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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Journal of Youth Studies* on 14 March 2017, available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.1305100>

Official URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.1305100>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.1305100>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/4373>

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**Generating recognition, acceptance and social inclusion in marginalised youth  
populations: The potential of sports-based interventions**

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## **Abstract**

In recent years sport-based interventions have been implemented as a mechanism via which to target marginalised youth in relation to the development of social inclusion. Much of the political rhetoric surrounding social inclusion programmes highlights engagement with education, employment, or training, as key metrics. This has led some scholars to observe that conceptualising social inclusion in this way can act to further marginalise young people who fail to engage with these metrics. In contrast, this paper seeks to employ an alternative understanding of social inclusion, which uses the concepts of recognition and acceptance, to infer how participation in sports-based programmes may enable marginalised youth to meet mainstream societal expectations and aid with social assimilation. Drawing upon findings from two small-scale studies of sport-based interventions located in three UK cities, this paper places participant accounts at the centre of the analysis to explore broader notions of pro-social development in relation to recognition and interpersonal acceptance. The paper concludes by suggesting that within contexts in which young people are able to generate strong interpersonal relationships with key personnel (such as coaches), and which are built upon trust, recognition and developing self-worth, there is clear potential for sport-based programmes to incubate social assimilation.

**Keywords:** Sport, social inclusion, marginalised youth, recognition, acceptance.

## **Introduction**

Addressing the marginalisation and social exclusion of young people continues to be a major challenge for governments across the globe (Pique, Veia and Strecker, 2016). While social exclusion as a concept exhibits different meanings between academics,

politicians and policy-makers (Levitas, 2004), discourses which highlight the centrality of employment have dominated understandings of inclusion and influenced interventions designed to enable young people to become part of the societal mainstream. As a consequence, young people who are neither in employment, nor undertaking any form of education or training to enhance their employability prospects, often become the focal point of interventions to address youth marginalisation (Nudzor, 2010).

However, others have argued that a preoccupation with employment as an indicator of social inclusion has further marginalised populations for whom academic failure, educational disengagement and structural inequality have undermined their attempts to gain secure employment (see Cheng, Siu and Leung, 2006; Whittaker, 2010; Rose, Daiches and Potier, 2012). In response, these authors propose that contrary to perspectives which prioritise formal structures of recognition, such as school attainment and work-place promotions, social inclusion should also be considered in relation to informal structures of recognition, such as interpersonal acceptance. Furthermore, by embracing this perspective of social inclusion, informal recognition may provide a foundation upon which access to the formal structures of recognition that dominate the social inclusion landscape can be built.

Uppermost within perspectives which promote informal structures of recognition is the construction and consolidation of mentoring relationships which engender qualities such as trust, reciprocity, and respect (Rose et al., 2012). Literature indicates that one social setting which can provide fertile ground for the cultivation of such relationships is within community sports clubs (Morgan and Bush, 2016).

Furthermore, as Coalter (2013) notes, the development of strong interpersonal relationships between key personnel (such as sports coaches) and young people hold potential to address issues of social exclusion within at-risk youth populations.

Consequently, the research reported in this paper combines data collected from two sports-based projects that were implemented in three UK cities between 2010 and 2015. In all cases, the aim of the intervention was to use sport to engage young people who were identified as marginalised from mainstream society, as well as those deemed to be ‘vulnerable’ because of their exclusion, or who were categorised as being ‘at risk’ of further exclusion. More specifically, this paper aims to provide insights into how participation in sport-based interventions may contribute to informal structures of recognition and enhance a sense of interpersonal acceptance within marginalised youth populations (Whittaker, 2010). Furthermore, it intends to highlight how recognition and acceptance may contribute to meeting mainstream societal expectations related to positive social outcomes and aid with social assimilation (Rose et al., 2012).

### **Youth, social ex/inclusion and sport**

Whilst a growing body of academic work has become attentive to conceptualisations of social inclusion (Spandler, 2007; Rose et al., 2012), existing literature points to a concept that possesses shifting meanings across the landscape of academic and political commentary or a term that is deployed flexibly to serve a particular ideological purpose (Levitas, 2004). Furthermore, much of the scholarship surrounding social inclusion conflates the term with conceptualisations of social exclusion meaning that the two are often used interchangeably or presented as

unproblematic opposites (Spandler, 2007), on the premise that those who are not socially excluded must, by definition, be experiencing social inclusion. This kind of thinking presents a neat compartmentalisation of society into an included majority and an excluded minority, all of which runs the risk of masking the complexity of the social inclusion/exclusion dynamic, fuelling the discursively created assumptions surrounding marginalised populations, and presenting “an overly homogenous and consensual image of society” (Levitas, 2005, 7).

The discursive approach to understandings of social exclusion is arguably best captured by the work of Levitas (2005), who presents three, overlapping yet contrasting discourses based upon a delineation of where the boundary for exclusion is positioned. The first of these discourses—the redistributive discourse (RED)—adopts a perspective of social exclusion that highlights poverty and a lack of material resources as the primary cause of exclusion (Townsend, 1979). Under RED, ideas to address social exclusion coalesce around the reduction of poverty through the redistribution of universal welfare, not just in terms of financial assistance, but also via public services (Levitas, 2004, 2005). When related to the capacity of sports-based interventions to address social exclusion, these programmes contribute to what Collins (2004, 728) has described as “the citizen’s package of expectations”, where welfare services are prioritised within their design (Coalter, 2008). Consequently, sport is utilised as a ‘hook’ via which issues of inequality can be tackled (Frisby and Millar, 2002; Nichols, 2007).

In contrast, the social integrationist discourse (SID) is concerned with the role of paid employment as the fundamental means for social inclusion (Levitas, 2005). More

specifically, SID emphasises the development of human capital (Baptiste, 2001) as the primary means to enhance employability, and subsequently, social inclusion. Existing research which has examined the correspondence between sport-based programmes and the enhancement of opportunities for paid employment and has noted the potential for such programmes to contribute to employability, most prominently through the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to enhance opportunities in the employment market (Spaaij et al., 2013; Sherry et al., 2015).

The final discourse offered by Levitas (2005)—the moral underclass discourse (MUD)—encompasses a social and moral component. Specifically, MUD is concerned with an ‘underclass’ of society who are culturally and morally distinct from the mainstream due to their low educational attainment (Levitas, 2005) and who demonstrate a “disdain for their [social] obligations ... [and] identifiably distinctive attitudes towards the family and the labour market” (Jordan, 1996, 109). Consequently, interventions to address social exclusion within MUD have focussed on tackling morally undesirable behaviour by enhancing personal qualities such as resilience and self-efficacy (Luthans et al., 2007). This is particularly noticeable within sport-based interventions, which often promote the potential of sport to engage marginalised populations in activities to assimilate cultural values, beliefs and attitudes accepted within the mainstream (see Nichols, 2007; Kelly, 2011; Banks, 2013; Hylton and Totten, 2013; Collins and Haudenhuyse, 2015).

Despite the growing body of literature which indicates how participation in sport may address issues of social exclusion, more critical scholars have noted how the claims attached to the transformative potential of sport are often unfounded, or exaggerate

the extent to which engagement with sport-based interventions is beneficial for all participants (see Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2015; Hartmann and Kwauk, 2011; Haudenhuyse, Theeboom and Nols, 2012). Consequently, these authors argue that research which is cautious in its generalisations (Spaaij, 2009) and offers theoretically-informed explanations as to how participation in sport may contribute to social transformation (Coakley, 2011), is necessary in order to effectively assess the social impact of sport. With this in mind, our intention within this paper is to utilise existing scholarship related to the concepts of informal structures of recognition (Whittaker, 2010) and interpersonal acceptance (Rose et al., 2012) as frames through which social assimilation may be generated through participation in sport.

### **Recognition, acceptance and marginalised youth**

As mentioned, the above discourses of social exclusion are most attributable to youth populations categorised as not in education, employment or training (NEET) (Nuzdor, 2010; Rose et al., 2012). Indeed, against a political backdrop which valorises paid employment as a key marker of inclusion (Levitas, 2005), being classified as NEET implies membership of a population which is anti-aspirational, irresponsible and negligent of its duty to society (Winlow and Hall, 2013), thereby portraying it as a stigmatising, exclusionary label (Hodgkinson, 2004; Yates and Payne, 2006; Whittaker, 2010).

In general, strategic attempts to resolve the crisis of NEET youth incorporate amalgams of motivational, punishing, or bridging approaches (Strathdee, 2013). Motivational strategies relate to activities which encourage the identified population to (re)enter the workforce, primarily through skill development, while punishing



strategies principally utilise welfare system reform to force young people into paid employment through reducing welfare dependency or increasing the negative connotations attached to being NEET. In contrast, bridging approaches aim to generate social connections which may enable marginalised youth to “repair deficits in [their] social capital by ... acting as a conduit between employers and job-seekers” (Strathdee, 2013, 41). However, in all approaches, these strategies incorporate an emphasis on formal structures of recognition (Whittaker, 2010) whereby positive engagement is rewarded with acceptance to institutions (such as those within education, training or employment) which are valued and recognised by the societal mainstream.

Gaining recognition has been highlighted as a key feature of adolescent self-perception (Cheng et al., 2006), which, as Whittaker (2010, 84) reminds us, “can be sought and gained for pro-social or anti-social behaviours”. Consequently, for young people who experience difficulty in attaining positive recognition from formal sources within the mainstream, the potential for further stigmatisation, marginalisation and exclusion becomes more pronounced (Hodgkinson, 2004). In response, Whittaker (2010, 78) proposes that strategies to engage marginalised youth may look to deviate from the heavy focus on academic achievement as the basis for recognition, towards more informal structures of recognition such as “verbal praise, or simply knowing that someone trusts and believes in you” as precursors to social inclusion in youth populations.

In an attempt to better articulate how young people classified as NEET conceptualise social inclusion, the work of Rose et al. (2012) presents an empirically derived

understanding of social inclusion, which offers a theoretical foundation to examine how community sport-based interventions may hold potential as an informal structure of recognition (Whittaker, 2010). Central to this work is the notion that social inclusion occurs at both an interpersonal and societal level (Rose et al., 2012). Consequently, as a primary indicator of social inclusion, Rose et al. (2012) identify acceptance as an essential component. In short, acceptance refers to a reciprocal sense of respect, acknowledgement and trust, both from peers and by people perceived to be in power (Rose et al., 2012). Therefore, at an interpersonal level, acceptance and recognition from individuals within socially valued institutions (e.g. sports clubs), has the potential to incubate self-worth through the acknowledgement of strengths and qualities outside of formal spheres of recognition (Whitaker, 2010). Moreover, acceptance enables a sense of individualised belonging upon which integration into more conventional notions of social inclusion (which often refer to education, employment and training) can be constructed (Rose et al., 2012). At a societal level, Rose et al. (2012) observe how social discourse influences a sense of inclusion, where typically, mainstream expectations of ‘normal’ or ‘functional’ life transitions (such as successful completion of school examinations, or gaining employment), impact and shape the sense of assimilation experienced within youth populations. For NEET populations, these societal definitions often impact negatively on self-concept, and further marginalise or stigmatise NEET youth. Therefore, when internalised by individuals, this discourse acts as a means to heighten feelings of worthlessness and insignificance whilst impacting detrimentally on notions of agency over future aspirations and feelings of hope about accessing the societal mainstream (Rose et al., 2012).

As Rose et al. (2012) imply, the valorisation of other forms of community contribution are beneficial to the process of internalising a sense of social inclusion among marginalised young people. Moreover, such acknowledgement may forge an alternative disposition towards mainstream values and societal roles alongside a greater sense of agency over the accomplishment of these ‘preferred roles’. Therefore, potential exists to examine how informal recognition and interpersonal acceptance may assist social assimilation, and offer an alternative understanding of social inclusion which reaches beyond articulations which prioritise engagement with formal education and paid employment.

### **Context and method**

The empirical findings featured here are drawn from two wider studies which sought to investigate the impact of sporting intervention on youth crime and anti-social behaviour. The first project, Sporting Youth,<sup>1</sup> was delivered from a number of project sites across three UK cities (one in the English West Midlands, one in the South East and one in the South West) and targeted young people aged 13-19 who were considered to be ‘vulnerable’ and/or ‘at risk’. The second project, Get Sport, was delivered via seven sports/youth clubs across one of the same three cities (South East) and targeted 14-25 year olds.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the interventions consisted of: (i) a boxing-based programme delivered in various locations in the West Midlands that were notorious for violent crime, gang-related activity, and anti-social behaviour; (ii) a multi-sport offering at a young offenders institution (YOI) in the South West; (iii) a predominantly football-based intervention delivered in partnership with local housing associations within residential estates in the South East; and (iv) a multi-sport

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<sup>1</sup> In order to preserve anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout.

<sup>2</sup> These projects were selected on the basis of the wider evaluative research that was being undertaken.

programme facilitated by a sports-based charity in sports/youth clubs also in the South East. Both projects partnered with organisations that offered education and training programmes and/or employment opportunities to the young people (male and female) who engaged with their sport-based delivery.

The research studies were driven by a constructionist ontology and interpretive epistemology with the aim of eliciting the subjective interpretations of the everyday lives of the young people concerned in relation to their participation in and experiences of the various interventions which each project hosted (Andrews, Mason and Silk, 2005; Bryman, 2015; Sparkes and Smith, 2013). The research findings presented here are drawn from one-to-one semi-structured and/or focus group interviews with participants, project/club leaders, coaches, and members of related partner and community groups. Respondents were selected on the basis that collectively they provided a cross-section of the individuals involved either in the intervention delivery or as participants, and in line with access and availability. Participants themselves were self-selecting as volunteers on the projects in question. In total, 80 respondents were interviewed comprising of 60 programme participants and 20 coaches and project leaders.

Data were collected between October 2010 and May 2015. Interview and focus group discussions across both projects explored young people's experiences of engaging with the initiatives themselves and associated interventions. Interview discussion topics varied with participants being asked about their entry route into the project, their awareness of its overarching aims and objectives, and 'critical' moments which had defined their experiences. The research teams explored testimonies where the

projects had successfully and effectively removed young people from damaging social circumstances associated with crime and anti-social behaviour, and facilitated their re/integration within localised communities. Interviews with project leaders/workers and partner agencies addressed their perceptions of the kinds of young people and communities engaged with the interventions, the perceived benefits accrued by young people from related activities, and the extent to which delivery staff (leaders/coaches) felt that wider project aims and objectives (around sport for social inclusion, positive youth development and social change) were being met.

Interviews lasted between 10-60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed in full.<sup>3</sup> Thematic and axial coding was used in relation to the analysis of these data where the research teams adopted a cyclical process of examination and inductive interpretation to draw out themes and meanings in response to the primary aims of the research and in line with the key themes and concepts identified from the existing literature (Charmaz, 2002, 2014). Data were analysed in four stages. Firstly, the transcripts were read in full to gain an overview of the data. Secondly, each transcript was individually coded and indexed whereby a capturing of the different aspects of participant experience took place. Thirdly, these experiences were then categorised into a number of over-arching topics broadly relating to issues of ‘acceptance’, ‘recognition’ and ‘inclusion’. The final stage of analysis involved the formal organisation of these topics into generic themes by further exploring the key issues around participant experience and framing those experiences within the context of existing conceptual debate (differentiated by respondents). These themes comprise: (i) sport, trust and recognition, (ii) developing acceptance through engagement with

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<sup>3</sup> Variations on interview timings were solely due to the availability of respondents.

sport, and (iii) sport, accepting relationships and social assimilation. The first two of these themes are addressed primarily from the perspective of project participants (i.e., young people), whilst the third incorporates the wider views of coaches and project leaders in order to provide greater contextual clarity around intervention delivery and impact.

## **Results and discussion**

Before presenting the findings, it is worth reiterating that what follows is the result of data collected from a sample of the programmes' participants. Consequently, our findings do not (and cannot) reflect the experiences of all participants who engaged with the programmes, and therefore the impact and generalisability of the findings are limited in scope (Houlihan, Bloyce and Smith, 2009). Moreover, as with much research that is conducted within these contexts, the testimonies that were recorded were provided by those participants who were most engaged with the programmes, and arguably those who were the primary beneficiaries (Coakley, 2011). As such, our findings may present what Hartmann and Kwauk (2011, 285) have described as "heartfelt narratives, evocative images, and quotable sound bites of individual and community transformation", which provide an overly optimistic or positive view as to how sport-based programmes can enhance social inclusion (Coakley, 2011; Haudenhuyse et al., 2012). Whilst we accept this position, our intention in presenting these results is to offer explanations as to *how* sport-based interventions *may* contribute to social assimilation through the development of informal recognition and interpersonal acceptance. In doing so, we wish to percolate ideas into existing debates regarding the social worth of sport-based programmes (Pawson 2006; Room,

2013) and pursue the construction of intelligent policy (van der Knapp, 2004), which utilises theory to provide an explanatory agenda for future practice (Pawson, 2006).

### **Sport, trust and recognition**

All of the interventions featured across the Sporting Youth and Get Sport projects were implemented within localities identified as deprived (Department for Communities and Local Government [DCLG], 2015). Despite the pervasive threat of commonly applied indicators of deprivation, the majority of young people engaged by these interventions were not affiliated with gangs, had not been in trouble with the Police, and were not identified as being at risk of falling into a life of crime and/or gang-related activity. Nevertheless, their vulnerability and marginalisation stemmed, at least in part, from them living amidst disadvantaged circumstances. For example, when referring to the neighbourhood where he coached at a BMX club, AJ noted:

... [It's] a classically deprived area ... Over there you've got Church Mews, which has been in the news numerous times ... That's got a curfew and all sorts, you know, Police, CCTV, smart car goes round every night.

However, other young people who believed themselves to be excluded from or stigmatised by mainstream society, based their perspective upon their previous actions, attitudes and/or life choices. They included those within the youth justice system, those on community rehabilitation programmes, and those on the verge of being criminalised or excluded from mainstream society because of their antisocial behaviour. A case in point was Brett, who was learning to cope with life back in the community following a period in custody. When reflecting on his life before being

engaged in Sporting Youth, his testimony mirrored many of the findings from previous research relating to marginalised youth (Hodgkinson, 2004; Yates and Payne, 2006; Whittaker, 2010), most notably in relation to trust:

Well, y'know, I didn't really trust anyone ... I mean I've always had a close knit family but your mates, well, they're not really mates if they're off doin' stuff [crime] and they want you to do stuff as well ... So, really you don't have no trust in anyone or belief in anyone, that's the thing. Trust comes in time when you get to know someone. But I didn't have that in anyone ... 'cos that's what I was like myself. I didn't have any belief in myself either and if you don't believe in yourself you can't have belief in others ...

Interview data revealed how participation in sport served to develop a sense of trust, most notably through informal means of recognition (Whittaker, 2010). For a number of young people who were struggling to “find (their) way into the world of work” the developmental opportunities provided through engagement with sport-based interventions were especially important. For participants like 17-year old Hamza from the West Midlands, boxing training sessions enabled him to embark on a pathway that was more conducive to his self-development as an individual with a “purpose” and a more “focused” approach to daily life. He explained:

It [boxing] opened doors for me I didn't know I could go through ... I couldn't be bothered before, but when I found out I was good at it, I wanted to try harder... I jus' realised that I was naturally good at boxing ... I felt like I had something to focus on ...



Similarly, 16-year old Mehtin, a boxer from the South East, noted how participation in sport had “changed everything” by offering a space for positive recognition of his clear ability in boxing, thus enabling him to feel more hopeful about his future whilst empowering him with greater agency over his aspirations (Rose et al., 2012). He continued:

Boxing ... in its own changed everything all the way around ... 'coz if I didn't do boxing I don't know what would've happened. I was always in trouble. It was just so difficult...it was boxing that changed it all the way around. It's how you live, the healthy lifestyle, and the way you eat; do your runs, the way you rest, the way you sleep, the way you wake up – it's like a routine ... It's how you live and do things right or wrong ... If you do one thing wrong it's not gonna work out. It's like you having the right passes, if you get one, or if you don't have one of them passes you're not gonna be able to go through the door 'coz they're not gonna let you in.

Returning to Hamza's testimony, he further highlighted the extent to which alternative understandings of success (Whittaker, 2010) within boxing helped to enthuse him; an important factor that appealed to a number of other project participants, especially those who were struggling to motivate themselves, or to identify something that engaged their interests and passions. For example, for those who discovered that they were 'good' at boxing, training sessions emerged as key places where hidden talents could be unearthed and where, crucially, recognition for pro-social behaviour could be sought and obtained (Whittaker, 2010). Typical narratives highlighted how young people often entered the interventions believing themselves to be decidedly

‘unskilled’, yet departed “feeling great”, especially those who claimed that they had previously struggled to find “anything they were good at”. Developing competencies and skills, knowing how to effectively apply these in training sessions, and receiving rewards, were all central to inducing positive recognition, even where apathy, resentment and boredom had previously reigned. In part, such a positively charged experience stemmed from knowing that praise was rarely given in sport unless rightfully earned. Hence, those who received a “pat on the back” often felt exhilarated about themselves and their performance. More importantly, they had identified a means for recognition which enhanced their self-perception (Cheng et al., 2006).

Certainly, the transformative potential of boxing appeared to be heavily rooted in the fact that as an individual sport, it enabled programme participants to “move at their own pace”. Hence, their success and progress was dependant on them listening to and acting upon guidance from their coach. Jez, one of the West Midlands-based coaches, spoke about this:

Whereas in football you might only be as good as your team, boxing is much more about the individual ... you can take one step forward or a massive leap forward and everyone moves at different levels ... And it’s up to you really. You set your own goals in our sessions, even if you’re being coached together.

What becomes clear from this excerpt is how marginalised young people value informal structures of recognition by individuals perceived to possess social legitimacy and power. Consequently, sports coaches were able to facilitate an emerging sense of trust between themselves and project participants (Whittaker,

2010), something that was lacking in the lives of many respondents prior to their participation in sport. For example, Gavin, from the South West, described how his work with boxing coach Barry had had a particularly important impact on his behaviour:

When I first come in [to the young offenders institution] when I had an argument with someone I'd be like 'Come on then ...' but now I just laugh at 'em ... Barry says to me every time I go in sparring that it's not a fight it's a boxin' match. So, you don't box like you're fightin'. Fightin' and boxin' are two different things ... Fightin' it's all aggression an tryin' to hit someone. Boxin' is more controlled. So, instead of hittin' someone really hard you can just give 'em a tap as controlled sparring.

Clearly, coaches, and more specifically, the behavioural climate that they created, had the potential to facilitate the building of trust with young people from which a sense of recognition might then develop. Such experiences were important because for many of the young people concerned trusting relationships with adults had been something that had previously alluded them. In turn, these coach-participant connections often went further, facilitating not only a sense of informal recognition but the foundations upon which a genuine sense of acceptance could be constructed.

### **Developing acceptance through sport engagement**

There was widespread belief amongst project delivery staff that sporting intervention promoted a greater sense of identity via the creation of friendships between participants and via the creation of strong personal and social bonds between

participants and their coaches. Advancing the findings of Rose et al. (2012), evidence from young people highlighted how club leaders and coaches enacted a series of behaviours—for example, making them feel valued; being mutually respectful and helpful; taking time to listen to them—to create a sense of acceptance. By way of illustration, South East-based boxers Majeed and Mehtin spoke of their coaches as “family”, while Jay indicated that the coaches at his club were “inspirational” and “actually help the kids round here in a way that people don’t really realise”.

Confirming the narratives which likened coaches to family members, Paul, the leader of a boxing club in the West Midlands, spoke of how, for some young people, the coach was almost a ‘substitute’ or ‘surrogate’ father-figure providing support and listening to the young person in a way that they were unaccustomed. He observed:

There’s a lot of respect between the boxer and the coach; more than any other sport really. For kids who are from deprived backgrounds and probably don’t have many good role models, especially at home, the respect they have for their coach is just incredible. We know kids who are hard as nails, but they will not talk back to their boxing coach ... there’s just something there, it’s inbred with the whole atmosphere of boxing really. Boxing coaches don’t give out praise a lot so, when they do, it’s really meaningful and the relationship becomes special and is often cherished for a long time.

As a result, project workers (such as Shaz) were revered for the things they had done for and with local youth populations. Indeed, it was this ability to care, to empathise, to create a sense of difference for young people that was most valued. According to

one participant, this was how Shaz had “made it big” in the eyes of those who he came into contact with:

He does a lot for us ... helping us an’ that ... telling us stuff ... He takes time out of his everyday life. He’ll stay an hour longer with us, when others leave, so he’s cool and we get on with him.

Such personal qualities (and the level of commitment spoken of here) provided a sense of reassurance for participants which, in turn, sustained their involvement in the intervention, heightening the potential for the project to have a positive impact. Other coaches and club leaders offered further insight into the approaches they deployed to sustain participation, to promote an increased sense of acceptance and, consequently, to provide an embarkation point for social assimilation and the potential for enhanced social inclusion. For Malcolm, identifying elements of cultural overlap (Ryen, 2011; Henderson and Thomas, 2013) was pivotal to his endeavours to initiate an accepting relationship. Having achieved notable success as a professional boxer himself, and having more recently received recognition for his services to youth, Malcolm was able to articulate how his life-world mirrored that of his mentees, and that this did not present an impediment to his achievements. He revealed:

What I want to show people is that ... you’ve been on the TV, [but] I haven’t changed ... that’s why they can speak to me. What I’m saying to young people is “If I can do it, you guys could do it”. I didn’t [sic] born in no special place, no special house, it was just I liked boxing. I was a young man who went to school, lived on the estate. If I achieved why can’t you guys achieve ...

In turn, Zaeem described how acceptance, and a burgeoning sense of social inclusion, was generated through the kinds of language and mannerisms used by himself and other project staff:

The language, for example... “What’s happening? You alright? Howya doing?”, give them a [fist] touch or something like that you’re straight away, automatically it changes the atmosphere ... That’s when they start trusting ... you’re ‘blessed’ – which means you’re ‘safe’, you’re ‘nice’, you ‘belong’, “We can relate to you” – and once you get that trust you can speak to them however you want, they’ll clearly understand you.

However, the potential for the two sport-based interventions to provide fertile ground to cultivate accepting relationships, and subsequently enhance social inclusion, was best illustrated by Graham, a custody project worker in the South West. His underlying philosophy diverged from that of traditional mentoring approaches where a structured programme of regular meetings takes place between mentor and mentee over a predetermined period of time (Coalter, 2013). Instead, the mentoring relationship implemented by Graham was mentee centred, and driven with the mentor responding (within certain parameters) to the specific needs (individual and social) of the mentee. Graham also provided ongoing, one-to-one support during the post-custody transition and, in many cases, far beyond; a consequence of the level of trust that he was able to establish with the young people whilst they were in residence at the youth offenders institution. The accounts of those who had developed accepting relationships through this system articulated how these interactions had contributed to their social assimilation by meeting societal expectations (Rose et al., 2012). As

example, Brett reflected on the way that Graham's one-to-one support had allowed him to see life in a completely different way since being released from prison:

I believe that anyone can do anything and that's through Graham an' that all mentoring me ... You don't meet people like this all the time who are committed to what they do ... And when you meet people like this it gives you so much inspiration ... To meet decent people who are 100% behind what they do, it's like 'gold dust' ...

Broadening the observations of Rose et al. (2012), it is clear that obtaining a sense of acceptance, either formally or informally, is critical to initiating the process of social inclusion for marginalised young people. Furthermore, these data suggest that participation in the two sport-based programmes offered the potential to present a critical connection with a recognisable and socially legitimate organisation (Whitaker, 2010) through which accepting relationships can be developed.

### **Sport, accepting relationships and social assimilation**

While determining enhanced levels of social inclusion is both conceptually complex and would require detailed longitudinal research, findings from both the Sporting Youth and Get Sport projects provided evidence to suggest that the young people who engaged in associated interventions had begun to assume life roles which cohered with mainstream discourses of social inclusion (Rose et al., 2012). Given that the context for the interventions detailed in this paper was working with young people at-risk of crime, it is perhaps not surprising that a number of participants revealed how engagement with sport had diverted them away from crime. Drawing parallels with

the moral underclass discourse as a marker of social exclusion (Levitas, 2005), several young people spoke of how project involvement had enabled them to develop a series of dispositions which aligned with mainstream ideas regarding morality. Gavin was one such individual who had responded positively to his sporting experiences and had pursued opportunities presented to him whilst in custody. In turn, everyday life had become much more focused and purposeful:

When I first come here I used to mouth off at staff and have fights an' all that. But on social time, if I'm off doing sport, I'm not getting into trouble ... You've got to behave to keep coming [to project sessions]. And so I kept coming and started to enjoy it. ... So, it taught me how to behave really; just started behaving...

Further narratives outlined how participation had enabled a sense of inclusion which allied with societal discourses relating to 'normal' or 'expected' transitions into adulthood (Rose et al., 2012). For example, one sports coach in the West Midlands spoke of a young man who had changed his demeanour and entered a committed, stable relationship since attending a boxing programme:

One of our lads was sent here 'cos he was always getting into fights, causing trouble, getting into trouble, and I hadn't seen him for ages and then Don [another coach] saw him after ages and the guy had gotten married. When you first saw him, you thought to yourself, this guy won't be able to get a girlfriend let alone get married ... He said the training side of things just made him grow up a little bit, it made him think differently about life.



Other indicators of participants aligning more readily with societal expectations related to some young people obtaining employment or gaining access to training programmes or apprenticeships opportunities. This was exemplified by the testimony of another boxing coach from the West Midlands who talked about the significant transformation he had witnessed in the life of one young man who had been on the verge of being in trouble with the Police but as a consequence of his involvement with boxing had changed his outlook on life and found work:

One lad came to us; he hadn't been in any trouble with the Police but there were worries that if he continued on the path he was on, he would end up in prison serving a custodial sentence. He came to our gym for about three months and he's now a taxi driver ... You'd never have thought he'd get his licence, but he pushed himself and focused because of the boxing. He said it made him think differently. It taught him how to set a goal for himself and how to work hard to get that goal. He put his training to good use and found himself a job, he was earning his own money and he was happy because he felt worthwhile.

Of particular note here is the claim that, by way of sporting engagement, the young person concerned had enhanced his self-worth, and discovered a greater sense of purpose in life, which, in turn, enabled him to internalise a growing sense of social inclusion (Rose et al., 2012). Moreover, and further developing the findings of Rose et al., interview data revealed that some young people had become more hopeful about their futures, an additional marker of social inclusion. Critically, the role assumed by coaches and mentors in laying the foundations for such hope, by offering

an informal structure of recognition and through the development of accepting relationships, was apparent. An illustration of this was provided by Brett who explained how his relationships with his mentor (Graham) had developed his sense of hope in terms of the journey from custodial to social life:

It [the mentoring relationship] opens up the doors for opportunities 'cos they're linked into people. Y'know, we'd be havin a chat and I'd say, "Oh, I wouldn't mind doing this one day", and they'd say, "Oh, hang on, I know someone who's involved in that". An' like, the opportunity that gives you and that safety thing as well. Y'know, when you work as a mentor with people you've got to feel comfortable with them an' like when you're inside [in custody] as well, a lot of people make a lot of promises that never come through. But when Graham's said, like, "We'll do this, do that", it all happens, y'know what I'm sayin ... And when you've got that confidence in people like that it just makes a difference ...

A further example of the sense of hope that was created through mentoring relationships was provided by Amber, project lead in the South East, who noted how coach and mentor, Zaeem, provided a sense of hope for the young people with whom he was involved. She explained:

They [the young people] know him, they knew him when he was younger, and they see him driving around in a nice car, wearing nice clothes because he's worked hard and gone down a different path. So something as simple as that – that they can aspire to somebody that they know has come from the same

background as them...so they know that it's not just really rich people or people from the other side of London that end up in those jobs...something like that is quite powerful.

## **Conclusion**

This paper contributes to a growing body of literature which has explored the instrumental use of sport as a mechanism to engage marginalised youth populations and enhance their sense of social inclusion. However, it differs from existing literature by virtue of the theoretical understanding of social inclusion that has been deployed. More specifically, we have diverged from commonly applied articulations of social inclusion, which accentuate a connection with paid employment (Lister, 2000; Cheng et al., 2006), to present social inclusion as a concept which is defined by informal recognition and acceptance by individuals and community organisations that are considered to be 'socially legitimate' (Whittaker, 2010; Rose et al., 2012). To this end, we have presented evidence to indicate that participation in the investigated sport projects has the potential to enhance a sense of social assimilation among marginalised youth, first, at an interpersonal level, by offering recognition and acceptance (Whittaker, 2010; Rose et al., 2012), and, second, at a societal level, where participants expressed how participation in sport had enabled social assimilation and offered a conduit to life roles which aligned with 'normal' or 'expected' societal discourses (Rose et al., 2012).

However, it is worth re-iterating that such conclusions should not be taken to infer that participation in sport is in some way a panacea for addressing social concerns (Coakley, 2011; Haudenhuyse et al., 2012; Coalter, 2013; Parker et al., 2014). On the

contrary, we suggest that certain contextual conditions related to sport-based interventions must be visible in order to promote the potential of sport to contribute to understandings of social assimilation and inclusion. As our findings demonstrate, uppermost within these conditions is the necessity for marginalised young people to generate trusting relationships with key personnel associated with the intervention in question. We have demonstrated how positive interpersonal relationships can enhance the sporting and wider personal experiences of young people. It is clear, for example, that some of the coach/participant scenarios described had developed over time into mentor/mentee relationships, where social development had become as (if not more) important than physical development and sporting prowess. As such, these findings reveal how coaches operated as agents of change who were “adept at oscillating between the [sporting] task at hand in a given setting and the broader world beyond it” (Wacquant, 2005, 460).

Needless to say, the philosophy and practices of club leaders and coaches was critical to the facilitation of trusting relationships. The underlying philosophy being put forward here differs greatly from that of traditional mentoring where the mentor is often someone who is far removed from the life experiences of the mentee (see Coalter, 2013, 2015). In contrast, the approach described in this paper encourages the establishment of trust, recognition and self-worth (Cheng et al., 2006; Whittaker, 2010) on the part of the mentee via an altogether more tangible peer-mentoring relationship where the regularity, frequency and consistency of contact are paramount. Moreover, trust was established and reinforced via similar life experiences which mentor and mentee shared (Henderson and Thomas, 2013), and where inspiration and encouragement was derived from the fact that the mentor in question had managed

(and chosen) to exchange those experiences for more positive and productive lifestyle choices.

It has been argued elsewhere that adopting such a philosophy presents significant practical challenges within a policy landscape which predicates the sustainability and survival of sports-based interventions upon funding regimes which prioritise short-term impacts and the attainment of pre-agreed numerical indicators (Green, 2007; Spaaij et al., 2013). However, invoking Coakley (2002, 24), the findings of this paper remind us that it is “only when the meaning and experience of sport participation connects young people with others in supportive and positive ways” that the utility of sport can be observed as a means to social inclusion.

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