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Sport in a Youth Prison: Male Young Offenders' Experiences of a Sporting Intervention

Andrew Parker, Rosie Meek and Gwen Lewis

Abstract:

The numbers of children under the age of 18 being incarcerated in England and Wales has decreased of late, with official figures indicating that the current population of just over 1500 has halved over the last decade[1]. But levels of reoffending among children released from prison remain the highest, with three out of four young people being reconvicted within one year of release from juvenile custody. Despite the overwhelming majority of community-based sports projects targeting children and young people, when it comes to incarcerated populations, sporting initiatives are less prevalent. Where sport has become well established as a useful social cohesion/inclusion strategy in community settings, some of these approaches have been translated into custodial settings. Resulting research has often proclaimed sporting pursuits as a modern-day panacea in terms of their social, psychological and emotional benefits, yet few studies have explored the nuances of sports-based interventions within secure settings. This paper comprises a small-scale, qualitative study of one such intervention in a Young Offender Institution (YOI) in the South of England. Placing respondent accounts at the centre of the analysis, the paper sheds light on the practicalities of programme delivery by uncovering the motivating factors behind participant engagement whilst exploring broader notions of personal development. The paper concludes by highlighting that sport/physical activity can confer significant psychosocial benefits and promote the rehabilitation of young people leaving custody, particularly when integrated into wider programmes of support and provision.

Keywords: Sport, physical activity, young offenders, prison, qualitative research,

[1] Figures published by the Youth Justice Board state that there were 1,523 young people aged 18 and under in the secure estate at the end of the year 2012, compared to 3,037 in November of 2008 (Youth Justice Board, 2013).

Introduction

There are currently 1,643 (Ministry of Justice, 2012a) children serving prison sentences in England Wales and reoffending rates among young people sentenced to custody remain the highest of all prisoner populations, with most recent figures indicating that 71% of juveniles (aged under 18) released from custody reoffend within one year (Ministry of Justice, 2012b). Youth offending has become an issue of serious concern for practitioners, politicians and policy makers alike, and strategies to curb youth imprisonment and reduce re-offending have adopted a range of approaches, including structuring interventions around mentoring, employment training packages, and sport and leisure opportunities. Despite a growing policy impetus towards the use of sport for targeting youth crime and anti-social behaviour (Bloyce and Smith, 2010) few sports based interventions, particularly for the youngest prisoners in the secure estate, have been evaluated. The present small scale, qualitative study evaluates a multimodal sports based intervention delivered to juveniles detained in an English prison catering for in the region of 400 15 to 18 year-old males.

Community Sports Based Youth Offending Initiatives

Since the 1960s, political rhetoric and policy in the UK and abroad has increasingly promoted sport as a suitable intervention and rehabilitation tool for tacking youth delinquency (Conservative Party 2010; Labour Party, 1997; TNS, 2011) despite there being little definitive evidence to support the assumption that sport is effective in reducing youth crime (Coakley, 1998; Coalter, 2009; Robins, 1990). Academic research in community settings which focuses on the re-engagement of marginalised young people through sport has yielded inconclusive results with regard to reducing offending. Early American sports initiatives such as the *Midnight Basketball* programme during the 1990s claimed to reduce crime by up to 30% (Farrell, Johnson, Snapp, Pumphrey and Freeman, 1996; Hawkins, 1998) and in the UK, a sports counselling intervention with 16-25 year olds which sought to increase independent participation successfully reduced reoffending over two years among the 25 participants who completed at least eight weeks of the programme, compared to matched controls (Nicholls and Taylor, 1996). Similarly, other British multimodal community sports based programmes (Robbins, 1990; Tsuchiya, 1996) have reported reductions in reoffending.

That said such evaluations are based on small samples and cannot distinguish the unique contribution of sport in reducing reoffending in multimodal interventions. Furthermore,

conflicting results according to different indices of measurement within interventions - as well as differences across different programmes - makes drawing conclusions difficult. For example, Berry, Little, Axford and Cusick (2009) found no difference between intervention and control groups on self-reported offending behaviour or substance use, but a modest significant improvement in official arrest and conviction rates among the intervention group compared to controls. Concerns regarding methodological rigour and statistical reliability, as well as benefits gained versus programme costs, have resulted in some commentators questioning the likely impact of such schemes on recidivism (Smith and Waddington, 2004).

In spite of this, it has been demonstrated that sport is successful in addressing proximal risk factors for youth crime (Hodge, 2009), for example in poor social and interpersonal skills (Coalter, 2005; Ravizza and Motonak, 2011), negative peer groups, poor use of leisure time (Nichols, 1997; Schafer, 1969) and psychological wellbeing (Coalter, 2005; Collins, 2009; Ekeland, Heian and Hagn, 2005; West and Crompton, 2001). Collectively, such research findings clearly highlight the extent to which both the personal and social aspects of sport can positively impactdisaffected young people by promoting self-esteem and social skills. In particular, physical activity and sport can be an effective means through which to engage young people in activities that they dislike, or would typically be reluctant to participate in through conventional means, such as classroom based educational (Sharpe, Schagen and Scott, 2004) or rehabilitative work (Lewis and Meek, 2012a; Nicholls, 2007).

Sport and Young People in Custody

In contrast to community initiatives, the deployment of sport with young people within the custodial context has received little attention. However, juveniles (under 18 years old) and young adult offenders (18-21 years old) have the highest rates of participation in physical activity of any incarcerated population in England and Wales (Lewis and Meek, 2012b). In the case of the former, this is, at least in part, attributable to Physical Education being a compulsory element of the curriculum outlined in the *National Specification for Learning and Skills* (Youth Justice Board, 2002) which ensures equitable educational provision for those of school age in custody as in the community. Furthermore, policy guiding Physical Education in custody for juveniles stipulates that provision must offer accredited qualifications, promote constructive use of leisure time and address offending behaviour (HM Prison Service, 2004; Ministry of Justice, 2012c), whereas such elements are discretionary with regard to provision for adults (Ministry of Justice, 2011). In terms of recreational physical activity, surveys of juveniles

coordinated by the Inspectorate of Prisons have revealed that the number of young people attending gym sessions at least five times per week and exercising outside everyday has increased consistently in recent years (Cripps, 2010; Tye, 2009). However, rates of participation are highly variable and remain inconsistent across prisons holding young people (Lewis and Meek, 2012b). For example, in six out of the 18 institutions (and of the 1,159 respondents) surveyed by Parke (2009), fewer than one in ten young men said that they were allowed to take daily exercise, although 77% reported that they visited the gym at least once per week. Enthusiasm for sport among young prisoners therefore is high, and focusing on such alternative, non-offending, activities, alongside employment pathways, has been consistently cited by this population as one of the key factors that would help them to stop offending (Cripps, 2010; Summerfield, 2011; Tye, 2009).

Despite a plethora of evidence documenting the benefits of sport for young people (Busseri, 2010; Ekeland *et al*., 2005; Kremner, Trew, and Ogle, 1997; Maher *et al*., 2012), a growing evidence base regarding gains associated with sport and physical exercise for incarcerated populations (Buckaloo, Krug, and Nelson, 2009; Elger, 2009; Martos-Garcia, Devis-Devis and Sparkes, 2009a; Meek and Lewis, 2012; Prison Phoenix Trust, 2011; Verdot, Champely, Clement and Massarelli, 2010) and a recognised potential for sport to be utilised as a vehicle for promoting rehabilitation among young offenders (Lewis and Meek, 2012a; Nicholls, 1997), only a handful of evaluative studies have addressed the role of sport for young people in prison and these have predominantly concerned young adult offenders. A recent evaluation of an intensive 12 week football and rugby initiative for 18-21 year olds, which combined physical activity with vocational qualifications in custody as well as 'through the gate' support, indicated significant improvements in established measures of conflict resolution, aggression, impulsivity and attitudes towards offending (see Meek, 2012; Meek and Lewis, in press). Positive changes on psychometric measures were also mirrored with qualitative reports of improvement in physical health, coping with stress and anxiety, social skills and focused resettlement plans. Similar findings have been reported by Dubberley (2010) in relation to participation in the Duke of Edinburgh Award (a programme encompassing volunteering, physical activity, the development of life skills and expedition) by 14 to 21 year olds in the secure estate in England and Wales.

Despite the fact that a number of previous studies have emphasised the benefits which sport and physical activity might confer on young people in custody evidence relating to the impact

of sporting interventions delivered to young adult offenders (18 – 21 years old) in custody on subsequent offending, is equivocal. Preliminary findings from Meek (2012) indicate reduced reoffending among intervention participants in comparison to the institutional average. Similarly, Farrington *et al.* (2002) identified a reduction of approximately 10% in reoffending after one year among young offenders who participated in an intensive programme incorporating physical activity with vocational training and work placements in comparison to controls, although it should be noted that this reduction was largely attributed to the non-sporting element of the programme. However, a second military focused intervention with a significant physical activity component evaluated by Farrington *et al.* (2002) did not yield reduced rates of reoffending after one year (in comparison to controls), this despite significant improvements among the intervention group in physical health and psychological well-being. Hence, whilst sport alone should not be seen as a panacea to youth crime, it is widely recognised as a valuable means by which to provide an initial point of engagement and subsequent psychosocial benefit for those within custodial settings.

Of course, successfully engaging young people in sporting activities in custody requires careful programme planning and delivery. In one of the few studies to focus specifically on juveniles, Andrews and Andrews' (2003) ethnographic evaluation of the role of organised sporting activities on 20 young people aged between 10 and 17 in a secure unit supported the use of sporting activities which de-emphasise regulations and winning, permit choice, foster self-esteem and allow for positive feedback. Indeed, Trulson (1986) demonstrated how, while participation in traditional Tae Kwando Do with a psychological and philosophical emphasis decreased aggression among juvenile delinquents, participation in modern Tae Kwando Do with a purely physical emphasis actually increased delinquent and aggressive tendencies. Moreover, while practitioners, politicians and academics have promoted sport with young offenders for educational and rehabilitative purposes, prisoners themselves rarely express such motivations for engaging in physical activity in custody (Frey and Delaney, 1996; Martos-Garcia *et al*., 2009a; Martos-Garcia, Devis-Devis and Sparkes, 2009b). Consequently, it is clearly important to explore participant perceptions of sporting intervention in custody in order to assess their potential to impact upon the decisions that young people make in terms of their attitudes and approaches to life within and beyond custody. The aims of the current study were therefore to explore the experiences of young people in prison in terms of their motivations to

participate in a sports-based resettlement intervention, and the perceived impact this had upon them both socially and psychologically and and in terms of their overall rehabilitation.

Context and Method

In order to explore young people's perceptions and experiences of a prison-based sporting intervention, we present empirical data derived from research carried out during the spring (January-April) of 2012 at a Young Offender Institution located in the South of England which caters for up to 400 male juveniles (aged 15-18) at any one time. The prison claims to provide a high quality learning environment with all residents receiving at least 27 hours of structured education per week (including mathematics, English, IT, music, art, physical education and life skills), which is supplemented with various resettlement and employability programmes.

The study utilised those methods of enquiry traditionally associated with qualitative research (i.e. participant/observation, semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis) in order to explore respondent experiences of the sports based intervention. A fieldwork journal was used to record observational events whilst observations and interviews were carried out during educational activities either in classroom or physical education settings, i.e. in and around the prison's gym and sports hall. Alongside interviews with residents, discussions also took place with mentors, case workers and Physical Education staff.[2]

The Sports Programme

The programme was structured around a series of sports based 'academies' each 12 weeks in duration and designed around a specific sporting activity (football, boxing, rugby or cricket). Each academy consisted of six classroom sessions per week (each session of 1.5 hours duration) where participants studied the 'theoretical' aspects of sport, supplemented with six 'practical' sessions per week (also 1.5 hours in duration) where young people participated in their chosen sporting activity. Wrapped around the theoretical and practical sessions was a comprehensive multi-agency individual support package delivered in partnership with

[2] Prior to the onset of the study, ethical approval was gained from the NHS Research Ethics Committee (REC) for Wales, the prison Senior Management Team, and the University of Gloucestershire Research Ethics Sub-Committee (RESC).

community and voluntary sector agencies and statutory organisations. To this end, academies included sports coaching, sport education qualifications (such as Sports Leaders awards), life-skills mentoring, community placements, community/industry-related guest events, and pre-release resettlement support providing assistance to young people in their negotiations with case workers, Youth Offending Teams (YOTs), Parole and Review Boards and in relation to issues surrounding family re-engagement. Depending on length of prison sentence, participants could complete as many different academy programmes (and associated qualifications) as they wished. On enrolment participants in the present study demonstrated a range of sporting interests and thus the intervention was designated as a 'multi-sports' initiative.

Participant Sample

Academies were advertised and promoted around the prison and young people were able to express an interest in taking part through the submission of an initial referral form. These expressions of interest/applications were subsequently processed by the Physical Education (PE) Department and screened by the prison's Education and Security staff in order to ascertain the suitability of applicants for academy involvement. In order to be accepted (and remain) as a sports academy participant, residents were required to maintain positive behavioural standards across the institution, i.e. in their relationships with other residents and their daily interactions with prison staff. Changes to this behavioural profile could lead to individuals being denied further access to sports academy programmes and/or to the forfeiture of privileges in relation to sport/physical activity sessions.

The respondent sample comprised 12 young men aged between 15 and 17 years. At the time of interview, ten were currently serving prison sentences, and two had been released on Licence in the previous 12 months to serve the remainder of their sentence under supervision in the community. Sentence lengths ranged from 10 months to 4.5 years, with most falling between 18-24 months. Convictions were predominantly related to theft, violence and drug offences. A number of the young men were considered 'at risk' either as a consequence of a lack of parental support or because of their previous offences, and five were known to be affiliated with gangs. Individual profiles indicated that the majority had few or no formal educational qualifications. Interviews with respondents were recorded and transcribed in full. Subsequent data analysis revealed a series of key themes relating to the way in which respondents perceived the benefits

of their sporting involvement during their incarceration. In the present paper we focus on two of these, specifically 'personal motivations for sport' and 'sport and social skills'.

Personal Motivations for Sport

As is the case within wider social spheres, sport does not appeal to everyone in custody, and neither are all custodial settings in a position to facilitate a wide range of sporting opportunities (Lewis and Meek, 2012b). However, by offering a structured and varied programme of physical activity, the sports academy programmes at the prison succeded in attracting not only young men who had an existing interest in (and passion for) sport, but also those who had little, if any, previous sporting exposure, as Majid[3] pointed out during interview:

> Q: *So, when you came here* [the prison] *were you a sports person anyway ... like at school?*
>
> Majid: *Definitely not. When I was in school an' that I was quite lazy. But ever since I've come in here I've been doing lots of sport an' stuff. It gives me a real buzz, running about an' that. An', y' know, sports really push you to the limit an I really enjoy that ... Boxing is the main thing that made me do it ... instead of just doin' weights ... 'cos they all* [other residents] *wanna do weights and just get big, but it's about stayin' fit on the inside; your lungs an everything. That's what I really wanna do as well. All that running and training. It's just pushin' me to the limit.*

Neither had the post-school experience been particularly productive for Majid. During his time in prison, however, sport had come to provide a means by which he could focus his thoughts and energies and start to think about life in an altogether more positive way (see also: Andrews and Andrews, 2003; Dubberley, 2010; Ozano, 2008)

> *It* [sport] *takes my mind off other things, y'know, stress an stuff, family problems, stuff that goes on in the world. It just takes my mind off it. 'Cos it's like a motivation for me, y'know. Before I couldn't*

[3] Pseudonyms are used throughout.

think about anything; fuck school, fuck education, I can't be arsed with any of it, y'know ... people aren't teaching me stuff that I'm gonna need in the future. But ever since I've come in here I've been doing my studies, been doing my boxing as well ... Instead of smoking drugs I do boxing and that makes me think more about my future to be honest.

Q: *So, do you think that you get the buzz out of boxing that you used to get out of smoking?*

Majid: *Yeah. Y'see, when you smoke weed you get the buzz at the time ... but in the morning you wake up an it's just like the headache an like ... if you don't smoke a spliff then you're just gonna constantly keep having this headache. But when I'm doing boxing it helps to release endorphins which keeps me happy all the time but then afterwards I feel healthy about myself y'know. So, in the mornings I jump out of bed and I get on with the day. But before I'd get up and I was like: 'Fuck it, I'll just go back to sleep'.*

Evident amongst Majid's comments are vestiges of previous research findings concerning the way in which prison may help young people to overcome the kinds of motivational barriers to physical activity which are common among substance misusers (Plugge, Neale, Davies, Foster and Wright, 2011), and consequently to experience the psychological benefits of sporting involvement, such as release from anxiety or stress (Meek and Lewis, in press; Verdot *et al*., 2010). Enagegment in the programme appeared to allow Majid to envisage himself with an altervative pro-social future, thus motivating him to engage in a range of activities. The scope for sport to instil postive alternative means for future self definition is especially important for young people considering a lack of positive future goals has been associated with a rnage of negative outcomes (Newberry and Duncan, 2001; Oyserman and Markus, 1990).

For other participants too, sport was something which had passed them by during their days in school (and in the community) and only on entering prison had it become an activity with which they had chosen to engage. There were various reasons and motives in play here: Sport often serves to break the monotony of prison regimes and to alleviate boredom (Frey and

Delaney, 1996; Martos-Garcia *et al*., 2009a; Martos-Garcia *et al*, 2009b; Plugge *et al*., 2011), which, in itself, is valuable considering the reported links between boredom, lonliness, depression, distractability and delinquency (Coalter, Allison and Taylor, 2000; Hallsworth and Young, 2004; Newberry and Duncan, 2000; Willmott, 1966). Indeed, some chose to partake in sport simply because they saw it as '*better than other lessons*' but '*looked forward to it anyway'*. Despite the simplicity of such motivations, engagement in pro-social activities such as sport has been correlated with low levels of anti-social behaviour (Duncan, Duncan, Strycker and Chaumeton, 2002) and asborbing young people's time in activities they are intreseted in within custody is likely to have a postive effect on the wider prison environment. Dean's (like Majid's) motivations similarly demonstrate how sport can have a wider impact in custody. For him it provided an avenue for emotional release, *'... if you're angry and you go to the gym, hit the weights, do a bit of boxing ...* [it] *takes your mind off certain things*'. Dean was conscious of the broader benefits of doing '*every qualification that you can ... while you're in prison*'. Either way, and for whatever reason, through the intergration of educational and resettlement work with community partners, sport was presented as a possible point of engagement for academy members and one through which a whole host of further life skills and learning opportunities had opened up for them (see also Sandford, Duncombe and Armour, 2008)

Indeed, for some, sport had provided not only a way of re-directing their thoughts and energies but, for the first time in their lives, a sense of achievement – a highly valued opportunity among young offenders (Dubberley, 2010; Taylor, Crow, Irvine and Nichols, 1999). In Gavin's case his relationship with the academy programme had played out far beyond his initial intentions or expectations. Gavin had been introduced to sport prior to entering the prison system, albeit as a consequence of previous exposure to the Courts, but once in prison the academies had served as an opportunity for re-engagement:

> Q: *So, what made you get interested in sport in here* [prison]*?*
>
> Gavin: *I'd been here a couple of weeks and the Gym lads* [PE Department staff] *said 'Do you wanna play football?' and I said I'd give it a go... And then they said 'Do you wanna have a go on the* [football] *team?', and so they got me on the team. And then every*

> *other sport they said 'Do you wanna have a go at this, do you wanna have a go at that?' and so I had a go.*
>
> Q: *And you're keen on the boxing. How did that happen?"*
>
> Gavin: *Well, when I was out* [prior to prison] *I got arrested for ABH* [Actual Bodily Harm] *and they put me on a Community Order. And part of that was that I went boxing at a gym round my area and I went there for about four months and I got into it. And then I came here and found out that they do a boxing club here, so I joined in ...*

It is possible that sport offered an alternative means of excitement and risk taking for Gavin (Lyng, 1993; Katz, 1988). However, his engagement with sport as a consequence of his experiences within the criminal justice system bears testament to the way in which such programmes can (and do) act as useful avenues of intervention (see Nichols and Taylor, 1996; Nichols, 2007). Gavin's narrative serves also to highlight the importance of encouragment and positive reinforcement from enthusiastic project staff in engaging diasafectioned youth in such interventions (Andrews and Andrews, 2007; Morris, Sallybanks, Willis, and Makkai, 2003).

Like most other initiatives within the prison, the sports academies operated in line with a clear punishment/reward ethos: if young men were deemed suitable (by the relevant internal authorities) to take part in one of the sports academies, then they were eligible for initial recruitment. If their behaviour (both on the Academy and within the prison itself) remained positive during the designated 12-week period then they were allowed stay on the programme. If, as a consequence of engagement, their general behaviour demonstrated significant improvement, then more opportunities within the Academy structure opened up to them including progression to Gym Orderly, Assistant or Mentor and, ultimately, work placements in the community.[4] As such, and consitent with previous findings (Martos Garcia *et al*, 2009b; Meek and Lewis, in press), sport served as an incentive for good behaviour, thus promoting social control within the prison:

[4] Work placement opportunities are available to those prisoners eligible for Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL), applications for which are considered on a case by case basis.

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

So successful had the process of sporting re-engagement been for Gavin that he had progressed through the various levels, ranks and stages of the Academy to earn himself a position as a Gym Orderly, working alongside full time staff in the prison's Physical Education Department. In turn, his everyday life inside prison had become much more focused and purposeful:

> Gavin: "*There's two* [Gym] *Orderlies ... and we take it in turns; one lesson one person refs the football while the other's training. So, we just take it in turns really and help each other out ... After the lessons people go back to the wings and are banged up in their cells for half an hour but because I'm here* [in the Gym] *I've got the option to stay over here and do a bit of cleaning an' that, or do a quick training session.*

Engagement in sport has consitently been found to improve self esteem and confidence among young people (see Ekeland *et al.*, 2005 for a meta-analysis), although not always to a greater exent than other acitivites – for example education (Munson, 1988). But for young people in custody who have historically had poor educational experinces and are resistant to enaging in such activites sport offers a useful means to promote self esteem, and for Gavin this was certainly the case:

> Gavin: *You can see a difference as well. Like, I'm much fitter ... more confident with people, more confident when I play the sport. 'Cos when I first come in I'd get the ball and just pass it to someone else but now I get the ball and take people on an' that ..,*

Sabo (2001) suggests that developing a healthy body in a custodial environment which severs as a continuous reminder of personal failure can be a means to rebuild self esteem. Gavin's

testimony suggests that it was both the physical and social development he experienced as a result of taking part in sport that helped to foster his self-efficacy, improve his confidence and encourage him to be more proactive in his overall approach. It has previously been proposed that sport can enhance an individual's locus of control and therefore improve feelings of self-efficacy which are then translated to other spheres of life (Nichols, 2007). In Gavin's case this appeared to be the case,and just as his involvement in sport had resulted in benefits for him in terms of everyday lifestyle and self perception, so too had it offered him a sense of individual progress and development, which had knock-on effects in term of his relationships not only within the prison but with his family too:

> Gavin: *Yeah* ... [before] *I came in I used to smoke weed an' that and I never used to talk to no one really. But I started to do sport an' you get to know people an' you get more confident talking to them an' that ... I talk to the family, I talk to the 'missus'* [girlfriend] *an' that. Sport's definitely kept me out of trouble while I've been in prison ...*

What Gavin provides here is clear evidence of the kind of personal benefits which academic commentators have, for some time, associated with sporting engagement (see Coalter, 2004; Collins, 2009; Muncie, 2009). Yet, a further benefit of Gavin's position as Gym Orderly was that he was able to come into contact with (and get to know) a range of other residents with whom, under normal circumstances, he would not have had the opportunity to interact. For Gavin sport both enhanced his confidence and provided him with a means to meet new people which in turn had an impact upon his existing personal relationships. This demonstrates how sport might act as means by which young poeople can develop socially as well as personally, a scenario common to a number of respondents .

Sport and Social Skills

For some years politicians, social commentators and academics alike have proclaimed the social benefits of sport: leadership, teamwork and self-sacrifice are words and concepts which are commonly used in association with sporting endeavour (Collins, 2009). What then of sport in custody? In a world where social interaction is often constrained by personal tensions and hierachies,how might sport oil the wheels of relationship building?

It would be fair to say that for many Academy members custody had been an isolating experience and a place where '*keeping your head down*' and '*staying out of trouble*' was their main objective. Despite all of this, sport had come to be seen by participants as a way that relational interaction might be promoted and through which their own social skills might develop, as both Dean and Majid described:

> Q: *Do you think sport helps your relationships with other people*?
>
> Dean: *Yeah, it's like, in prison you meet different people in the gym sessions an' that. You're in there doin' a bit of 'shoulders' an' they're given you hints on how to get bigger an' that. An' while you're workin' out you're talkin' with them ...*
>
> Q: *And these are people that you don't know*?
>
> Dean: *Yeah, you see them round the prison but you don't really talk to them. But when you see them in the gym an' stuff and they're doin' the same work-out as you're doin', then you get to talk to them. You just start communicating with them, y'know what I'm sayin' ...*

Engagment in sport while in custody apppears to offer a context in which a shared interest can promote a level of communication which would not usually take place. Participation in the Academies allowed for new friendships to be fostered and, as found in other environments characterised by marked social divisons and interpersonal tensions (Ravizza, 2011; Ravizza and Motonak, 2011), sport served to break down barriers between groups and challenge existing stereotypes:

> Majid: *It helps you gain friends as well. You get to meet new people from other areas* [of the prison] *an' everything. You think that everyone's from London and are just gangsters an' everything, but it's not like that ... When you get to know them they're not actually people that are like that, they're totally different.*

Gavin talked of similar experiences with regards to the way in which, as a consequence of his Gym Orderly role, he had begun to build relationships with people who he came into regular contact with: '*you get people from different* [accommodation] *blocks mixing together so when they come in* [to the Gym] ... *I do their* [physical] *assessments, so you meet people everyday really*'. Having attended a number of sports academies during his time in custody, Brett (now living in the community, under licenced supervision) reflected on how rugby, in particular, had brought home to him the ways in which sport has the potential to develop social relationships and how important this kind of developmental process is:

> *From looking at* [the] *rugby academy and from the way that people didn't like each other* [at first] ... *when it came to* [playing] *a match, when one of those guys went down, the other one was there to support him ... It's like ... competition, competitiveness; get us all out on the rugby field, smash your way through 15 blokes, y'know, but have fun and pass the ball round. Matey boy gets tackled, three of us run in, get everyone off him, look after him, y'know, protect him, while someone gets the ball out again. Scrums as well, like ... cos you have to communicate with each other, hold it tight, squeeze and press together, y'know ...*

Significantly, Brett described how introducing competion actually promoted communication and bonding between him and his peers, contary to the prevaling view that competitive sporting environments should be avoided when enaging young offenders (Andrews and Andrews, 2007; Kohn, 1986; Slater and Tiggemann, 2011):

> Brett: *If you're not communicating with your teammates you're gonna end up paying for it. You're gonna end up losing the ball for the team and you don't wanna be the odd one out ... If you're the only one who's not committing to the team you'll soon be noticed, y'know what I mean, you won't get passed the ball or anythin'. I mean, who's gonna give the ball to someone who's not gonna listen to anyone ...*

This serves to demonstrate how engagement in team sports can help young people in custody develop their social skills in terms of listening, collaborating and working together. Indeed, for

Brett, the transformations which had taken place during the 12 weeks of the rugby academy which he had attended had been something that he would never have imagined beforehand:

> *I think if someone could have videoed at the end of the rugby academy that team that we had ... 'cos there was a lot of conflicts in the team between people at first verging on fighting an' that comin' from the wings* [prison accommodation] *and outside* [in the community] *and previous stuff an' that. But we all come together as a team. And we were doin' stuff in the classroom and on the pitch ...* [and] *after a few weeks ... the team gelled so well* [that] *we never lost ... Two people that were arguing at the start of it, they might have an argument in the classroom, but as soon as we got out on the pitch they'd support each other on the field ... Y'know, you never used to speak to each other on the wings but now it* [was] *different.*

Testimonies of this nature bear witness to the potential benefits of sporting involvement for those in custody and reinforce the findings of previous research which has attested to the development of mutual respect among offenders and, indeed, between offenders and the professional staff with whom they interact (Johnsen, 2001; Meek and Lewis, in press). In turn, they provide exemplary narratives of the functional role of sport; individual catharsis, social cohesion, character formation, inclusive practice - sport transforming people's lives, for the better, for the social good. Undoubtedly the practical sporting activities of the initiative proved beneficial to those taking part, so much so that they could recognise these personal and social transformations taking shape. What Brett was also clear about was the way in which that transition had been facilitated by the various organisations that were in partnership with the academy programme and the importance of the wide ranging networks, connections and avenues of referral which staff had at their disposal.

Indeed, for the majority of the young people concerned, there was a feeling that the work that they did within the Academy context - did not simply represent a series of false hopes and hollow promises but rather a sense of possibility and opportunity; a way out of the crime-custody cycle (see also Dubberley, 2010; Ozano, 2008). Uptake of sport for young people can represent a sigificant point of change (Kehily, 2007), which in custody can be an especially important way of allowing individuals to (re)negotiate a postiive identity (Piot, 2008).. For

Majid this meant a change in attitude towards his lifestyle and towards his future in which he saw himself continuing his involvement in sport:

> Majid: *Well, hopefully* [case worker] *is going to help me join a project called 'Fight for Change'. I'll join up with that ... And I'm thankful to* [case worker] *for trying to help me get into that.*

What such sentiments indicate is the kind of benefits on offer when interventions and initiatives operate within a co-ordinated network of joined-up thinking, hence the ability of Majid to progress from the sports academy within the prison to a community-based project on release. Indeed ongoing post intervention support has been identified as a key element of successful sport based interventions for young people in community settings (Morris *et al*., 2003; Nicholls and Taylor 1996; Taylor *et al*., 1999). For Majid and others, part of the role of the community organisation partnership was to make these connections; to hand-over young people to wider (trusted) partners and support agencies, and to ensure that the specific needs and interests of those concerned were appropriately and adequately met during the transition from custody to community. Amidst such tailored 'through-the-gate' provision there was at least the possibility that sporting hope would become an everyday reality on the outside.

Conclusions

> *Freedom man, I can't wait. Freedom ... do my Licence ... and then go back to college ... I'm looking to work with my Dad in the future, get my own business. Everyone deserves a '2nd Chance', init. Y've got to learn from your mistakes*. (Dean)

Extending the findings of previous research with young adults, the narratives of the academy participants highlight the potential for sporting activity to be utilised as a means of engaging the youngest and amongst the most vulnerable people in custodial settings in wider rehabilitative endevours. The respondent experiences captured here serve to demonstrate how taking part in sport within such settings has physical, social and psychological benefits which can positively impact participants and the wider prison environment. Futhermore, these findings highlight how personal devleopment through sport in terms of fostering self esteem and the development of social skills can help young people re-envisage a more positve future, thus promoting desistance from subsequent offending.

Facilitaing such development in the current intervention was supported by integrated multi-agency support. A common criticism of the British Criminal Justice System is that despite the provision of structured programmes of support within custody and the provision of multi-agency assistance within the community, there remains insufficient integration of the two. Amidst a whole raft of new responsibilities (and from a position of vulnerability and risk), too often, on release from prison, young people find themselves without the personal or social skills to engage with the agencies which are designed to support them. For these young people the easiest way to survive may be to return to the life that they know best and around which they feel most secure, which is often characterised by offending. Interventions such as the one presented here , which intergrate holistic through-the-gate restetlement work with sport and which can capture the interest of some difficult to enage young people, can allow young people to develop a sense of confidence and belief in themselves, trust in others, and hope for the future. At a practical level sport can serve as a platform to empower young people to think positively about life, to develop coherent self-advocacy, to interact with multi-agency support and, where appropriate, to re-establish familial connections and relationships. All of which is designed to enable participants to (re)gain a sense of active citizenship, to access a better quality of life, and to give 'voice' to those who, for one reason or another, may have never before been heard. With such skills and attributes in place, young people are better equipped to articulate their needs which, in turn, increases their chances of receiving appropriate help and support to make the transition back into society.

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