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## **Enhancing social mobility within marginalised youth: the accumulation of positive psychological capital through engagement with community sports clubs.**

### **Abstract**

Recent government policy in the United Kingdom has strongly encouraged youth populations to acquire increased stocks of human and social capital in order to enhance their social mobility prospects. While much of this policy speaks to mainstream educational institutions to facilitate capital accumulation, other community-based organisations, such as sports clubs, have been heralded as alternative sites where such capital could be acquired. However, recent academic literature has advocated that the acquisition of positive psychological capital—and its key components of self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience—is equally necessary to actualising social mobility. Nevertheless, few studies have explored how community-based organisations may facilitate this form of capital. Consequently, and by drawing upon interview data collected from young participants (all male) and sports club coaches who engaged with a sport-based project delivered in London (UK), this article will provide insight into two main concerns. First, the article will highlight how informal educational opportunities which are offered within community-based (sport) organisations may enable the acquisition and development of positive psychological capital, and second, offer tentative insights into the conditions that are required within a sports-based intervention to enhance the elements of positive psychological capital.

**Key words:** sport, education, positive psychological capital, social mobility, youth.

### **Introduction**

Recent policy rhetoric within many Western welfare states has amplified the need for young people, irrespective of social background, to acquire a range of resources—or capital—which will equip them for positive social change. For marginalised youth populations, the acquisition of capital becomes more acute, and is often cited as a ‘meal-ticket’ to a more prosperous future or as a building block that will facilitate social mobility (Atkinson 2015; Kelly 2011). Many of the strategies that have been employed to enable capital to be acquired by young people are contained within the formal education curriculum (Strathdee 2013). However, increasingly, community-based organisations are being utilised as potential collaborators in engaging young people from within marginalised groups to achieve similar ends (Morgan and Bush 2016; Cooper 2009). Of these organisations, sport clubs have been noted as providing a laudable mechanism through which

forms of capital can be acquired, to label sport as a means for social and personal change (Coakley 2015; Dacombe 2013).

Existing research which has examined the relationship between participation in sport and the accumulation of capital has largely focussed its attention upon the acquisition of human and social capital (Souto-Otero 2016; Sherry et al. 2015; Kelly 2011; Nicholson and Hoye 2008; Coalter 2007). In the case of human capital, this has involved studies to explore how participation in sport has enabled the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes which may benefit economic potential (Kelly 2011; Becker 2006; Baptiste 2001). In contrast, studies which have explored correspondences between sport and social capital have typically referred to how such participation has broadened social networks to enable individuals or groups to obtain certain types of social advantage (Coalter 2007)<sup>1</sup>.

However, other scholars (e.g. Brown et al. 2011; Phillips 2010) have noted how social mobility may be achieved through the acquisition of personal qualities (and capital) beyond the knowledge and competencies gained through education, training, or an individual's social network. Of these, personal qualities such as resilience, self-efficacy, hope, and optimism have been noted as key attributes to social mobility (Seddon et al. 2013; Nudzor 2010; Phillips 2010). Consequently, these qualities, categorised as positive psychological capital (Luthans and Youssef 2004), have received more recent academic attention, with Luthans et al. (2007) noting that a symbiotic integration of psychological capital in conjunction with human and social capital is essential to actualising social mobility within contemporary society.

Nevertheless, while the correspondences between participation in sport and the accumulation of human and social capital have been well-documented, few, if any, previous studies have examined the potential for sport participation to facilitate the acquisition of positive psychological capital. Therefore, by drawing upon research conducted within a charitable organisation who use sport as

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst it is beyond the scope of the current article, it should be acknowledged that studies which have explored the correspondence between participation in sport and the accumulation of social capital have noted that participation often reinforces or exacerbates existing social biases around gender, social class and ethnicity (among others), thus conferring any social capital benefits on those individuals who are more pre-disposed to sport participation (see Engstrom 2008; Jakobsson et al. 2012; Ferry and Lund 2016).

a means to engage socio-economically disadvantaged young people, this article will explore two main issues. First, the article will highlight how informal educational opportunities which are offered within community-based organisations may enable the acquisition and development of positive psychological capital, and second, offer insight into the conditions that are required within a sport-based intervention which hold potential to enhance the elements of positive psychological capital. In doing so, the article will examine the following research question: **how does participation in a sport-based programme enable the elements of positive psychological capital—namely self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience—to be acquired and accumulated?**

### **Youth, social mobility, and employability**

As noted, in recent years, the use of sport as an instrument to enhance social mobility in youth populations has become a staple of several Western welfare states (Ekholm 2013; Spaaij 2011; 2009). While participation in sport may not appear to be an obvious concern of welfare policy, for Bergsgard et al. (2007, 53), the expansion of the welfare state during the post-war years, ‘accepted leisure time as an important aspect of social welfare’ to confirm the place of sport and recreation as a legitimate means to address broader social objectives.

In general, social mobility refers to the movement of individuals between their class origins and their current class position (Breen 2004). However, at a more specific level, social mobility is a multi-dimensional concept, which focusses upon how a blend of social, political, cultural, and economic factors impact on opportunities for social progression (Burchardt et al. 2002). Nevertheless, much of the existing literature highlights paid employment as the fundamental means to promote social mobility (Spaaij et al. 2013; Brown et al. 2011; Lister 2000), particularly within youth populations, where those who are categorised as *not* in education, employment or training are commonly the target for social policy interventions (Spaaij et al. 2013; Rose et al. 2012; Yates et al. 2010). The fixation with paid employment as an indicator of youth social mobility is scarcely surprising, not least because (un)employment statistics offer a simple and accessible measure by which to assess which citizens are contributing positively to society (Rankin 2005). Furthermore, this connection between social mobility and paid employment has deep resonance with the ideology of activation policies, which have been utilised by a number of Western nations in recent years to support and incentivise job searching, increase individual self-sufficiency, and

enable young people to participate more productively to society (see Fahlen and Stenling 2016; Hespanha and Moller 2001).

On this basis, a wealth of literature points to the strong correspondence between the acquisition of human and social capital as the means to enhanced employability prospects, and consequently, social mobility (e.g. Brown 2006; Lauder et al. 2006; Savage et al. 2005; Robertson et al. 2002; Bourdieu 1986). This assumption has been reinforced within government policy and strategic approaches to resolving youth unemployment, which, according to Strathdee (2013), have often cohered around carefully constructed amalgams of motivational, punishing, and bridging approaches, which to a greater or lesser extent, involve efforts to enhance the accumulation of human capital (Baptiste 2001), or repair deficits in social capital by building conduits between employers and job-seekers (Strathdee 2013). For Brown et al. (2011), such thinking is indicative of an ‘opportunity bargain’, whereby increased educational opportunities enhance the acquisition and development of credentials and capital that not only enrich employability prospects, but simultaneously, social mobility and individual freedom.

However, recent academic debate has considered how the acquisition of human and social capital in isolation may lack the sufficiency required for employability and social mobility. For example, the shifting nature of contemporary skill requirements as a result of technological advancement (Becker 2006), fluctuations in the global economy (Brown 2006), and adjustments to the nature of work (McDonough 2015), have all been proposed as factors which support this perspective. In addition, as Brown et al. (2011, 12) note, the explosion of opportunities for education and training diminish the advantages promised by such interventions, whereby ‘the opportunity bargain’ instead becomes an “*opportunity trap*, that forces people to spend more time, effort and money on activities...[where] no one secures an advantage”. Furthermore, the assumption that human and social capital accumulation will secure employment, wholly overlooks the fact that entry into the labour market is a two-sided affair, where the simple acquisition of attributes which enhance employability, is no guarantee of demand for those same acquired attributes (Brown et al. 2011). Indeed, criticism of supply-side interventions is often founded upon the oversight of demand-side factors which may render the skills and knowledges developed through such education and training programmes as unsuitable, redundant or insufficient (Spaaij et al. 2013; Brown et al. 2011). Consequently, it would appear that interventions which only engage young people with skills

training and the acquisition of recognised qualifications may be insufficient *per se*, in enabling social mobility via routes into paid employment. Such criticisms can be extended to sports-based interventions, which often limit training and employment opportunities to those found within the sport and active leisure industry, an industry which some commentators have noted is reducing its workforce, experiencing extensive redundancies (Spaaij et al. 2013), or becoming increasingly dominated by graduate-qualified personnel (Collins 2010).

In response, it has been noted how the development of ‘softer skills’, such as ‘personal drive, self-reliance and interpersonal skills’ (Brown 2006, 391), have become qualities which are valued by employers. Indeed, as Luthans et al. (2007) argue, the continued accumulation of the forms of capital that have traditionally been considered essential for organisational success is insufficient when pursuing sustainable competitive advantage within a knowledge economy. Consequently, a re-examination of existing views, which prioritise the acquisition of human and social capital as the primary credentials of employability, may hold merit (Brown 2006).

### **Positive Psychological Capital**

The shift towards the development of ‘softer skills’ resonates with the concept of positive psychological capital, which has been proposed as vital to realising human potential for employability within the contemporary job market (Luthans et al. 2007; Luthans and Youssef 2004). The basic theoretical components of positive psychological capital are self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience (Luthans et al. 2007; Luthans and Youssef 2004), four concepts which have been found to be central to the development of work motivation (Luthans and Youssef 2004) and noted as offering the potential to provide a sustained competitive advantage within the employment domain (Luthans et al. 2007).

The first component of positive psychological capital is self-efficacy, which has been noted as fundamental to human agency and pivotal to achievement (Bandura 2001). While definitions vary, conceptualisations of self-efficacy typically make reference to an individual’s conviction or confidence to execute a particular task within a given context (Biddle and Mutrie 2008; Bandura 2001; Stajkovic and Luthans 1998). More critically, increased self-efficacy has been documented

as central to stimulating the pursuit of challenging objectives, pivotal to enhanced levels of motivation, and prominent in enabling individuals to persevere in the face of difficulty (Bandura 2001). Within the context of positive psychological capital, the above factors feature heavily in the description of self-efficacy. More specifically, Luthans et al. (2007) note that self-efficacious individuals display five essential characteristics which enhance the attributes of employability, with independence, autonomy and effective performance chief among them. Of note, Seddon et al. (2013) indicate how self-efficacy has offered a useful measure of an individual's motivation and sense of physical and psychological well-being in relation to their propensity for employment. Consequently, to better appreciate the extent to which positive psychological capital (and social mobility) may be enhanced through the development of self-efficacy, a more nuanced understanding as to how participation in sport may contribute to the development of the characteristics listed above is critical. Nevertheless, as self-efficacy is domain specific (Bandura 2001), it should be noted that any analysis of the impact that sport-based interventions can have on this element of positive psychological capital needs to be cognisant of the fact that self-efficacy within the sporting environment may not be transferable to other social contexts. Indeed, literature has continually cautioned about the limited transferability of skills developed in a sporting context to other social domains (see Ekholm 2017; 2013).

The concept of hope constitutes the second component of positive psychological capital. In similarity to self-efficacy, conceptualisations of hope are open to a multitude of differing interpretations (Kast 1994; Webb 2013). However, Webb (2013) offers five 'modes' of hoping, which provide conceptual direction towards delineating the characteristics and dynamics of hope. Of these 'modes', *resolute hope* provides the category most closely aligned with the descriptions offered in relation to positive psychological capital (Luthans et al. 2007). More specifically, resolute hope refers to an individual's perceived capability to remain hopeful in the face of adversity (Pettit, 2004) and envisage clear pathways towards intended goals through self-directed determination, despite the objective evidence suggesting otherwise (Snyder, 2002). In other words, being hopeful is a combination of 'willpower' (agency) and 'waypower' (pathways) (Luthans et al. 2007), which requires an individual to generate alternative means towards the attainment of goals, when original plans have proved fruitless (Snyder 2002). This conceptualisation of hope resonates coherently with marginalised youth populations, for whom popular discourse regularly acts as an impediment to both the development of pathways and the agency to realise them (Banks 2013; Webb 2013). However, as Webb continues, educational programmes, which encourage such populations to

increase their stores of willpower and waypower, hold potential to enhance resolute hope. Indeed, studies which highlight the possibilities for sport-based interventions to act as a form of non-formal education (see Morgan and Bush 2016) have demonstrated the transformative potential of sport participation to contribute to the second element of positive psychological capital, a feature that the current paper will explore further.

The closely related concept of optimism is the third component of positive psychological capital. According to Luthans et al. (2007), optimism represents the most important element of positive psychological capital, yet is the least understood of the four concepts. Drawing heavily on the work of Seligman (2006; 2002), Luthans et al. conceptualise optimism in terms of an individual's attributional and explanatory style towards positive and negative events. More specifically, positive events are attributed to permanent, personal, and pervasive causes, which are within the individual's power and control, while, negative events are attributed to external, temporal, or situation-specific factors (Luthans et al. 2007). However, as Luthans et al. caution, increased levels of optimism should not be confused with an indiscriminate or reckless form of optimism which may expose an individual to unnecessary or higher risks. Instead, individuals should display a realistic and flexible form of optimism which requires a careful appraisal of situational factors, self-discipline, and analysis of past events as precursors to optimistic or pessimistic thought. Consequently, an understanding as to how sport-based interventions may enable 'realistic optimism' (Schneider 2001) and develop an ability for participants to be rational in making attributional decisions offers a promising departure point for investigation.

The final element of positive psychological capital—resilience—has often been defined around notions of an individual's ability to adapt positively or successfully in the context of adversity (Kossek and Perrigino 2016; Skodol 2010; Zautra et al. 2010; Masten and Reed 2002). Such description is evident in relation to positive psychological capital, where Luthans et al. (2007, 112) identify resilience as 'the capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, [or] failure'. Skodol (2010) presents a range of psychological traits which constitute the 'resilient personality' in an attempt to identify how individuals may protect against psychological disorders related to adversity. Of particular relevance to the context of this paper, Skodol's work is heavily oriented towards resilience within 'Western' cultures and societies, where 'individualism and self-reliance are highly valued' (Skodol 2010, 114). Again, such focus chimes with recent political discourses



surrounding marginalised youth, not least activation policies, which incentivise young people to become more self-sufficient and productive in their contribution to society (Ekholm 2017; Hespanha and Moller 2001), and the principles of neoliberal governance which have encouraged individuals to be more accountable and responsible for their own destiny (Rose 2000). Consequently, Skodol (2010) defines the resilient personality as (i) possessing a variety of traits related to a strong sense of self, such as self-direction, self-understanding, a positive future orientation, and an ability to control negative emotions; and (ii) displaying strong interpersonal skills, for instance sociability, empathy, understanding of others, and altruism. Again, potential exists to explore how sport-based interventions may be able to develop aspects of the ‘resilient personality’ (Skodol 2010), and, in turn, contribute to enhanced positive psychological capital.

However, as Phillips (2010) observes, it is also necessary to acknowledge that young people may look to acquire such capital for reasons that do not directly translate into criteria related to an employability agenda. As such, the sole fascination with the accumulation of positive psychological capital in order to enhance employability options is too limiting to adequately capture the breadth and depth of the positive influence that these qualities might convey (Seddon et al. 2013; Phillips 2010). For these scholars, the four qualities that constitute positive psychological capital possess a broader, more holistic impact on young people who are excluded from mainstream society. More specifically, Phillips (2010, 502) reports that the intensification of positive psychological capital ‘makes [young people’s] lives meaningful, enhances their self-esteem and is instrumental in the progress that they themselves consider they have made in their lives...in areas that are significant for young people themselves’. Similarly, Seddon et al. (2013) observe how structured employment programmes which primarily aim to develop skills for employment, further education or training, may also enhance the components of positive psychological capital to develop a plethora of qualities—for example, more structured employment-seeking strategies, a daily routine, more realistic career plans, and affirmative peer relationships, among others—which ‘do not conform to ‘official’ criteria’ (Seddon et al. 2013, 517) as metrics of social mobility. Such findings are similarly supported by Spaaij et al. (2013), who suggest that the measurement of initiatives designed to enhance employability need to be receptive to processes which move beyond the simplistic metric of job attainment towards more holistic approaches which capture the additional qualities that such programmes may deliver.

## Methods

As a site for investigation, this article will draw upon data collected from a sport-based intervention which was delivered within East London by a sport development charity whose mission to transform the lives of young people through the medium of sport aligns closely with existing discourses which promote sport participation as a means for social development. While the intervention itself is on-going, this research focusses upon delivery between March 2011 and July 2013, which involved programmes in seven project sites across five boroughs in East London. The identified boroughs all exhibited indicators of deprivation, with three classified at the time as among the most deprived unitary authorities in England (DCLG 2011). Consequently, the selected sport-based intervention presents an emblematic case study (Abma and Stake 2014) of a community-based programme that is designed to utilise sport as a mechanism to address specific social challenges.

Following University ethical approval, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 20 individuals who were either coaches and/or club leaders at the seven sports clubs (n=9), or young people (all male) who had become members of the clubs during the course of the project (n=11). Consequently, while gender is not an issue that the paper will directly explore, it should be noted that any findings and insights may only be applicable to male populations and confined to the specific programme under investigation. It is also important to note that the research participants were purposively selected due to their close proximity to the programme delivery as coaches or club members, despite the existence of enduring relationships between the sports-based charity who oversaw the project and the identified sports clubs. It is possible that these relationships, which were ingrained within the transference of resources (funding and equipment) to support the intervention, may have influenced the resultant data in a positive manner. However, this research sample enabled the essence of the coach-participant interactions to be captured and critical insights to emerge regarding the implementation of the project at the delivery level, to offer legitimacy to the statements provided by the coaches and club leaders (Walsh 2012; Lipsky 2010).

The interviews, which were conducted between July 2013 and May 2014 enabled participants to adopt a retrospective vantage point and provide first-hand accounts pertaining to their experiences of the programme and reflect upon the transformative impact (if any) that the programme had on its recipients. While the limitations of retrospective research (e.g. exaggeration/under-reporting

and accuracy of recall) are well-documented (see Veal and Darcy 2014), interview participants were afforded an opportunity to reflect upon positive, negative and ‘critical’ moments which defined their experiences. Both sets of data (i.e. from the coaches and the programme recipients) were subjected to a cyclical process of examination and inductive interpretation by utilising four ‘dialogues’ of analysis (Johnson et al. 2004). The opening dialogue—*recalling*—involved immediate reflection on the data, using the selectivity of memory to establish initial impressions of the research setting or preliminary themes pertaining to the investigation. This was followed by the dialogue of *listening around*, where the interview texts were transcribed, coded and indexed, to revise or reform the themes generated during the recalling dialogue (Johnson et al. 2004). During the third dialogue—*close reading*—the data were subjected to closer scrutiny for meanings associated with the salient features of the lived experience and framed within the context of existing theoretical debate. This phase also acted as the precursor for the final dialogue, of *representation* (Johnson et al. 2004).

While a variety of themes emerged in relation to the efficacy of programme delivery and the extent to which social mobility had been enhanced, of notable interest were themes pertaining to the types of capital that programme participants accrued as a result of their involvement. More specifically, it became evident that many of the respondents believed that aspects of their lived experience had restricted their stores of positive psychological capital, but, concurrently, elements of self-efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience had been developed through their involvement in sport. These themes will be explored in more depth, along with participant reflections on how sports clubs may provide fertile ground to aid this development, to offer tentative insights into the correspondences between participation in sport and the accumulation of positive psychological capital.

### **Sport participation and positive psychological capital: young persons’ perspectives**

Traditional understandings of social mobility have typically noted how the accumulation of human capital is critical to an individual’s social progress (Baptiste 2001). **The findings** from this study would reaffirm this view, with all except one of the 11 sports club members engaged in some form of education, training, or employment. Despite this, a growing number of scholars have questioned the sole accumulation of human capital and argued how the development of positive

psychological capital is equally essential to generate social mobility (Brown et al. 2011; Phillips 2010).

However, data from the young respondents revealed how certain aspects of their lived experience were perceived as an impediment to the accumulation of positive psychological capital. More specifically, the findings exposed how these apparent barriers, most notably the structuring of society, impacted on perceived deficiencies in hope, optimism, self-efficacy and resilience (Luthans et al. 2007). For example, when reflecting on any mitigating reasons which could impede his aspirations of becoming a secondary school teacher, Jay, a young boxer, observed:

...there's stuff making it harder. Society really...the world doesn't intentionally make it easier for them people [from privileged backgrounds], but while people talk about equality of this and that, social imbalances stop people achieving what they could achieve. [It's] not really a barrier just something that's always in the background...there'll always be somebody who can achieve a bit higher than me just because they went to a posh school?

Clearly, when perceived in this way, the 'social imbalances' that Jay referred to impacted on his levels of hope and optimism about his future, a feature reinforced by Zaeem, who summarised his upbringing on an urban residential estate as "unlucky". Such narratives further reveal how the lived experience had created a perceived absence of pathways and undermined agency over their own futures (Luthans et al. 2007; Snyder 2002) to limit a sense of hope and, arguably, engender a sense of silent or covert pathologising of the lived experience (Shields 2004). According to Shields (2004), such pathologising positions the lived experience of those on the margins of society as abnormal or unacceptable, where the abilities possessed by these pathologised individuals become construed as subnormal. This silent pathologising was evident in Dwayne's narrative, who mentioned that since he left school two years ago his "skills have really, like, gone down" which had contributed to a reduction in self-efficacy, and an absence of agency and pathways, the key elements of hope (Luthans et al. 2007).

However, the data also revealed how young people had acquired and developed the elements of positive psychological capital through their participation in sport. For example, Noel articulated

how the self-efficacy he had acquired through leadership roles in his football team had translated to his education through the enhanced confidence to contribute vocally in class. He explained:

Confidence...when I play football I'm really confident. I used to be a bit more like shy, but I learnt through football that I have to speak more, communicate...so in school now I'm not too shy to put my hand up and ask or say something...

Similar sentiments were shared by Sam (a boxer) who outlined how his enhanced self-efficacy in the sports context had encouraged him to “step out” into other social contexts (Stajkovic and Luthans 1998) and become involved in a variety of voluntary projects in the local community. He explained:

I think I'm a more confident person than I was. I've always been the closed-off type...but since I started getting more in to my sports I've come out of my shell a bit more. It's sent me into stepping out and actually having the guts to try out things.

Hope and optimism were also evident within the narratives offered by young people at the sports clubs. More specifically, many of the young people provided insight into how club membership had presented new opportunities, altered perspectives and revitalised ambitions, alongside generating a sense of agency and internal attribution over the attainment of life aspirations (Luthans et al. 2007; Seilgman 2006). For example, Majeed explained:

I definitely want to make sure I'm a boxer. Even if I don't, I'll try opening my own [boxing] club. 'Coz I'm studying business, so I can start from the bottom and then move to the top. [T]hey're predicting me my grades are D's and C's, but I'll prove them wrong.

Other indications that participation in sport had bestowed greater agency and spawned a more optimistic outlook on life were provided within narratives which spoke of how engagement had instilled ‘discipline’ and ‘the value of hard work’ as factors which could stimulate social mobility. For instance, boxers Mehtin, Majeed and Thaqib explained how lessons learnt through sport had acted as motivation to work harder at school, and had helped to re-focus their educational ambitions towards a future career.

However, it was the component of resilience which appeared most salient in regard to sporting involvement and the accumulation of positive psychological capital. Several of the young people who participated in the study articulated qualities that they had developed through sport which were akin to an enhanced ability to respond positively to adversity or uncertainty (Luthans et al. 2007). In some cases, aspects of the sport itself were cited as pivotal to learning about resilience, most notably within the sport of BMX. As Faizel, a BMX rider noted, resilience, or “taking it up”, could be experienced via the risks associated with the sport:

Definitely one of the things is crashes. In normal everyday life you're not as likely to break a bone...but with BMXing it comes with that. I've learnt that if you fall down you hurt yourself – it happens...it comes with the sport – *you have to take it up*.

Additional qualities associated with resilience were noted, with Sam (boxer) observing that participation had developed an ability to persevere and remain impervious to potential setbacks (Luthans et al. 2007). He mentioned:

I don't jump the gun anymore, so if, like, something bad happens, I wouldn't panic as quickly as I did back then; I'd be able to come up with different alternatives and try and work it out from there.

Similarly, Terrence (a footballer) offered a detailed account of how he had become more “patient” through sport; an observation which complemented a recognition that success in all facets of his life required him to control negative emotions and be less confrontational (Skodol 2010). He explained:

You have to be patient about what stuff you're gonna learn next, so you don't wanna rush in and miss out the important parts. You don't want to go for the quick and easy, you need to go for the long and make sure you get a better result. So part of patience is not just at football, literally it's everyday things...like [school assessment] deadlines, you have to be patient about that...it can be anything...

Clearly, these findings underline that, in appropriate environmental conditions, participation in sport holds potential to provide a suitable vehicle through which the theoretical elements of positive psychological capital can be acquired and accumulated. While it is difficult to assess how

the statements provided by the young respondents actually transferred to the manifestation of positive psychological capital (Ekholm 2013), these reflections, at the very least, demonstrate how the young people had started to contemplate how their participation had equipped them with qualities which could be beneficial to social mobility. Consequently, and building upon Luthans et al. (2007), when integrated in conjunction with human and social capital development, there is tentative evidence to suggest that the acquisition of positive psychological capital may enable marginalised young people to enhance their life prospects and provide a foundation for social mobility.

### **Sport participation and positive psychological capital: coaches' perspectives**

Echoing the testimonies of the youth respondents, the narratives provided by the sports club coaches highlighted how aspects of the lived experience often undermined elements of positive psychological capital within the young people who attended their sports clubs. As example, Michael, a mentor at a multi-sport youth club, outlined how the initial lack of employment opportunities in the area coupled with the disenchantment experienced following unsuccessful job applications had a draining effect on the reserves of resilience among the young people at the club. He stated:

There's quite a few of them that are looking for work, but there's no work out there – it's very hard, you know what I mean – and then when you see some of them coming in [to the club], it's disappointing when they don't get the job.

Further narratives outlined how the life-world of the young people acted as a significant impediment to the actualisation of their life aspirations (Paton et al. 2012; Willis 2003). This was captured most aptly by Zaeem who, when reflecting on his own (comparatively successful) transition to employment as a coach at a youth sport foundation, signalled how elements of his own upbringing had combined to weaken the levels of positive psychological among those around him:

I had so much energy inside [when I was younger] but I didn't know where to release it, so that forced me to get into trouble outside of school. All of us innit...imagine us like 14, 15, 16 and there's no sports club in the estate, there's no youth clubs, there's no pitches...it was literally like there was no one there to guide you...no hope.

Insight into how a decline in hope represented a barrier to aspiration and social mobility was presented by AJ, a BMX coach. However, not only did AJ's testimony point to limited hope, it also gave indication as to how optimism was also impacted through an apparent externalising of attribution (Seligman, 2006) for their current circumstances. He mentioned:

Not many kids will actually go 'why can't I get a job'; they go 'I *can't* get a job'...so a lot of these kids apart from the odd one who hot-foots it out of here...if they want [to get on in life] they've gotta do it themselves...

Nevertheless, the data provided by the club coaches revealed a range of examples where sport acted as a medium for the acquisition of positive psychological capital. For instance, club leaders Trevor (cricket) and Brian (judo) reflected upon a number of young people who had enhanced their levels of self-efficacy following episodes of success in sport. As Trevor revealed:

I think it's life confidence, you know, we get some boys coming in here who are very, very shy, but after a while they realise that they've got some talent at the game and it brings them out of their shell.

The facilitation of optimism was also notable, mostly through examples of participants attributing the cause for certain events to factors within their control (Seligman 2006), or by valuing internally-focussed attributes such as the importance of hard work and integrity as the basis for achieving goals, whether related to sport or other areas of their lives (Luthans et al. 2007). For instance, Trevor (cricket) observed:

In cricket terms, you know, teaching them the responsibility of when that ball's coming towards them they've got to make an attempt to stop it...and they begin to realise that if you do things in the right way you get good results, if you do things in the wrong way you get bad results, and that can be taken into life for them, as well, you know, if they try to cut corners they're going to miss out on things.

Nevertheless, and mirroring the testimonies of the youth respondents, the club coaches noted that resilience was the most common element of positive psychological capital that was acquired



through participation in sport. For BMX coaches Rio and AJ, the ‘lessons’ provided by sport participation could be used in an instrumental manner to enhance resilience. As Rio explained:

When they fall off their bike I take a few minutes to go there and if they don’t stand up in a few minutes then I will go there...and that’s life isn’t it. If you don’t have money no-one comes and gives you money, you know, you have to look out for yourself.

Such sentiments were shared by AJ, who further elaborated on the correspondence between BMX participation and the development of resilience.

Shit happens...you better just deal with it and pick yourself up quickly before someone runs you over...there’s a certain kind of logic of ‘you’ve gotta look after yourself’, primarily...[So] you need an attitude of, um, a general kind of can do, will do, give it a go, fail...[BMX]creates resilience because if you really want to do it [achieve] it’s not simple.

These examples indicate how membership of the sports club had not only become a vital mechanism for initialising positive psychological capital, but also offered an alternative (and preferred) pathway to social mobility which enabled young people to circumvent the necessity to engage with formal institutions for support. Indeed, one of the most prominent features of the research was how the personnel at the selected sports clubs were able to look beyond the primary function of the sports club—namely to provide sporting experiences to young people and generate ‘on-field success’—and recognise the pivotal role they performed in connecting with young people who experienced uncertain prospects for their future lives. Whilst it must be noted that at most clubs there was a clear focus upon achieving ‘on-field success’,<sup>2</sup> there was also acknowledgment of a wider, social purpose to their voluntary work, whereby club personnel operated as social agents who were ‘adept at oscillating between the [sporting] task at hand in a given setting and the broader world beyond it’ (Wacquant 2005, 460). For example, Zaeem mentioned how his intentions to “break down the barriers” between himself and the young people at the ‘multi-sports hub’ he operates on a residential housing estate had been central to his efforts to engender a positive transition into adulthood (Whittaker 2010). He reflected:

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Napier Park Cricket Club had won the County Under 16 Cup and had two of the team selected for the County Academy; the Glynmore Youth Club had identified and were developing a clutch of boxers who were destined for the professional ranks; and Central Judo had produced a medallist at the London 2012 Olympic Games.

My main aim...would be for them not to go down the path that we wouldn't want them to, so if they can turn around and say "Zaeem, thank you, 'coz of you, you made me understand", that's all we want for them. I could have been doing drug dealing right now, 'coz we had that route so many times in life....but we want them to see that you can't make money like that – simple as – regardless of how desperate you are...

Similarly, Michael, a mentor at a multi-sport youth club stated:

They [the young people] now know that there is actually nothing for them on the estate or on the streets ... this [the sports club] is their only place to go. [So] we want to improve their self-esteem, their belief in their self, to make them feel that they're self-worthy as well, because a lot of the kids that hang around don't really think that, you know, there's nothing to look forward to in life...we want to change that perception, we want them to understand "you are important, you're the next generation" basically...

In exploring more precisely how coaches and club leaders had fostered elements of positive psychological capital the data revealed how the creation of trust between young person and adult was critical. Testimonies revealed how trust was developed through, first, the language and mannerisms of the coaches and, second, via the practice of befriending (Pawson 2006). With regard to the interactive, embodied and dynamic nature of language and mannerism as a means to create trust (Barker 2012), Zaeem pointed to the need to provide explicit, visible indicators that demonstrated understanding of the lived experience of the young people they were attempting to engage.

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.

This necessity to present a depiction of oneself that cohered with the young person's standpoint was also apparent in the manner in which the coaches and club leaders attempted to befriend young people and develop bonds of trust through shared experiences which enabled the mentee

to ‘recognise the legitimacy of other people and other perspectives’ (Pawson 2006, 124). For Malcolm, the club leader and boxing coach of a multi-sport youth club, identifying elements of cultural overlap (Ryen 2011) was pivotal to his endeavours to both befriend and initiate a mentor relationship. Having achieved notable success himself as a professional boxer, and more recently receiving local and national 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 born in no special place [sic], 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”...

Consequently, the findings from this research highlight the critical role that sports club leaders and coaches can assume within the generation of elements associated with positive psychological capital (Luthans et al. 2007). Crucially, this implies that club personnel should be attuned to the tenets of social justice and demonstrate a community consciousness (Henderson & Thomas, 2013), whereby the coaches exhibit an awareness that is bounded by the issues of concern in the local community.

## **Conclusion**

Existing literature has presented a conceptual link which coheres social mobility with the accumulation of various forms of capital (Rose et al. 2012; Levitas 2005; Lister 2000). Of these forms, recent policy ‘solutions’ have centred their attention on investment into human and social capital as the primary means to promote social mobility (Strathdee 2013). Yet, these two forms of capital alone cannot deliver social mobility to young people residing in disadvantaged localities (Brown et al. 2011) with the accumulation of positive psychological capital proposed as an alternative form of capital which may enable youth populations to navigate the complexities of contemporary society (Luthans et al. 2007; Souto Otero 2016). Building upon this work, this article has offered insights which demonstrate how participation within community organisations, such as sports clubs, hold potential to act as a conduit to social mobility through the accumulation of positive psychological capital via the development of qualities such as self-efficacy, resilience, optimism and hope (Spaaij et al. 2013; Brown et al. 2011; Luthans et al. 2007).

At this juncture, it is worth mentioning that the findings presented here do not reflect the experiences of all participants who engaged with the sport-based programme investigated in this article. In addition, given that many of the testimonies provided an overly optimistic or positive view as to how participation in sport had enhanced positive psychological capital, one must be cautious to make generalisations about the educative worth of sport in addressing social concerns (Coakley, 2015). Furthermore, existing research has noted how the values (and capital) that are accrued via sports-based interventions are limited in their transferability to other spheres (Ekholm 2013) to further temper any inferences made by the findings of this paper. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to conclude that participation in sport, or the accumulation of positive psychological capital per se, act as a solution to address youth social mobility (Parker et al. 2014; Coakley 2011; Coalter 2007).

Nevertheless, the findings presented in this article suggest that within certain contextual conditions, involvement in sporting activities can enable its participants to enhance aspects of positive psychological capital. As the findings exhibit, where coaches and club leaders recognise the pivotal role that they undertake in providing an environment which not only fosters the development of sporting prowess, but extends to generating learning opportunities beyond the sporting domain, potential exists for sport being utilised as a tool for social development. More specifically, the findings of this research indicate that where sport participation can enable young people to develop qualities which enhance their levels of self-efficacy and resilience, and which make them more optimistic and hopeful about their futures, then, in theory at least, participation in sport may have a role to play in fostering social mobility. However, as a relatively new area of academic investigation, these findings are somewhat tentative. **Therefore, further empirical investigations are required in order to present the substantive and critical insights that may demonstrate the educative worth of sport as a mechanism to accumulate positive psychological capital and enhance social mobility prospects in youth populations.**

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