"It's about the relationships": Evidencing impact through sport-based development - an ethnographic case study of the Youth Engagement Service programme

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Abstract

Sport is generally understood to be widely beneficial within society and for individuals. As a tool it is sometimes used to engage with young people, within often underserved communities, in offering a range of positive development opportunities. Such provision may reflect a variety of broad or focused "sport", "sport-plus", "plus-sport" (Coalter, 2007a, p. 71) or "plus-development" (Eisenkraft Klein & Darnell, 2024, p. 128) approaches in meeting a range of complex and contextual development priorities within community settings. With its broad potential reach, scholars have critiqued approaches to evidencing the impact of sport-based development as often providing limited insight and understanding into its design and practice, and its full and nuanced efficacy (Camiré et al., 2023; Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2007a, 2017; Jeanes & Lindsey, 2014; Nicholls et al., 2011; Whitley et al., 2019). There is paucity of empirical evidence on the interaction enabling impactful practitioner engagement with young people within open access community sport-based development settings (Debognies et al., 2019; Moreau et al., 2018; Spaaij & Schaillée, 2021), and scarce examination of families' experiences of these activities and their wider impacts, each of which limit current understanding including around the full value and reach of this activity.

This study examined the enabling aspects of a community sport-based development programme which supported beneficial impacts for young people and their families, and which are nuanced and challenging to fully evidence. The examination drew on a 30 month ethnographic case study of the Sporting Communities four year National Lottery funded Youth Engagement Service (YES) programme as an example of a sport-based intervention (SBI). An ecological systems approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993) was adopted to examine at: i) the 'exo' level, the organisational capacities which enabled impactful SBI design and delivery within challenging and fluid contexts by a third sector provider, utilising Hall et al.'s "Conceptual Model of Organizational Capacity" (2003, p.

7); ii) the 'meso' level, the impactful delivery conditions and interaction through which engagement and connectedness was achieved with young people through SBI activities, utilising Goffman's "Fun in Games" (1961, p. 15); and the 'micro' level, to examine families' experiences of impact through SBI involvement.

The findings show the complex range of inter-related enablers and enabling relationships needed to provide impactful sport-based development. Key enablers included: i) the multi-disciplinary expertise, ethical ethos, and experience of staff to navigate dynamic contexts in an agile and fluid way at all levels of organisational, service and programme provision; ii) the relationships the staff built within and outside of the organisation including with young people, families, wide ranging organisations and the funder; iii) staff approaches to understanding the priorities of the young people, families and local communities; and iv) the organisation's commitment to holistic service provision which included and extended beyond sport, designed into their delivery approach to provide, flexible, and tailored services for programme participants. These deliberate and mutually reinforcing approaches fundamentally informed how staff sought and applied resources through which service provision was enabled. Young participants and their family members described involvement in different activities through the organisation and the YES programme, and different extents of involvement and over time. However, each described significant, yet varied and often highly nuanced, impacts experienced through their involvement with the programme.

Staff and family research participants within the study identified that the relationships built and impacts experienced through the YES required time to develop. Delivering and maintaining consistent organisational resources, and in particular the human capacity evidenced by the skilled staff needed to deliver quality holistic SBI provision, is particularly challenging for third sector organisations within England where access to resources continues to be fragmented, limited and unreliable. The study confirms that holistic provision is important for young people and families within the challenging contemporary socio-economic context in England, and in particular within underserved communities. The study has focused on informal sport-based delivery and engagement within underserved communities which serves as a counterpoint to research focused on more formalised sport-based delivery within settings such as schools and

community sports clubs. In these informal community settings practitioners collaborate with young people to create sessions where young people choose to engage regularly. For the wider aspirations of sport to fully benefit young people and families, the complex inter-related impactful enablers of holistic community sport-based provision, identified within this study, need to be in place to facilitate consistent, quality services which can achieve a range of positive impacts which meet local and participant priorities.

This study has contributed to empirical knowledge through holistic examination of i) the impactful enablers of community SBI design and delivery, ii) the interaction dynamics enabling trusted participant-practitioner development relationships to be built with young people within open access SBI community settings; iii) the wider impacts experienced by families through sport-based development; iv) holistic SBI provision experiences and adaptability during the extraordinarily challenging global COVID-19 pandemic. This study further contributes methodologically through its: i) family interviews and innovative elicitation methods; and ii) range of qualitative methods enabling holistic insight into the enabling mechanisms and the complex dynamic context of SBI provision.

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