

Performance environment parallels: How community sport coaches and youth workers can model practice to improve young peoples' life skills and prosocial behaviours

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Abstract:

Whilst both community sport coaches and youth workers use sport and physical activity to assist young peoples' development, there is a lack of research related to any best practice that both fields may share. This study explored, through semi-structured interviews with eight workers with experience in both community sport and youth work, how practitioners identified best practice and interactions between the two fields relative to the use of sport. Results demonstrated that, when contextually applied, there are a number of significant parallels that can be drawn between the fields of performance sport coaching and youth work/community sport coaching.

Key words: Empowerment; relationship building; sport diversification; positive youth development

Introduction

In the United Kingdom, two of the most well used mediators to use sport as a social instrument tool are the fields of youth work and community sport coaching. In essence, these deliver political will, legislative and policy frameworks, and aspirations related to civic behaviour, social inclusion, and supporting young people in disadvantaged areas and/or disadvantaged backgrounds (Coalter, 2008; Ord, 2016). In the first instance of youth work, it is well worth noting the sector's disparate nature, one that encompasses traditional policy and government support (led by the manner in which statutory youth provision in the UK was aligned to social welfare reforms from the early 20th Century) and the way in which early faith based organisations (i.e. YMCA, Boys Brigade) and then also how 'youth work' and youth clubs, post the highly influential Albemarle Report's (Ministry of Education 1960) recommendations to support young peoples' development, can operate either within or outside of the field's statutory frameworks and professional accreditation (Banks & Iman, 2000; Ord, 2016).

Indeed, youth work has a long history of helping young people through processes that are now considered as, essentially, complimentary to the education system. In many respects, the essentiality of youth work is considered to be aiding young peoples' social and personal development, with a focus on helping them become independent, productive adults. Much of this is through a process of enabling young people to develop positive values and belief systems, and encouraging life skills (Hammond & McArdle, 2023; Wylie, 2015).

As alluded to, the profession of youth work is well established, with historical documentation going back to 1863 that details 'youth clubs' (Bright, 2015; Clyne, 2016; Springhall, 1986). However, whilst there are some general approaches recognised and a route to professional accreditation in youth work (in the UK, the National Youth Agency [NYA] is the national body that oversees national occupational standards), there are a number of disparities in terms of how it is undertaken in the voluntary and professional sectors. Moreover, many jobs offered within the domain of youth support oftentimes use the title youth work despite not needing professional accreditation, and a number of other areas/professions use

some different titles (for instance, adolescent care, residential or mobile support workers) that whilst having some different job specifications or aims to explicit youth work, essentially operate in highly similar fields with similar approaches to work and support.

The second field in the UK that is oftentimes used to convey government policy related to wider social issues that foster community integration, prosocial behaviours and psychosocial development, is community sport coaching. Without a Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB), and at times needing just some form of coaching certificate (i.e., a level one of any sport) and to meet normal safeguarding standards (such as a Disclosure and Barring Service check), the field sits at odds with the manner in which youth work is overseen by the NYA. However, in many ways it also mirrors some of youth work's actual practice in that working in 'youth work' does not always necessitate professional accreditation, and youth work has multiple areas/professions operating under the banner of youth work without ascribing to the NYA, and similarly there is a wide, diffuse yet interlinked, line of work in sport that meets the vocation and essence of community sport coaching (SkillsActive, 2005; Crisp & Brackley, 2022).

Whilst community sport coaching is not then a distinct profession per se, it is one that is recognised in literature and policy and, crucially, oftentimes funded through explicit governmental funding streams. Whilst the time period within which community sport coaching has been undertaken is not comparable to youth work, there is still a documented history of successive governments using sport as a mediator of behavioural change for disadvantaged participants since 1960, with the *Wolfenden Report* (Wolfenden Committee, 1960) explicitly outlining a link between sport participation and behavioural developmental outcomes.

This report essentially secured the manner in which sport in the community has subsequently been framed and used in the UK. Indeed, a succession of approaches through the 1970s 'Sport for All' campaigns (Green & Houlihan, 2005), the 1980s with the post urban unrest positioning of specific 'sport development' officers through local governments (Bloyce & Smith, 2009), illustrate the way that successive governments post the *Wolfenden Report* (Wolfenden Committee, 1960) started to use sport as a manner in which to effect health and community policy. This continued through the 1990's and 2000's where sport became more integrally used as a social instrument tool and, in the case of the 2000's, received considerable government spend related to increasing participation and addressing social inclusion and community regeneration (Crisp, 2020a; Parnell et al., 2015). Certainly, many of the underlying principles of youth work have been seen in the values governing the practice and aims of community sport, and there is a large body of work related to sport as a tool for social exclusion and crime reduction (Nichols, 2004/2007). Indeed, Coalter's (2007) premise of how sport projects can be matched with other objectives through Sport Plus and Plus Sport (respectively how non-sport objectives can be 'added' to sport development initiatives, and the second how non-sport programmes can 'add' sport to help recruitment), is equally capable of explaining how both youth work and community sport/sport for development (S-F-D) promote benefits of sport participation for wider developmental objectives (Crisp, 2021a). And whilst the austerity driven policy pursued by the Coalition government in 2010 and the Conservative government in 2015 has significantly reduced the scope and order of financial support for sport, advocacy for the efficacy (and popularity) of sport in the community as a means to improve psychosocial outcomes remains (Crisp, 2021a/2024).

Community sport coaching is then based more so on S-F-D principles, and does not include sport for sports sake youth sport programmes (i.e. after school clubs) or regional National Governing Body (NGB) foundational development programmes. Whilst not a term/concept that is completely distinct, the general consensus (see Coalter, 2007; Crisp, 2021a; Nichols, 2004; Ives et al., 2021) is that it essentially relates to programmes and philosophies that aim to raise aspirations and improve health and prosocial behaviours within more marginalised

communities. Nevertheless, there has been a long-standing debate as to whether much of the use of sport in youth programmes (in both youth work and community sport coaching) that specifically seeks to address social and personal development as outcomes, can necessarily be ascribed to sport itself, or whether many programmes and orchestrators of youth sport just make a priori assumptions as to the uniqueness of sport's capacity to change others (Coakley, 2007).

All told however, the premises of both community sport coaching and youth work share a more measured approach to understanding how sport is an effective mediator of behaviour change as opposed to, as above, assuming that sport in and of itself can produce positive developmental outcomes for individuals. Yet whilst they also share many characteristics such as caring for their participants and being supportive (Brady & Redmond, 2017; Cronin & Lowes, 2019), the applied nature of 'doorstep' and 'street' work within the same context (Crisp, 2020a; Wylie, 2015), and a range of literature that purports to best practice in both fields (Crisp, 2021a; Debognies et al., 2018; Haudenhuyse et al., 2012), it is probably fair to say that there is still a need to more clearly understand the intersubjectivity between the two fields in terms of applied practice. This is particularly so when we consider two things. The first is that there is a dearth of real literature pertaining to the connections between the two fields, and what there has been is potentially more cursory in nature. The second is that any programmes that are run should, according to underlying theoretical precepts related to applied practice, be predicated on coaches, youth workers, and field practitioners as they are the ones that influence and determine outcomes.

Given this relative paucity of education and guidelines that both connect and traverse both youth work and community sport coaching, this study used 8 youth workers/community sport coaches as the basis to investigate and subsequently inform how both fields may conceptually and practically intertwine. Outside of this continuing review of literature, which will detail how best practice is conceptualised in both community sport coaching and youth work, the study consists of an additional three sections. One section detailing the methodology of the paper, a findings and discussion section that was generated from the methods and analysis that was undertaken, and finally a conclusion and summary that provides relevancy and suggestions for practice.

Community sport coaching/leadership: best practice

Although there remains an element of definitional uncertainty related to exactly what underpins and can accurately define community sport coaches/leaders, in particular due to the lack of an established framework and professional recognition (Cronin & Armour, 2014), there is considerable agreement and support related to how to broadly categorise them in two interrelated areas/disciplines (Daniels & Bell, 2019). These are the policy (governmental) background of the last four decades or so that has already been discussed, and also the general consensus in academia, that will now be outlined in more detail.

This scholarly understanding of community sport coaching/leadership is typically predicated on coaches that operate within areas/communities/groups that have been highlighted as at-risk or disadvantaged. These categories can encompass a variety of preventable health conditions (including those under the umbrella of mental health) and adverse health effects and problems associated with sedentary behaviours (Crisp & Brackley, 2022; Mansfield et al., 2018), indices of social deprivation (i.e. anti-social behaviour [ASB]) (Crisp, 2021b), and/or systematic, society-wide barriers to participation such as locale, ethnicity, gender, age, disabilities, and intergenerational poverty (Gale et al., 2022). In other words, they inevitably work within contexts that illustrate or directly reflect the broader viewpoint of the sports development profession, that of inclusivity, and personal and community development.

As previously mentioned, despite the reduced spend and resources available for community sport coaching post austerity measures, community sport coaches/leaders are still expected to operate as facilitators, organisers, and coaches of a variety of sport projects. These sport projects, and the everyday coaching practice that community sport coaches oversee, encompass a diverse range of sports, initiatives, and activities that can use team sports, individual sports, and activity and fitness sessions. Indeed, even with the growing influence and provision of Football in the Community (FitC) programmes in the age of austerity (Parnell et al., 2015; Crisp, 2020a), the use of various sports and physical activity interventions also cuts across this sector (Crisp & Brackley, 2022). Yet whilst (and sticking to the UK context) established, formal, coaching qualifications and NGB pathways have focused and continue to focus on - for the most part - principles of coaching that align to matters of structural competency (i.e. the 'building blocks' of session planning and delivery), the difference between what community sport coaching/leadership entails and the typical/traditional approach to performance sport coaching remains somewhat unclear. This is in much part due to the lack of formal qualifications that best equip coaches to operate in non-performance sport type contexts (Crisp, 2020b).

Nevertheless, as previously outlined there is a relatively broad consensus related to what community sport coaches/leaders do, and their impact, within both scholarly work and policy commitments, and there is also an emerging body of work within academia that outlines 'how' they should work. In the context of their impact, much research demonstrates how taking part in community sport projects benefits participants (Coalter, 2008; Kay et al., 2008), oftentimes most notably through effecting changes in behaviour for individuals and groups. This is conceptualised and categorised through the use of positive youth development (PYD), wherein the principles see young people as resources to be developed—and not as problems to be managed (Crisp, 2020b; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Petitpas et al., 2005), and developing participants' social capital, whereby participants are seen to increase their friendships, support systems, and networks of 'help' (e.g., Hoye & Nicholson, 2008; Holt, 2008; Hoye et al., 2010). As an applied example, the work of Côté et al. (2014) promotes the creation of relationships as a means by which coaches and projects can foster PYD.

With respect to 'how' community sport coaches/leaders should work, the general consensus is that they must focus more on using empathy (Crisp & Statham, 2022; Sandford et al., 2006), developing relationships (Petitpas et al., 2008), emphasising emotional needs (Martinek & Hellison, 1997), and focusing on inclusivity (Hardman et al., 2010). Moreover, and perhaps not unsurprisingly given this paper's use of the term, a number of scholars also position leadership as a critical component of community sport delivery (Crisp, 2016; Lyle, 2002; Sandford et al., 2006).

Specific guidelines for coaches in this context to work from include creating boundaries, focusing on fun, and fostering decision making within programmes (Gambone et al., 2006; Vierimaa et al., 2017). In the same vein, Bradley and Lynn (2019) outline how positive psychology approaches such as emphasising positive emotions, and strengths-based coaching that facilitates engagement, meaning, relationships, and accomplishments (of participants) for the community sport coaching sector. Similarly, as strategies, Camiré et al (2011) advocate personal coaching philosophies centred on holistic development of participants, meaningful relationships, and intentionally planning, and making sure that participants practiced, life skills. Indeed, the author's (2020b) own work and four guidelines related to community sport coaching/leadership best practice of establishing common ground, developing relationships, prioritising inclusivity, and highlighting meaningful activity and contribution to games for all participants, all illustrate a synthesised approach to operating in community sport contexts. In so doing (and reflective of the similarities with youth work) community sport coaches/leaders can look to ensure that young and/or disadvantaged participants' emotional and personal

circumstances are mitigated for, and their personal and social development and skills are prioritised – in much part the essentiality of their practice.

Youth work: best practice

Exactly who or what can be defined as youth workers or youth work presents a range of problems, principally related to the manner in which not all ‘jobs’ either titled or situated within the youth work field require professional accreditation, and also the historical fashion in which youth work has been used to describe a broad range of young peoples’ services, including church interventions, voluntary groups, and such as the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) (Jeffs & Smith, 2010). Yet whilst there is some definitional uncertainty, there is much used and understood in the way of professional practice, ethics, policy, and guiding standards within youth work (Banks & Imam, 2000; Ord, 2016). In the context of expected competencies for National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs – based on competencies for work), apprenticeships, national occupational standards, and National Youth Agency (NYA) and Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC - who set the national framework for pay scales for youth work) recognised accreditation (NYA, 2020), as a brief overview these include, but are not exhaustive to, principles such as cultivating relationships, treating service users with respect and dignity, and promoting personal and social development through positive pro-social behaviours and character (Brady & Redmond, 2017). Crucial to all of these principles are the underlying conceptual currents of using informal education and voluntary participation to extol and facilitate (not coerce) meaningful personal changes of young service users.

The manner in which this facilitative process can be undertaken is, in much part, through the aforementioned building and subsequent scaffolding of relationships, encouraging personal decision making, and through using structured (i.e. sports, recreation, arts etc.) or unstructured (detached, such as doorstep/street work contacts where young people congregate and the youth worker can act in an advisory, supportive fashion) activities and approaches (Batsleer & Davies 2010; Young, 1999). Moreover, consistent studies and practice have reinforced the manner in which young people respond well to social interaction, and spaces within which this can be facilitated, with peers and other young people (Jeffs & Smith, 2010).

Whilst youth work and community sport coaching share much in terms of aims (particularly in terms of improved opportunities, and to an extent social justice and servicing people from disadvantaged backgrounds), perhaps the most salient ‘difference’ is seen in how the very essence of youth work fundamentally seeks to present practitioners as active mediators of an educative process that seeks to engage young people (Harris, 2014). Notably, this is achieved through dialogue and helping young people develop their understanding of their lives, as well as advocating on their behalf, indeed, examining and supporting how young people engage in their social worlds as a *raison d’être* (Crisp, 2024; Davies, 2015), and thus shifting somewhat from the perspective of community sport coaching whereby this is perhaps a consequence of participation as opposed to a specific goal.

Quite specifically in youth work, the use of empowerment, a theme and approach that encourages autonomy - oftentimes through acquiescing decisions and allowing for incremental levels of responsibility – is used as a means of facilitating changes in values, identity, and behaviour of young people (Cargo et al., 2003; Kim et al., 1998). Indeed, empowerment is seen as a key method that can aggregate a number of key challenges and intended outcomes in youth work, such as values, social and self-responsibility, life skills, and self-awareness (Chinman & Linney, 1998; Crisp, 2020a). Aligning this concept and application of empowerment alongside the aforementioned mode of working that prioritises a relational approach with the use of empathy and relationship building (Clyne, 2018), helps us to define the configuration and precepts of person-centred practice evident within youth work.

Intersubjectivity and research questions

In many respects, what can be argued is that both youth work and community sport coaching are underpinned by quite acutely similar priorities, policy content, and indeed quite likely, if not yet proven (as this paper explores) applied practice. And though there are the aforementioned differences in terms of community sports coaching's configuration and form is predicated on delivering sport as a vehicle for psychosocial change, and youth work's fundamental premise of working as an educative process, both seek to position themselves as complimentary, or at times integral, elements of welfare provision that is predicated on supporting psychosocial development, the promotion of life skills, and community support/regeneration. Moreover, in both fields, recreational activity that either explicitly (community sport coaching) or tacitly (youth work) uses sport is considered an effective, valuable vehicle through which personal growth can be effected, and in order to implement these kinds of outcomes the workers in both youth work and community sport coaching rely significantly on the establishment of productive relationships. However, despite these broadly recognised assertions that pertain to the commonalities between the two fields, the connections and intersubjectivity between the two, at both academic and policy level, are more limited in scope.

Given this, and in an effort to determine best practice for both community sport coaching and youth work, this study uses the following aims. Firstly, to investigate and establish – from the perspective of community sport coaches and youth workers – the complexity of their working, applied practice and the interactions therein. Second, to find out the extent to which they can identify factors that impact their ability to effectively influence programme and interpersonal outcomes. And lastly, to investigate how community sport coaches and youth workers exercise strategies (if any) in terms of best practice.

Method

Given the above research questions' focus on ascertaining some of the factors, practice, and commonalities that underpin best practice in both community sport coaching and youth work, the present study used an interpretivist epistemological approach and a qualitative method. The epistemological standpoint of interpretivism is used to understand the meanings, motives and values that determine each individual's experience and knowledge of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Moreover, methodologically, the interpretivist perspective can apply a more inductive line to analyse qualitative data, and generate understanding (through multiple models, notably through systematic grounded theory), whereby construction and generation of data is formed through the iteration of constant comparisons between emergent concepts (Bryman, 2008). And of note, undertaking the study in this manner (although specifically using a grounded theory approach in this instance) is consistent with much previous work undertaken in both community sport coaching (such as Gale et al., 2022) and youth work (for instance, Fyfe & Mackie, 2022) that seeks to identify perceptions and personal narratives, and allows researchers more scope to understand experiences (and their interpretations of them) of individuals (Butler-Kisber, 2010).

In order to meet the study's research questions, an intended purposive (Robson, 2002), theoretical (Gratton and Jones, 2010) sample of community sport coaches and youth workers that were either known to the researcher (four of them) or, and as per snowball sampling principles that indicates how initial contacts recommend further contacts (Cresswell, 2007), recommended by one of the known coaches/youth workers was used (the remaining four). Reflecting the purposive sampling principle of intentionally picking participants based on certain characteristics, specific criteria for the community sport coaches and youth workers included that they had more than three years full time equivalent practice in either their

respective field or a combination of both fields. All told, the sampling method can be described through the phrase ‘expert sampling’, whereby the selection of participants (and those they might recommend) is driven by their expertise and credentials relative to the study aims and context (Etikan & Bala 2017).

Ethical approval from the University of Chichester was granted (Research Ethics Approval Number 2122-2008054) and then (following direct contact, the provision of an information sheet pertaining to the study, and signed consent forms), eight participants who worked full time in either of the two fields and who worked or had worked extensively in both fields (sometimes in a part time fashion) were recruited for the study. Per the theoretical sampling and reflecting principles of the study’s grounded theory approach, theoretical saturation was completed as no new insights or data had emerged by the end of the interviewing the eight participants (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). See *Figure 1 Participant Biographies* below for details of their experience.

Cameron: works as a community sport coach, across both football in the community and specific disability community sport programmes He has 10 years’ experience in this field and has also worked part time for a youth club the last four years.
Nathan: is currently a community sport coach with over 15 years’ experience. Prior to this, he worked as a youth worker for three years, and still works in partnership with various youth services to this day as part of this current role
Steven: is a coach for various community sport initiatives, but his main job the last six years has been as a youth worker
Greg: has worked with troubled youth in various roles for over 20 years full time He also oversees a number of community sport initiatives
Melissa: is a community sport coach working predominantly for a football in the community programme with over ten years; experience, but has also worked at times in a part time capacity with local youth services
Amy: is a community sport coach with over five years’ experience, but prior to this she also worked for two years as a residential youth worker
Adam: has worked as a community sport coach for over four years full time, and works in areas and with people that liaise with youth services, at times working for them in a part time basis
Joe: has worked as a community sport coach with some managerial responsibilities for a large programme for 13 years, and prior to this was a youth worker for three years

Figure 1 Participant Biographies

The semi-structured in-depth interviews comprised of five in person meetings (all of which were spent in their work/project environments), and three recorded via Teams meetings. Prior to the interviews, an interview guide was developed that was based on the main principles related to the present study’s research aims of determining the extent to which community sport coaching and youth work intersect, and any commonalities of best practice. Whilst the guide consisted of introductory questions designed to establish some form of history of their working lives (e.g., “could you tell me about your work?”), the gist of the open questions was to allow the participants to give their thoughts and ideas related to their own and others’ applied practice in their fields. Thereafter, questions such as “how do/can you facilitate change in behaviours and support participants?”, “what are the constraints/barriers you face?” and “what impacts do you think projects and yourself or colleagues might have had?” were predicated on the participants recalling their own personal narratives about their work, and how they operated (Robson, 2002). Of note though, and reflecting the inductive intention of the study and emphasising the fact that the author wanted the participants to express their own reflections without imposing pre-existing ideas or definitions, the interviews were based on the participants outlining their experiences in a more uninhibited manner – and the interview guide acted more as a crib sheet, and only used as a guide to maintaining relevancy and not a specific series of questions read verbatim (Liamputtong, 2010; Thomas, 2013). Overall, the interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes and all of the interviews were recorded verbatim.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using an approach based on grounded theory, a method that constructs theory from data through constant comparative analysis (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Identifying and reporting patterns (themes) within the data was predicated through the prism of the study's research aims, and as such the text was read and reread repeatedly in order to, in the first instance, identify any intersection between the fields, how they ran programmes/interventions and worked with others, and any commonalities of best practice between the fields. The emergence of the eventual findings then was undertaken through a process of identifying initial, open statements which were distilled through sorting these themes into broader, more focused ones. At all times during this process, the question of how and whether the themes appropriately reflected the initial research aims was asked, and then these broader, more focused themes were then developed, through theoretical coding and identifying relationships between these results, into two final key themes which are outlined in the findings/discussion section.

Trustworthiness and positionality

When considering the extent to which confidence of qualitative study can be determined, particularly in comparison to results garnered from quantitative research, the quality and credibility of information and findings has to be taken into account (Bryman, 2008; Smith et al., 2014). In the case of the present study, credibility of the data and the author's interpretations were undertaken through an iterative series of journaling and mapping the direction and narratives of the interviews. Moreover, outside of developing rapport with the interviewees not known by the researcher (through asking introductory questions etc), member checking was undertaken with three of the interviewees (the most experienced) to ensure confirmability, and their thoughts and reflections positively mirrored and complimented the data and the presented themes and concepts.

Finally, it is important that the author acknowledges their past work in community sport and youth work (care) for a protracted period of time, and their continued involvement in sport development projects across their academic career. In doing so, the importance of relationships and interpersonal qualities have substantially underpinned much of their own work, and that of many of the practitioners that they have worked with. Whilst acknowledging the author's positionality here (Bourke, 2014), the subsequent erring towards the qualitative spectrum of research, and the potential biases therein, the author defends their position and decision to keep a small sample size and a qualitative method due to the fact that exploring the complex issues that the aims of the study encapsulate, necessitated an approach that examined the subject and the participants' experiences, perceptions, and understanding in an in-depth fashion.

Findings/discussion

The two general themes connected to the broader research questions investigating the complexity of practice, and any best practice strategies, are now outlined in more detail. Of note, the first theme *Best practice principles*, is comprised of three interrelated 'sub themes' (diversification, focus [goal setting], and helping them understand), whilst the second theme, *Developing soft outcomes – performance environment parallels*, whilst taking a broader approach that results in two 'sub themes' (mediating, and incrementally building relationships), extends many of the principles found in the first. As per Figure 1 Participant Biographies, the findings/data are presented in anonymised fashion with pseudonyms.

Best practice principles - diversification, focus (goal setting), and helping them understand...

The following brief overview of this theme creates a frame by which the three ‘subthemes’ can be understood. Essentially, the central findings and phenomenon of best practice principles (the theme in totality), were seen as establishing an understanding of what the young people could do, why they perhaps lacked certain skills, and how to support them (*Diversification*), helping the young people to develop resilience and use sport as a template (*Focus*), and helping them develop adherence and responsibility (*Getting ‘buy in’*). Aggregated as a whole, these subthemes contributed to the overall understanding of the conceptual development and practice the participants reported.

Diversification – playing loads of sports and figuring out what they’re interested in

One of the key elements that the coaches/youth workers in this study consistently reiterated was how their participants oftentimes lacked fundamental sport skills as well as the capacity to work with others in this context; because of this, many lacked motivation to play sports, insisting that it was something that they were not that interested in, despite the coaches/youth workers establishing and understanding that the young people may not have had many previous opportunities. Indeed, frequently displaying behaviours that illustrated either past misdemeanours (not in practice, but in presentation of self and ‘hardness/toughness’ for instance), or a lack of appropriate care and considerate socialisation of prosocial behaviours at key moments of their lives oftentimes led the young people, from the perspective of the coach/youth workers, to struggle with what could be everyday activities.

An example here, was the way in which many of the young people identified to take part in interventions had oftentimes missed opportunities to play organised sport when they were growing up. This might have been through missing school, a lack of family or carer provision and any real socialisation into sport, or for some of them the fact that the activities that their peer groups often focused on were more criminal, than recreational in nature. In the eyes of the coaches/youth workers it seemed to be the case that for many of the young people, as much as some were “quite reasonable and could function in a lot of things that kids should be able to do” (Greg), there were always some that “couldn’t because they were in the high end of things” (Nathan). Whilst these kinds of remarks certainly alluded to behavioural problems, they were even more explicitly detailed in the data and the thoughts of the study participants overall, fully illustrating the difficulties that many of the young people they worked with had with sport:

A lot of them couldn't play sport... because they hadn't played sport. I, mean, that was that kind of background and like, you know, some of them have missed two or three years of proper school. almost missed two or four years from proper PE or any family or people just helping them. (Steven)

As Nathan also explained:

Many of them have just been hanging around on street corners and stuff...so they’re really good, no lie and I’m not making fun of this, at escaping stuff and climbing walls and other stuff, but not actually just going to kick a ball or simple sport things. (Nathan)

As mentioned previously, the lack of motivation to play sports, and in many instances the deficiency of some crucial, fundamental sport skills exhibited by some of the young people that the coaches/youth workers worked with, highlighted a need for further support. In the first instance, just bridging the transition to understanding, playing, and hopefully enjoying sport was the first barrier to overcome. In addition to the informal manner of introducing a variety

of sports to the young people, the coaches/youth workers also outlined more formal ways of getting them to commit to activity, and a clear approach and influence focusing on getting the young people to engage in sports dialogue was clearly something that was seen to significantly influence participation. Here, Greg, a youth worker/community sport coach who has worked for over 20 years in both fields (predominantly youth work), describes this idea:

Yeah, you play loads of sport... and you try and find out what they're interested in. They're not necessarily good at it.... just.... just interested in it. You got a lot of kids who say they're good at football or basketball, this that or the other, but when it comes to playing it they're not that good at all... but they're interested to learn. They just hang around with the wrong kind of kids that...don't do it. So yeah, we do a lot...Play tennis, badminton, football, boxing with a lot of kids... still do boxing with one of the kids now. (Greg)

In many respects, the most straightforward explanation and manner in which to theorise this is to use the Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP). A model developed by Jean Côté (1999), the central proposition of the DMSP model is to prioritise the long-term success related to adherence levels of children within sport (Côté et al., 2007). Supported by age-explicit critical stages of development, the model is underlined by both early diversification (sampling) within a number of sports, as well as opportunities to specialise and excel at later periods within the developmental stages. Whilst in the DMSP there are physical and tactical advantages to diversifying within sport, much like other models such as the Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model (again, a model with age-explicit stages, yet one that is considered to be more mono-focused on physiological factors, chronological age, and with a teleology directed to performance [Dowling & Washington, 2021]), the essential philosophy of DMSP is one based on reducing attrition (drop-off in participation) and fostering a love of participation in sport and activity. Whilst this approach can essentially also be a prerequisite of building sustainable participant bases for sports and thus overall performance success, the premise of the DMSP is participant, not performance, centred.

The crucial difference in the present study, however, is the context in which coaches/youth workers operate, and the social characteristics, circumstances, and lived experiences of their participants. Whilst, oftentimes, traditional sport participation and developmental models make little exception for any absence of resource or support for young people beyond a recognition that it will/can inhibit both participation and excellence, the immediate reality and social world of the young people that the coaches/youth workers in this study worked with was, in many respects, a direct imposition on their ability or opportunities to 'sample'. The context and the data here though, demonstrated that the coaches/youth workers operated in a similar fashion to sport coaches or organisers that prioritised sampling, yet whilst it may be argued that they had to work in this way because they had no choice but to do so, their beliefs and thoughts on best practice were that this was the best method...because in their eyes it simply works.

Focus: sometimes falling off but still getting back on for the journey

Whilst the coaches/youth workers were in agreement with the fact that sport was an excellent tool for the young people they worked with, and used similar approaches to diversification and getting them to try lots of different sports, the way in which they promoted participation in sport (something that required thought given the participants' lack of previous activity) had a number of key principles. One such principle discussed by the coaches/youth workers that illustrated a distinctiveness in their approach, was based on a centrality of using sport as a means through which the young people could centre their concentration and life direction, even temporarily. One community sport coach/youth worker, in a manner that reflected how all of

them considered sport as a useful tool, outlined how the young people they worked with could improve their general focus in every activities and life through participation within sport and physical activity:

It kind of gave them a focus... you know they were interested once they got into it, it gave the kids a focus...So, they sort of learnt how to sort of look after themselves a little bit better. (Melissa)

This was a recurring theme, and others referred to the uniqueness that sport (and training) provided in terms of the physical differences in health, performance and movement, mental approaches, and aesthetics that could be created for young people. One community sport coach/youth worker stated:

They sort of recognise they might be getting a bit fitter, if you're taking kids to the gym, they might have seen changes in their physique, which they liked. Yeah...it just gave them...a bit of a routine and a bit of a feel-good factor about themselves really. (Adam)

This idea of routine for the young people was quite prevalent in much of the data, with the coaches/youth workers able to quite clearly define the way in which having a routine, with some form of ambition and objectives underpinning it, was a significantly useful scaffold to underpin their work. This was illustrated by Amy who said “kids would go missing or not attend regularly unless there was something... in the future or a goal to be set in the future”. In fact, this kind of comment represented much of the kernel of what was explained by the coaches/youth workers, with an emphasis on the way that their service users/participants needed to be understood, with training, keeping fit, and appreciable changes in their form (visual) and function underpinning the use of goals and incremental training; initially set by the coaches/youth workers but then developed and extended by the participants in partnership. All of the coaches/youth workers outlined how they (and other coaches/youth workers) needed to see the perspectives and trajectories of their participants in a longer-term, contextualised fashion. Nathan summed this up quite clearly:

Everybody's on a journey. They just sometimes take longer in that journey to get to where they want to. And also, they fall backwards every so often. So actually, sometimes people fall off and need to get back again, and to get back up to where they are before. But everybody goes on a slow and different journey right the way through. But actually, the main role, if you can, it's just to try and keep people wanting to be on this journey. (Nathan)

In many respects, these findings reflect the wide-ranging nature of goal setting within sport (Burton & Raedeke, 2008) and also physical activity (Swann & Rosenbaum, 2018), whereby the premise is that setting and attaining goals helps focus, motivation, self-confidence and pleasure (Martens et al., 1990). In this instance, however, research and theory examining the application, usage, and experiences of goal setting within performance sport and athletes, could conceivably help the data here. Indeed, it is quite possible to draw out some key themes and propose a composition of these well-established goal setting in sport themes, alongside and in combination with other theories/concepts, in the instance of the data in the present study life skills, PYD, and body image (both aesthetically and functionally).

Life skills and PYD are oftentimes seen to encompass and aggregate a number of principles that relate to social and emotional growth, including resilience, self-esteem, and emotional

control (Pierce et al., 2018). However, whilst there is a broad consensus between their objectives and the way they are understood (including how both use goal setting), there are some differences and nuances seen by some authors (Gould & Carson, 2008). The general consensus though is that life skills enable people to integrate, function, and succeed within environments in which they live, and that these can range from social-emotional-interpersonal skills to ones that are contextually specific, i.e. how one can successfully navigate school/education, workplaces, or broader living environments (Super et al., 2018).

PYD, as previously mentioned in the present study, takes an approach that looks to develop and enhance young people (Petitpas et al., 2005), and in the context of the data here the premise that it supports the development of self-efficacy and resilience is observable. Indeed, the data explicitly outlines how, from the coaches/youth workers perspective and recollections, their participants that regularly (although recognising that this in itself is not an authoritative, definitive concept and that regularly for some could well mean something entirely different to others) partook in training, started to look after their selves in terms of health, and took an interest in their appearance. It is in this last sense, one of body image (both aesthetically and functionally), that the data and findings perhaps – whilst acknowledging the closeness and interface between all – builds upon goal-setting, life skills and PYD.

Whilst the idea that young people involved in sport and physical training can and do benefit from a behavioural-investment in the process of training and the results they can gain in terms of aesthetics and functionality are well established (for instance, see Abbott & Barber, 2010), the present study sees this through the eyes of the coaches/youth workers operating in the context of disadvantaged youth. Indeed, when presented as the aforementioned composition, explaining the data through a combination of goal setting (sport context), life skills (community context), PYD (development context), and body image (the contexts of bodily aesthetics and functionality), we can see the manner in which the coaches/youth workers used sport and tangible goals as predictors of adherence to programmes, and appreciable changes in pro-social behaviours, at four levels.

Getting ‘buy in’ - helping them understand

While there was agreement throughout that playing and trying a number of sports and supporting young people through outcomes that emphasised and/or reinforced individuals’ goal setting was a central part of their practice, the respondents in the present study also strongly felt that there had to be ‘buy in’ (Joe) from the young people they worked with. Indeed, for any longer-term adherence to programmes or training to be successful, the coaches/youth workers stated that the young people needed to take some responsibility and ownership of their actions, motivations, and behaviours. However, any semblance or move towards self-determination needed to be understood in the context of what many of the young people had in common, and the challenges many had faced in terms of poor past and present sociological mediators, such as lack of opportunity, parental/family support, and appropriate role models. As Amy outlined when discussing some of the biggest challenges they might have had and how they looked to overcome them:

You’ve just sort of like, got to make sure that the young people understand all aspects of the training. So I’ve had kids before who’ve walked straight out because I’ve asked them to warm up and the warm up isn’t smashing the crap out of a bag... and the warm up might be skipping or might be something else and some of them don’t want to do that. They just want to smash the crap out of a bag....so they just then refuse and walk out, you know, so it’s just make them understand. (Amy)

Furthermore, there was a real emphasis on getting the young people to either construct or contribute to goal setting (essentially shifting their motivations to do so rather than expectantly assuming adherence, and providing them with a basis for personal agency), and asking them more probing questions as to 'why' they would make certain determinations, and what really motivated them:

I guess it's just the intention that you may have had was more explicit, perhaps, not in your coaching, but perhaps the way that you had to shift their mindset going into you've an open mind set up to draw up some outcomes, or what's the purpose of today is it to just to do A or B or whatever? Just you know, I mean, we must do a coaching sessions tonight, but it might just be the first session for three months for a lot of them, so they need to know where they're going and why they should do it. (Joe)

For the coaches/youth workers, the fact that adhering to "the journey" then enabled the young participants in sport/activity programmes and interventions the opportunity to experience positive life skills as tangible transfer outcomes was a priority. Unsurprisingly, and rather obviously, the manner in which this was mediated was of course through the mechanism of sport, but of note was the coaches/youth workers' awareness that this was not just a simple equation of playing sport equals greater life skills, rather the thought and realisation that life skills needed to be taught and nurtured through the prism and experience of sport participation. For instance by asking the young people to train with others, take warm-ups, contribute to practice games by helping referee at times and the like.

You have to make a decision of what you're doing and you have to take command of that situation. And I think sometimes it's those sports leadership skills that you can build up, but people don't realise are quite important in it all. And actually, you're put in this position where you have to have some responsibility, too, people are looking at you and I think it's a really good thing to be able to do in organising sessions and learn certain things, but you learn it through and from the sport you love. (Cameron)

Overall, much of the assertions from the coaches/youth workers then revolved around the twin concepts of encouraging self-determination and motivation, and fostering incremental levels of responsibility in order to promote life skills. In the first instance, the data and findings then can be well-explained through the plethora of research that outlines commitment as essential elements of adherence and persistence over time within sport (O'Neil & Hodge, 2020). Moreover, as a psychological construct commitment inevitably details or parallels concepts of motivation including, as the coaches/youth workers in this study outlined, how they wanted their participants to freely take part and make their own choices, and the idea of autonomous-motivation (Bagøien & Halvari, 2005).

The rather specific references to fostering independence and responsibility are consistent with findings that use empowerment in similar contexts. The concept of empowerment is essentially a process of social action that instigates and looks to establish a series of developmental outcome behaviours. Applied practice, and much of the literature pertaining to it, is principally situated within the fields of community matters and youth work and looks to underline life skills, independent living, and a more autonomous capacity for participants in programmes or interventions that attempt to develop any of the aforementioned. In sport, there is a growing body of work that has used empowerment principles as a key developmental theory in sport projects (Forde, 2014; Lindsey & O'Gorman, 2015) and relative to the present

study, community sport (Lawson, 2005). In the same vein, these findings then are consistent with previous work of the author (Crisp, 2020a) that outlines how community sport coaches promoting individual agency within areas of social deprivation can increase individuals' self-regulation and promote wider psychic positive developmental changes.

Of note, it is well worth recognising the monodirectional view of much of the previous findings, with the young peoples' circumstances and the approaches that the coaches/youth workers undertook to support them. Yet as the findings have demonstrated, there was also a clear realisation from the workers themselves that they needed to be aware of the lack of support that many young people encountered. Indeed, the data also pointed towards not just the aforementioned parental/family, opportunities, and environmental factors that had adversely affected many of their participants, but also in terms of the 'system', decision makers, and funding that oftentimes blighted life chances for young people with disadvantaged backgrounds. As Greg stated:

There's still this war. We've had this for a long time that they all still think they're people that cause trouble and vandalism and stuff like that are young people. But that but actually, you've got to have places for people, for young people to go, and that's the only way we can help them. (Greg)

Developing soft outcomes – performance environment parallels

The major finding of this theme is that ensuring coaching processes dovetailed and aligned in respect of the participants and subsequent behavioural changes. Issues of applied practice, particularly issues surrounding the provision of sessions and projects that involve cognitive and behavioural aspects, were proposed as opportunities to directly mirror and parallel traditional coaching (sport performance) contexts that used a rational approach (results oriented, goals etc.) to improving behaviours and outcomes (*Mediating learning*), and emphasising planned, approaches to building relationships (*Connections/concentration*).

Mediating learning and success (contextually specific)

For many scholars and practitioners, there is a strong conceptual current running through sports coaching, one that emphasises a rational approach to performance with, oftentimes, a reliance on linear scientific application and performance related success – irrespective of whether the coaching in question falls under anything other than one related to elite performance and production. Whilst there are competing approaches and questions related to contextual specificity, as will become clear as the results unfold in this theme, predominantly aligning outcomes to more rational models of production is seen as equally beneficial in both community sport coaching and youth work, it is just that many intended outcomes are 'different' from traditional sport coaching. As Cameron explained:

Community sport coaching in particular, in that kind of field, if you go into a session with the mindset of "I might be able to impact on this", Actually if I work on making sure that I am doing a group activity that's going to have a social element to it, etc., etc., then if you're coming at it from that perspective then those soft outcomes will literally come out of the session. (Cameron)

Steven concurred with this approach, stating that:

The key principles to coaching and yeah, yeah, I guess to be fair, a lot of things overlap anyway between coaching and youth work, but primarily within

community coaching, it has to be about engagement and connection with participants... if you like, community coaching for me is creating those soft outcomes for individuals rather than those performance outcomes. (Steven)

In this manner, Steven identified the importance of soft outcomes, and his quote was representative of all of the research participants. Amy provided an excellent explanation of how these soft outcomes would operate in the realm of community sport and youth work type settings, including doorstep sport, and explained how any direction of coaching type sessions would need a form of tangible, achievable outcomes and steps, and it was just the case that the goals needed to be decided on:

I guess to explain soft outcomes, it is that notion of building things that could be physical health could be mental wellbeing, trying to improve people's confidence, self-efficacy. That type of stuff. And there are a number of ways to really specifically do it, I think that in some of our programmes and in terms of that kind of coaching, but actually, again, you know, try not to overcomplicate it. (Amy)

Aligning ideas for outcomes in their sessions to traditional sport coaching approaches, with aims, objectives, and goals, was considered by the study participants to be a common, essential strategy. As Joe explained, he approached his community sport coaching and youth work in the following fashion:

If you go into it again, then using that parallel to a performance environment, if you go into it thinking, right, I'm going to prove this is a skill, this over a course of six weeks, well, if you apply that into kind of softer outcomes you can still achieve the same kind of result. So what we try to do here, is just having a mindset of impacts around these soft outcomes. And if they go into it with that, then they would likely be able to achieve that as a result of their delivery. (Joe)

Connections, concentration, and deliberately/incrementally building relationships

Melissa raised the importance of following set goals, and looking to achieve more positive outcomes for young people, through an example of incrementally building and developing the confidence of some of her participants through meaningful connections to others:

So like I say, when you think about improving someone's self-confidence, well, that's a really hard measurable, but actually when you think about it in a context of somebody that might be a little bit isolated for a variety of reasons, but might have poor connections in a school environment or work environment, that type of thing, even by putting on a group based session, you're already improving their connections already, which is already likely to be improving their self-confidence. And then if you are able to deliver in such a way that encourages that further, so encourages them to build connection with others, that gives them a sense of belonging, and again, we can see how those building blocks of somebody's self-confidence can start to grow just through delivering sport and through an activity. As long as you know what you're doing. (Melissa)

Her observations fit neatly with the view that working on connections can constitute a significant part of coaching and working with others, something that Côté and Gilbert (2009) identify as one of their tenets of coaching expertise and effectiveness, and that Côté et al.

(2007) have previously conceptualised through their definitions of 'Participation Coaches'. Moreover, they also reflect the key tenets of youth work that seeks to develop supportive relationships (Wylie, 2015), although in this case she (Melissa) and the other study participants made sure that they were specifically targeting this as outcomes. Indeed, in the same manner Greg gave a good insight into how "improvements" in behaviour and habits could be conceptualised in much the same manner as improvements in archetypal sporting performance. In giving an example of how a participant of his was doing, and how he had to explain incremental changes in behaviour to fellow workers or newcomers to community sport coaching and youth work, he outlined the following:

I might ask, how is his concentration? How long is he staying on the gym, how long is he engaging in a practice? And if you say, well, "actually, he used to stay five minutes and now he's there for fifteen minutes", well, then that's a huge progress. That's a huge step. You know, you might see that as part of being a sports coach for that. But for that person that's a huge step where they can concentrate for that extra amount of time and it's measuring these small steps to, you know, get to bigger steps. Sometimes, when I'm explaining this, I have to sort of really go back to basics and say, okay, we're going to break this down and this is how we're going to measure it because we're going to get our aims and objectives. And this is how we might measure to see how people are really progressing. (Greg)

Whilst much community sport coaching and youth work is based upon relationship building, informality, and even an improvisational process (Crisp, 2021a), the community sport coaches and youth workers in this study all felt that the building blocks of performance sport, ones that emphasise rational, planned, approaches to incremental positive changes, were also applicable when it came to other, not necessarily typically sport related but mental, emotional and regulational outcomes and life skills, in terms of execution and achievement. As Adam explained:

The more you plan, the more you reap the benefits... like any time or life, the more you do the more likely you are to be seeing the positive outcomes. I think that overlaps so much between the youth work, the community sports that I do and my coaching. Cause it just overlaps in all... whatever I see or use in the sport coaching world, I also see in a different way, but similar, down at the youth club, or when I'm doing the community sports. It all has the same impact, all has the same results, just different levels of the same result. (Adam)

This section ends with an overview connecting the themes and emergent theories that explain the commonalities between youth work and community sport coaching. In sum, rather than relying on what might be considered less structured approaches to relationship building, or hoping that voluntary participation in and of itself would (or does) enable growth and development, the participants in this study felt that more preconceived programmes of activity, goals, and aims interpolated through a process of action and intended outcomes that mirror performance sport principles were an effective method that constituted best practice.

Across both fields, these intended processes are bound together by the unifying theme of supporting the development of at-risk or disadvantaged young people. Indeed, the study participants unequivocally demonstrated and extolled the parallels between the fields, with the minor exceptions being the focus on some forms of developing sport (i.e. a sometimes very subtle nuance and shift towards improving sporting ability somewhat from those who were

currently more involved in community sport coaching), yet at all times all participants maintaining focus on developing relationships and enabling their own participants to flourish in a supportive environment. As Nathan stated “whether it’s darts, table tennis, or football, youth work or community sport coaching, it’s pretty much the same thing in terms of trying to help...”

Conclusion

Whilst the current study does not necessarily offer new understanding or insights relative to the benefits of sport participation for young people in at risk areas, the intention and the aims of the study were always to (hopefully) show some guiding principles of applied, essentially field practice that might cross over in both fields of community sport coaching and youth work. In this sense, many of the perceived, shared, challenges experienced by the practitioners in this study could be mitigated for by following certain goals, intended outcomes, and strategies to achieve them. These findings then helped offer insight into the aims of this research, essentially to determine how the two fields intersect, and how practitioners they exercise strategies (if any) in terms of best practice.

In establishing the commonalities between both fields, both philosophically and in terms of practical application, the present study then has outlined how youth workers and community sport coaches can draw parallels with wider sport philosophies and approaches. This is in terms of the way that the youth workers and community sport coaches in this study sought to offer a diverse range of activities to explore what ‘worked’, and also to mitigate (for some of their participants) the previous lack of applied sport participation or experience. And in the realm of performance sport principles, goal-setting and using techniques to establish life skills, and also ensuring responsibility and autonomy were developed through a system of empowerment, were also readily apparent as consistent commonalties reported by the study participants. Whilst it is worth remembering that the present study was based on an inductive, grounded theory type approach and thus the generated themes and theories are reflective of being constructed from the data itself, pleasingly the member checking/trustworthiness undertaken with the three most experienced interviewees showed they were particularly positive in their praise for the themes, with all stating that “it made perfect sense” and that they would use the ideas to inform their practice. Indeed, overall, the results showed that using these kinds of aims as guidelines may well support best practice for operating within the fields that youth workers and community sport coaches exist and operate in, and it is in this respect that the present study contributes to existing literature. This is perhaps particularly so when we consider the lack of intersubjective research and space underpinning what, as the present study confirms, are the particular nuances that cross both fields and the manner in which practice is, inevitably, led through positive relationships and supportive interventions between practitioners and people.

However, whilst the present study offers several new insights, this is not to say that it is not without its limitations, both theoretically and methodologically. In terms of theory, the very nature of this study has to be acknowledged as focusing on the practitioners themselves. Whilst worthy, it would also be highly beneficial if programmes could involve wider influences on youth lives, yet there is more limited scope and funding available to address these more systemic societal/familial disadvantages and in many respects these services exist because of the lack of appropriate role modelling, caring, or guardianship, that exist (Russell et al., 2016). Moreover, in the context of participants from lower socioeconomic status, it is well worth remembering that there are evident health inequalities with, for instance, more common symptoms and diagnosis of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Harvey et al., 2009). Given the use of sport in youth work and community sport coaching is often predicated on building confidence and other positive developmental outcomes, an acknowledgement of

how young people with ADHD experience problems with motor development and movement disorders is also worthy of consideration for further research. Methodologically, the limitations include the relatively small sample size of workers who had practiced in both fields (potentially inhibiting their ability to differentiate between the two), and the fact that the study relies on participants' recollections and biases, which are in essence problematical given they may not necessarily detail objective truths (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Indeed, a cautionary note here is that two out of three of the participants used for member checking were known contacts of the researcher, and so understanding the author's prior experience within both fields (over twenty years) is necessary to appreciate that some issues of familiarity through a proximate network and prior partnership working (however little) could be seen to have influenced their decisions and thoughts. A recommendation would be for future research to more widely integrate higher numbers of participants to increase generalisability and more rigorously ensure confirmability.

Nevertheless, whilst a wider scope within future research and possible longitudinal observational methods may well build upon this research, as would a focus on the service users' (youth work and community sport participants) care environments and a consideration of ADHD, the fact remains that the present study does complement both the youth work and community sport coaching fields, and highlights their commonalities, the intersubjectivity, and importantly, the manner in which the findings could contribute to any manner of combinations and permutations of what best (or at the least 'better') practice may mean for both. In this sense then, the research offers a number of essential ingredients for worker interventions and practice related to improving the lives of young people, and posits that offering a variety of sports and activities (diversification), goal setting and embedding life skills, empowering young people, and mirroring performance sport processes of establishing achievable aims and outcomes, can support applied practice.

Conflicts of interest:

The author declares no conflict of interest

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