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Changing Behaviours in Community Sport: A Precis of Sport Programme Practice and the Principle of Empowerment for Participants

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Abstract

Commonly referred to and used by wider social policy, youth sport organizations, and some practitioners in the field of sport/social intervention projects, the use of positive youth development (PYD) and an emphasis placed on developing relationships is supported by a relatively robust body of empirical and professional practice evidence. However, there is still room for frameworks and schemas to support the applied practice of community sport coaches and organisers, and the purpose of this paper is to outline the use of empowerment as a conceptual framework, with relevant application and design, within sport/social intervention projects. In order to do so, this paper reviews previous work related to the distinct context of community sport coaching, that specifically uses Jennings et al.'s [1] Critical Youth Empowerment (CYE) model to help explain findings, and signpost potential future practice.

Keywords: Behavioural Change; Sport Coaching; Community Development; Rapport

Introduction

In the UK, and indeed across many societies and cultures, there is a broad consensus that sport can help contribute to a wide range of social policy issues [2-4]. Indeed, a wide range of youth development programmes and concerted efforts to engage with young and disadvantaged people in community matters, do so through the prism of sport projects (sport-for-development [SFD] programmes). Much policy matters and papers often explicitly outline how sport can be used, and political capital often layers itself on to what are seen as the ubiquitous, often non-arguable or uncritically challenged, assumptions that sport can contribute to a wide range of welfare matters. In the UK, for instance, there is a long history of government recognition of the role of sport. The Policy Action Team (PAT) 10 [5] report in 1999 focused on the impact that sport and arts could have on combating social exclusion. And Game Plan [6] in 2002specifically outlined case studies offering strong evidence for the efficacy of sport in contributing to social policy. Whilst these policy/strategy papers were under the auspices of the then Labour government, even prior to their Coalition government being elected in 2010, the Conservative Party's belief in the transformative nature of sport was given weight by their 2009 sports manifesto and their paper Extended Opportunities: A Conservative Policy Paper on Sport [7]. Subsequent legacy funding for the 2012 Olympic Games, and further, successive strategies such as Sporting Future: A New Strategy for an Active Nation [8] all readily point to the manner in which, despite reduced funding under the Conservative government's policy of austerity, successive governments over the last 20 years plus have focused on the broader use of sport within social intervention projects (although admittedly with reduced spend under the Conservative government). There is also a fairly broad body of academic literature that long been engaged with, and specifically pertains to, community sport coaching and sport/social intervention projects. For instance, the work of Eckholm [9] and Hoye et al. [4], illustrates the manner in which sport has been seen to be able to potentially create and contribute to changes in young, or disadvantaged peoples' behaviour. This field of work is, however, oftentimes critical of how many primary aims of sport projects may not necessarily be accurately articulated, or indeed actually prove to be anything other than superficial remedies to deeper, oftentimes systemically entrenched disadvantages that require (at the very least and outside of substantial and noteworthy social changes) significantly more focus and resource over protracted time periods. Nevertheless, there are several theories that help us to conceptualise just how the use of sport, and similar activities, may help young and disadvantaged people, and there is – as already mentioned – a body of work that continues to demonstrate that sport can, in some capacity, positively support the development of participants in social intervention projects. As an example (and one that is well-known and applied), the theory of positive youth

development (PYD) sits within the context of psycho-social development, and whilst not a theory that is explicitly situated within or confined to sport itself, it can help to explain how sport and similar activities can be used to facilitate changes in development. These changes are seen to be through the manner in which the use of sport, when meaningfully applied and with key outcomes and delivery methods identified, contribute to the emotional and social development of young people. This is through the enhancement of understanding and ability to self-regulate emotions, resilience, self-efficacy and the like [10-11]. In terms of application, professional practice, and establishing strategies to embolden positive changes in behaviour and/or developing life skills, Theories of Change (ToC) frameworks have been identified as a purposeful tool to facilitating outcomes centred on young and/or disadvantaged peoples' development. ToC frameworks essentially look to clearly articulate organisations' planning, pathways, and strategies [12-13]. This is through placing an onus on transparently identifying the change process and methods that are necessary for intended outcomes, and deliberately emphasising their use through delivery methods, intended aims, and reinforcing evaluation (and necessarily reiterating or revisiting key principles) throughout the lifespan of projects [14-15]. Bolton et al. [16], for instance, highlighted how a 'Calls for Action' sport/social intervention programme prioritised changes in behaviour as one of the desired outcomes of the programme. This approach, one that explores and tests existing assumptions about programme and social intervention effectiveness, allowed a more critical approach to take place and for the effective management of partnership work, with their own intended outcomes and biases, to take place. Perhaps key to all theories underpinning social intervention projects, and indeed the role, nature and professional practice of community sport coaches and professionals (including approaches to organisation management e.g, through ToC), is the realisation that effective relationship building (with participants) oftentimes significantly underpins the success (or not) of programmes. Within the field of sport/social intervention projects – essentially that of community sport coaches - the effectiveness of the projects has been seen, by a significant amount of research [i.e. 17-18], to be predicated on the quality of relationships between community sport coaches and their young and/or disadvantaged participants. The fundamental premise here is that positive relationships, with established boundaries, act as the genesis and nexus for any possible reflexive space and intersectional, reciprocal changes in behaviour. The caveat here is that it is the community sport coach/professional that must ultimately act as the arbiter of psycho-social change, and the reciprocity of any changes in behaviour needs to be skewed to more positive, pro-social behaviours. The consensus then, seen by such as Martinek and Hellison [19], Bell [20], Bradbury and Kay [21], Hardman et al., [22], and the author [23], is that positive relationships are the dominant factor through which change in behaviour is assumed to be brought about. Identifying key features of managing positive relationships within the context of community sport, and the management and best practice that can underpin participant behaviour, expectations, and possible changes, can be seen in the principles of youth empowerment. Fundamentally set within the field of youth work, welfare, and community development, the concept and practice of empowerment calls for a process of social action and an acknowledgment of developmental outcome behaviours, and subsequent delivery methods that emphasise this [24-25]. Empowerment itself is predicated to ideas of developing independent living and life skills, as well as a wider, conscious autonomous capacity that sits with and within pro-social behaviours. Whilst most literature specifically outlining empowerment sits in the fields of community matters and youth work, there is some within the context of sport. For instance, Forde [26], who advocated the development of life skills in sport/social intervention projects. The author has also published a paper entitled "Leadership, empowerment and coaching: how community sport coaches in the UK can effect behavioural change in disadvantaged youth through incrementally given roles of responsibility", that specifically uses Jennings et al.'s [1] Critical Youth Empowerment (CYE) model to help explain the findings, and articulate how the model could be used by community sport professionals to guide approaches to session delivery and project goals. This mini-review next outlines the findings from this paper [27].

Discussion

The paper, Leadership, empowerment and coaching: how community sport coaches in the UK can effect behavioural change in disadvantaged youth through incrementally given roles of responsibility [27], is a study that used ten significantly experienced sport coaches who operated in a variety of community sport contexts. Interviews were undertaken with the coaches to determine, essentially, what they viewed as good practice and what their experiences, recollections, and understanding of community sport benefits, drawbacks, and any wider observations were. The findings were categorised into five wider themes. The first, Empowerment, leadership, and sustainability, demonstrated how the coaches tried to identify potential leaders among their participants, and prioritised, or at the least understood the importance of, promoting flexibility and choice within sessions and incrementally giving participants levels of responsibility to run sessions themselves – as leaders. The second theme, Burgeoning coach-participant relationships, outlined the importance the coaches placed on meaningfully trying to build relationships. Crucial here, was an explicit realisation that respect and relationships needed effort, resource, and time, and a pro-active approach with a focus on empathy and understanding the lives and contexts of the young and/or disadvantaged people they were coaching. The third theme of Pro-social behaviours essentially reflected upon how the improving behaviours of the participants had been underpinned by trust and rapport, and the fourth theme, Personal well-being, civic pride, and looking after others showed how these improved behaviours had, at times, extended to wider community matters,

such as pride in local environment and supporting younger members of the participant cohort. The last theme, Reductions in funding: 'less time to coach because you're working in a library', was less centred on coaching best practice, in as much as it highlighted more how reduced funding in the age of austerity had significantly impacted programme delivery, design, sustainability, and naturally, outcomes. As stated in the previous section, the findings were interpreted through using Jennings et al.'s [1] CYE model. This model is an aggregation and synthesis of four conceptual youth empowerment models (much of which draws upon developing self-esteem, psychological theories of adolescent development, and ultimately detailing psychological changes), that emphasises supported environments, meaningful participation, incrementally given roles of responsibility, and contribution to community affairs, as key tenets of successful programme design, participant engagement, and participant change. There are six essential dimensions of CYE which can act as a "frame of reference" [1: 52] which follow: 1. A welcoming and safe environment; 2. Meaningful participation and engagement; 3. Equitable power-sharing between youth and adults; 4. Engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and socio-political processes; 5. Participation in sociopolitical processes to effect change; and 6. Integrated individual- and community-level empowerment. The study's [27] five themes/findings were then viewed through, and by, critically and systematically applying the CYE model and each of its six dimensions to all of them. The first correlation was made with the dimension of a welcoming safe environment, as here the findings showed that the development of coach-participant relationships was considered essential to how the coaches, programmes, and intended outcomes could build and/or demonstrate any success. Key to this then, was a welcoming environment that reinforced support, rapport, and trust. The next dimension, meaningful participation and engagement, and its inherent call for participants to learn additional skills (such as planning), could be seen through the way in which the coaches in the study felt that encouraging and actioning their young participants to plan and deliver (over time, and once considered appropriate) elements of their sessions. The CYE's third dimension, equitable power-sharing between youth and adults, was evidenced through the manner in which sports (and other) activities for the young people were often decided and planned for through consultation, choice, and consensus. With regards to the fourth dimension, engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and socio-political processes, the coaches' recollections and reflections quite clearly referenced and explained how many of their participants had become, during the programme lifespans, more capable of self-responsibility, accountability, and aware of their impacts on others. The fifth and sixth dimensions, participation in socio-political processes in order to effect change, and integrated individual and community-level empowerment, could be seen in the way in which additional volunteering took place, and incrementally offering, embedding, and ensuring levels of responsibility and leadership roles. This kind of approach (and philosophy) was considered to be a key principle of planning and delivering effective sessions and programmes, and crucial to effecting changes in behaviour. This application of the CYE model to the findings in the paper demonstrated how meaningfully planning for and using principles of empowerment supported the development of the young people in the coaches' programmes. Clearly though, the paper's [27] findings (particularly in the last theme) outlined how successful applications of these strategies required effort, time, and resource (financial and emotional), and were understandably constrained by cuts to funding that the coaches and programme managers had experienced.

Conclusion

Jennings et al.'s [1] model has been used to examine teen empowerment strategies through the lens of CYE [28]. However, before the paper this review outlines [27], youth empowerment models had not been used in a specific youth sports context. It is important to acknowledge this, as the paper has innovatively acted in bridging youth work and community sport literature. Overall, the paper presented a detailed overview of how improvements in participant behaviour can be explained through using the CYE Model as the key theoretical framework. There could be, nevertheless, some concerns about how new and/or beginner-coaches might be able to fully comprehend or apply these principles. Arguably then, a criticism of applying CYE within community sport coaching may lie less in the flaws of proven good practice and any theoretical base, as opposed to any minutiae, understanding, and expertise necessary for its application. Of note, many of the principles underpinning it extend quite significantly beyond the remit of many traditional coaching qualifications, given that many coach training courses focus on the building blocks of delivery, as opposed to - for instance - developing, understanding, and maintaining effective relationships. The work does, however, relatively authoritatively outline how building/fostering supportive environments (through effective and supportive relationships, rapport, and trust), and incrementally offering responsibility and ensuring participants themselves contributed to some forms of delivery and wittingly (through encouragement and deliberate planning) actively support and participate in the sessons and ancillary elements of projects, can lead to positive behavioural change.

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