/youth worker: With over 25 years' experience, he essentially operates as a sport development officer for a local authority with a role that formally encompasses working as a community sport coach and youth worker*
>
> *Rebecca - community sport coach/youth worker: An FitC community sport coach for ten years, also works in a part-time capacity with local youth services*
>
> *Mia - community sport coach/youth worker: A community sport coach for over six years, prior to this worked for over two years as a residential youth worker.*
>
> *Liam - community sport coach/youth worker: Has over four years full time experience working as a community sport coach in areas of social deprivation, where he also works on a part time basis with local youth services.*
>
> *Rohan - youth worker/ community sport coach: A manager in the youth work field with over 20 years' experience, and is also in charge of a community sport (combat) club and works on other community sport initiatives.*
>
> *Edward - youth worker/community sport coach: A youth worker with over six years' experience, he has also worked on a number of community sport initiatives during this time period as a coach.*
>
> *George - community sport coach/youth worker: For the last four years has worked part time for a youth club and also a non-league FitC project, his full-time job the last 11 years is as a community sport coach, with key responsibilities for specific disability sport programmes*
>
> *NOTE – the prioritisation in terms of labelling the participants either 'community sport coach/youth worker' or 'youth worker/community sport coach', refers to their principal occupation and experience followed by their secondary occupation and experience.*

FIGURE 1 Participant biographies.

and how they might articulate their understanding of connections, behavioural change, and the impact of associational, person centred approaches. Six of the interviews were conducted in person (five whilst spending the day in their work environment, one in a café) and three were recorded via Teams meetings, with the interviews lasting between 50 and 125 min.

After transcribing the interviews verbatim, thematic analysis was used to interpret the meaning and importance of a number of related themes through repeatedly reading the data and highlighting commonalties and areas of potential interest (Braun & Clarke, 2008). Through an iterative system of checking how developing themes worked in relation to the data, a process of desegregating and then aggregating meaningful data and codes took place. The final themes had a singular focus, did not overlap, and detailed a coherent 'story' of how the participants viewed the essentiality of their practice. The final two themes, *Stability and consistency in the community sport coaching/ leadership and youth work space* and *Authenticity—enjoying the experience* are presented in the following section.

3 | FINDINGS

3.1 | Stability and consistency in the community sport coaching/leadership and youth work space

In line with the literature that outlines how supporting young people in disadvantaged areas with their personal, social, and educational development, the community sport coaches and youth workers in this study felt that many young people depended on their work, their provision and extension (for the young people) as a support system, and

as much constancy as they could provide. Indeed, all of them felt that it was the bedrock to any real, ongoing chances of improving behaviours or aspirations for young people:

> Stability and consistency in their lives. And we're always there, once a week twice a week, whatever, there was that stability and engagement. That engagement bit, again, you know it was really crucial because, you know, we could get them in the door kind of thing, but actually how we would keep them in the door and keep having people come back, there is definitely something in that engagement space as well. And then that connection bit, that more often than not within that youth working space.
>
> *Liam*

One of the most striking parts of the data were the consistent statements that illustrated the lack of support that many of the young people the community sport coaches and youth workers worked with had. Oftentimes, this lack of support was described in terms of an absence of appropriate family, or guardians' availability and involvement in their lives, or other particularly chaotic or even violent episodes that they would experience. As Simon explained:

> It's like really fractious family relationships, the...everything else right, the kind of violence they might be facing. So they come to us, I think it is because they know in a sense they are safe. And can help them. I think the difficulty is that we don't day to day necessarily go into those homes, see them so much. So actually, some of the problems and complexities that people are facing are more kind of hidden to us than anything else.
>
> *Simon*

All of the community sport coaches and youth workers understood their professional context, yet also knew that they needed to provide continuous care for their participants, who if not necessarily vulnerable, had certainly illustrated why they regularly accessed their community sport provision. A good example of this can be seen from Jamie's outline of how coaches and youth workers could support and encourage welfare:

> Actually now I think a hell of a lot more people are saying the reason I go and do sport with us (*the coaches*), or the reason I meet up with my mates and the coaches, meet up with other people, play football, or whatever I do, is because I mentally need it, I need that planning, I need to meet people, I need to go out doing stuff, I need that constant regular support.
>
> *Jamie*

As a specific example of how the community sport coaches and youth workers would deal with this, here, Mia outlines some of the ways this particular lack of support presents itself:

> The young people were coming to us because they were, there were a whole variety of reasons, they might not have been having a great time at high school or at home or, they were just looking into something else to feel connected to, to feel part of, so when you take all of those kinds of four principles and apply them into community sports and coaches, they're kind of one and the same aren't they? They're the same principles that would apply, you just tag sport on the end of it, doing some sport with it and giving them that positive opportunity.
>
> *Mia*

The data also, however, illustrates the difficulties some of the workers had with working in social environments that were problematic, and the fact that many of them needed to take responsibility for young people in hard

circumstances. There was a recognition, for the community sport coaches and youth workers, that what they did certainly moved beyond what many see as traditional, performance type coaching.

> So, yeah, it's hard. And I think when I went for it, there...I really implemented that we need to get them out, we need to go and do stuff, we need to be social because to get their full potential you need to be doing stuff which pushes them out of their barriers. So it's not just coaching, is it? Just. Well, not coaching as sometimes coaching seems now, you know.
>
> *Melissa*

The community sport coaches and youth workers described the difficulties that many would have with understanding how to conceptualise the process of coaching in the context of community sport, and outlined some of the ways in which participants would be encouraged to work with others. They also outlined how coaches and youth workers should always be aware of the need to support their participants given what could be the significant role they played in their lives, but at the same time encourage and facilitate positive learning environments. As Rohan pointed out:

> We don't allow any, you know, anybody being disrespectful to any other coaches or even to each other ...because they only have... to think they have a difficult enough grown up time in their life anyway.
>
> *Rohan*

Given this, it is unsurprising that the community sport coaches and youth workers as a whole actively encouraged a philosophy that supported their participants through key ideas and strategies. As Luke stated:

> Arguably, you could say playing table tennis and snooker was the same kind of thing. But as I say those kind of core principles of providing advice, guidance, and acting as a mentor that they can trust are the same.
>
> *Luke*

3.2 | Authenticity—Enjoying the experience

A highly important theme, in the view of all the practitioners, was that they all emphasised the distinctively informal nature of their work in order to build both connections and engagement. George identified the importance of being conscious of the mechanisms between thinking through how to connect and how to keep participants, and his viewpoint is representative of the sample as a whole:

> So, yeah, is that engagement there...And looking at how do you pull participants into a session and give them a really meaningful, positive experience and then retain them, and get them to keep them coming back. And that bit comes through connections and how you as an individual, as a coach, will connect with your participants again and again.
>
> *George*

The findings included here then demonstrate the manner in which the community sport coaches and youth workers in this study actively sought to make connections in their professional context. However, much of this was also predicated on the fact that they were also conscious of the fact that the young people they worked with were

particularly perceptive, and that they needed to be acutely conscious of their actions, self, and their responses to others in their social interactions in order to establish trust.

> They get to know you very quickly, probably quicker than you get to know them, and I think just being in that position as a coach, you have to almost immediately be nice, and instil that trust so that they feel that they can ask questions. They can be themselves. They… even if they've got an issue, they can they feel comfortable enough to talk to you.
>
> *Jamie*

However, the most pressing element that came through the data was the fact that they all believed that their work, and the way that their participants saw them, had to be characterised by a truthful representation of their selves. This was considered to be critical as a mediating factor in the interaction of the coaches, youth workers, and their participants. Edward, when discussing some of their practice, outlined the following when thinking through how practitioners should approach their work:

> There's you know, there's lots of different methods and varieties of doing so, but principally through my experiences, it's just about being yourself and being open and willing to connect with them and, have a positive experience yourself. That seems to be the biggest thing. If I go and have a nice time and enjoy the experience myself, then generally speaking, I'm confident that the participants would feel the same.
>
> *Edward*

And Simon made a strong argument for how coaches needed to be prioritised, and their practice needed to be, in some sense 'righteous' (Simon), when considering how people would react to them and (hopefully) benefit from their input:

> Yeah, facilities and funding are important, absolutely crucial, don't get me wrong, but actually coaches are the more important ones in many ways… because without them, nothing happens. Or it happens badly. I think yeah, without caring and being truthful, people get bad experiences, which people are still saying, for instance 'my PE teacher did this to me or I did that or I didn't get involved, or "some-one" didn't care'. People will be turned off if it was not done in the right way or came from the right place. So it's absolutely fundamental.
>
> *Simon*

In the same vein, all of the community sport coaches and youth workers stressed that the only way for young people to respond positively to them was to first earn their respect. And as a simple, yet crucial means to facilitate this process, being open, honest, and treating the young people with respect was essential to promote relationships and facilitate the development of changes intended to improve the lives of young people.

> Be yourself. You can't try and be somebody else for these kids, they kind of will see through that kind of thing. Treat them with respect, I suppose, because you'd expect some respect back from them… if you don't treat them in a certain way, how are you going to get that same treatment back? Um, but I think… show as much interest as you can, you know you are there to work with them, kids, you know? You know, you're not there for anything else.
>
> *Rohan*

Indeed, as Rebecca outlined, a coach's (and youth workers) make-up and presentation of self will constrain and determine the way that relationships will meaningfully develop:

> I think is about being...the most important thing is to be yourself. If you go in there thinking you're somebody different or you play out as something different, they will notice that. And will either use that against you, and think, well, you're not being true to yourself, it's about being who you are and being honest about who you are, and treat them the same as you expect to be treated. You know, that's the most important thing to them, if you treat them with respect, then they respect you. that's my first thing.

> *Rebecca*

In essence then, all of the community sport coaches and youth workers agreed that their actions and the degree to which they presented their authentic self impacted the effectiveness of the process of developing relationships, key to their practice. The positive manner in which they could contribute to effective practice outcomes then, was predicated on authenticity. As Rohan explained:

> I'll go back to some of those things that I think are really important for coaching young kids, authenticity...respect both ways...yeah, a form of trying to encourage discipline I supposed, but far more than that. It's getting them to invest... instilling this idea of real trust and not pretending to be something else, and getting them to understand that. That and of course the fact you can't just be authoritarian with them because they will walk out!

4 | DISCUSSION

This paper set out to identify the extent to which intersubjectivity and similar approaches between the fields of community sport coaching and youth work practice exist, and to identify through a psychosocial analytic frame whether there were any particular minutiae or precepts that lent their selves to explaining effective practice. Unsurprisingly, the community sport coaches and youth workers in the present study quite clearly articulated the challenging conditions within which their participants (young and vulnerable) live, and the findings strongly illustrated one of the defining characteristics of working with young, disadvantaged, and marginalised (socially excluded) people was to develop relationships, offer some form of companionship, and create as inclusive, supportive environment as possible.

In essence then the current findings, and in particular the first theme (*Stability and consistency in the community sport coaching/leadership and youth workspace*), reflect and compliment earlier studies by highlighting the importance of a range of support, for example, family management practices such as regular meals and leisure participations (Beckmeyer, Su-Russell, & Russell, 2020), and the role of positive relationships (adults, peers, significant others) in the development of young people (Noble & McGrath, 2012). Indeed, the use of PYD is centred on how young people can be supported and developed, and the Developmental Assets Profile (DAP)., a framework closely linked to PYD that identifies 40 experiences, skills, and relationships as crucial to young peoples' development, cites 'support' as a significant contributory factor to positive outcomes (Scales, 2011).

However, rather than simply repeating the guidance and understanding inherent to PYD and the DAP and other strength-based or asset-based approaches, it is worth reiterating the fact that the data in this study fundamentally places the community sport coaches and youth workers as necessary collaborators who can yes, support the young people, but also as workers that can create a number of conditions which can more easily predicate success. These include, but are not limited to, the aforementioned emphases on maintaining a constancy of contact, establishing connections, and maintaining rules of behaviour. The role of the community sport coach and youth worker then,

should be holistic in nature and irrespective of activity, should focus on the minutiae necessary within more constant relationships.

The findings in the second theme, *Authenticity—enjoying the experience*, showed pivotal distinctions in terms of the level of self-reported importance given to consciously employing truthful representations of themselves to their participants. Certainly, in much part, the findings for the second theme are in agreement with previous research such as Jaynes (2020) and Crisp (2020a, 2020b), who identified developing rapport and meaningful relationships with young people as essential for youth work and community sports coach practitioners. Indeed, much of the premise for this from the study sample was based upon their beliefs that their participants' confidence in the community sport coaches/youth workers had to be wholehearted because of their (their participants') ability to distinguish between trustworthy and untrustworthy workers. In all then, these results then concur with long held approaches and prior studies, for instance, the work of Martinek and Hellison (1997) who advocated that community type sport coaches should focus on the emotional needs of their participants, and Young (1999) who strongly suggested a need for youth work practitioners to underpin their work through honesty, trust, and respect.

Nevertheless, in a noteworthy manner this study also extended any notions of trust and respect to one that demanded authenticity in terms of understanding the importance of practice. This finding supports previous research by Fyfe and Mackie (2022) who, in a study of seven youth work practitioners working in inner-city contexts in Scotland, found that their participants were conscious of policy constraints that focused on performance and outcomes, but valued nurturing meaningful relationships through contact and felt the best manner in which to do this was through presenting their genuine selves and being truthful about their own thoughts, feelings, and principles. In this sense and also drawing upon the work of Cranton and Carusetta (2004), as Fyfe and Mackie (2022) do, authenticity can be seen as theorised multifacetedly through concepts of genuineness, consistency of values, demonstrating authenticity, and critically appraising one-self.

Elements of these kind of findings can be seen within the wider literature pertaining to how to lead others. Certainly, there is a significant body of work that is dedicated to the concept of transformational leadership, and to a considerable extent much of the rationale behind this theory of leadership (fundamentally based upon the premise that 'leaders' support and develop their 'followers', that is, Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996) helps explain these data. Moreover, as previously mentioned there is a growing body of work in the community sport sector that prioritises leadership and the need to bridge differences yet maintain boundaries with participants, that is also beneficial in positioning the data (Crisp, 2020a, 2020b). However, perhaps the key difference here is the acknowledgement that whilst leadership should present itself through an authentic manner (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1978; Malloy, Yukhymenko-Lescroart, & Kavussanu, 2022; Price, 2018), pseudo-transformational leadership does not do so, and instead summarises the manner in which some leaders may well present as transformational, but instead focus on their selves and use methods that may mask this. As Mills (2020) points out, in the context of sport those using manipulative means ('authentic arseholes') may well present as outwardly positive and supportive, but any true representation, as per the comments from the participants in this study, of any egoistic presentation of self (non-authentic) will likely be recognised by young people and negatively impact relationships.

Whilst the findings could not definitively equate community sport and youth work to authentic family/carer/guardian experiences (crucially, real activities and responsibilities, not approximations), practice in the findings still demonstrate how authenticity in practice as outlined by the participants in this study was pivotal, and can be both mirrored as effective practice as well as more rigorously conceptualised in order to better understand this premise. The evidence then demonstrated that if community sport coaches and youth workers 'pretend' to meaningfully engage with service users/participants in terms of supportive relationships, then in the eyes of the participants in this study who wholeheartedly placed the premise of 'it's just about being yourself' (Edward) at the forefront of work, young people will not be taken in or deceived by 'inauthenticity' and respond far less positively. Moreover, the premise and foundation of 'enjoying yourself', something highlighted by the participants as integral to successful programme and relationship outcomes in their experiences of youth work and community sport, mirrors some of the

literature that positions fun as an important element of absorbing information in the adult learning context (Bum & Jeon, 2016; Crisp, 2019; Lucardie, 2014).

According to the data then, theoretical and practical principles and precepts of both community sport coaching and youth work should avoid any top-down impositions of practice that do not highlight the need for authenticity. Moreover, a central tenet of the findings outlines how meaningful connections should underpin person-centred practice. All told then, the question of 'who works best?' is shown through the findings to be based upon those workers who can critically understand their role, sacrifice ego, enjoy themselves, and present and work authentically.

5 | CONCLUSION

The calls for community sport and youth work to work in tandem have a long, mutually related history, although one that is not necessarily well-established in terms of applied and shared practice. Indeed, the *Wolfenden Report*, a benchmark for the position of sport within public policy that still influences sport policy today, recommended that 'those concerned with sports clubs and specialist groups in an area should be associated with the Youth Service through representation on local youth advisory committees' (Wolfenden Committee, 1960, p. 54).

The central approach to both community sport coaching and youth work lies in the way that both fields seek to respond to either what are seen as ASB from young (oftentimes disadvantaged) people or people in areas of social deprivation, or a combination of both, and/or supporting the same people with personal, social, and educational development. The premise then is to divert them away from crime and/or other negative/challenging behaviours, and support them in terms of lifestyle choices and eventual life trajectory.

The manner in which the process of diverting, supporting, and educating people in need takes place is often through targeted interventions, and they are—certainly explicitly within the youth work field—predicated on voluntary education and participation, and in both fields can take place through doorstep/street-work (more unstructured) or structured programmes, both more often than not using sport as a commodity and vehicle to social engage with participants. In both cases, the establishment of relationships is seen as key throughout literature (Brady & Redmond, 2017; Petitpas, Cornelius, & van Raalte, 2008), and the data in the present study supports this.

This study used workers with experience in both community sport coaching and youth work to investigate the following aims: to explore any intersubjectivity between the two fields, to highlight any shared best practice, and to examine what any nuances in their practice relative to psychosocial inter-processes were. The findings of the present study demonstrated how the workers could create conditions (and stability) that could increase chances of success, and that the workers determined that authentic approaches and positive psychological, supportive, ethical, and fun climates and effective, trusting relationships were crucial underpinning elements of flourishing relationships and positive change.

In essence then, the findings reflect a large body of work underpinning community sport coaching and youth work that essentially states that relationships are key. However, they move well beyond acting in just a confirmatory fashion to prior research and also offer, as per one of the broad aims of the study, a range of principles and precepts that can guide action and practice. These are that workers in both fields should reflect on their constructions of professional identity, and look to ensure that their rationale and philosophy for practice are aligned to ensuring that relationships are, yes subject to professional boundaries, but also enriched through providing genuine support. Moreover, this process of reflection and then action should also prioritise the need for them to authentically engage in both their work and their presentations of self, in these findings key as a precept to effective practice.

These findings are important because they place the psychosocial ingredients of worker interventions as the centre of good practice, essentially answering a question of 'what works', as opposed to relying on either the widespread belief that sport in and of itself has the capacity to change, or the degree to which certain individuals and workers might be 'better suited' to working with some young people. However, although there are new insights within this study, this is not to say that it is not without its limitations. It is indeed a small, qualitative study that

makes both generalisability to a wider population more difficult (Faber & Fonseca, 2014). and reliability, given it is based on individual perceptions and recollections, more difficult to fully ascertain (Sutton & Austin, 2015), and because of this a wider scope of future research then could use a larger sample size.

Nevertheless, the research sample used criteria that were particularly focused on the premise of applied experience of workers across both community sport coaching and youth work fields, and so in many respects was predicated on a particular expertise that allowed for comparative ideas, thoughts, and recollections to be heard. Given this, the research is helpful in that it provides evidence and meaningful 'stories' to potentially direct and support the education of those working in community sport and youth work, through essentially positioning the philosophy of individual workers (they must want to build relationships, want to help, be authentic and truthful, and try to have fun—the psychosocial 'ingredients') as a foundation to their practice and ability to facilitate psychological change in participants.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.