Abstract

Community-based interventions have long been seen as mechanisms via which to target marginalised youth in relation to personal development. Research surrounding such interventions has often highlighted the promotion of a range of pro-social behaviours and attributes which, in turn, facilitate an increased sense of social inclusion. This paper seeks to build upon and extend this literature by adopting the concept of social capital to infer how participation in sport and performing arts programmes may enable marginalised youth to access wider support networks. Drawing upon qualitative findings from a small-scale study of one community-based intervention located in the UK, the paper explores broader notions of personal development in relation to educational and employment pathways whilst at the same time developing understandings of the processes through which such programmes might support social inclusion and social mobility. The paper concludes that when marginalised young people are presented with the opportunity to generate positive interpersonal relationships built upon trust, recognition and acceptance, there is clear potential for community-based activity interventions to act as a form of education to enhance employability and incubate social mobility through the accrual of social capital.

Keywords: Sport and performing arts, social capital, social inclusion, social mobility, marginalised youth.

Introduction

For young people situated at the margins of society, exposure to a number of identified risk factors (Farrington and Welsh 2007) render them vulnerable to disengagement or disaffection from mainstream social institutions such as education and employment (Halsey 2007; Rose et al. 2012). Consequently, such disengagement may heighten the possibility for further marginalisation, through lack of educational attainment, unemployment, or involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour (Morgan and Parker 2017). Diversionary activities, such as participation in sport and the performing arts (Nichols 2007), have long been heralded as a means to tackle social concerns (including social exclusion) and have become a staple of state policy within Western industrialised societies (Coalter 2017).

In exploring how marginalised young people may enhance their sense of social inclusion, literature has highlighted the importance of strong interpersonal relationships, built on acceptance and trust, between youth populations and influential adults to be of particular benefit (Whittaker 2010; Rose et al. 2012). Within the context of sport-based interventions, the significance of accepting relationships has also been noted as a foundation upon which social inclusion can be enhanced (Morgan and Parker 2017). However, common discourses surrounding social inclusion often prioritise paid employment as a key indicator (Levitas 2005), inferring that in order for young people to enhance their sense of inclusion, feeling accepted is merely an initial step in the process (Rose et al. 2012). Further literature has documented how the accumulation of various forms of capital is integral to gaining paid employment (see Brown et al. 2011) and that, of these, increasing stores of social capital, through a broadening of an individual's relational network (Lewandowski 2012) has particular merit. Therefore, space exists to explore how interventions that involve participation in diversionary activities such as sport and the performing arts not only enable marginalised youth to construct accepting relationships, but also assist them in accruing social capital within their pursuit of paid work.

The present paper seeks to explore this 'diversionary activity-social capital nexus' by presenting findings from an independent, external evaluation of a community-based intervention (herein referred to as *Future Stars*), which sought to investigate the operationalisation and impact of the intervention on cohorts of marginalised youth residing in a city in North-West England. The project was specifically targeted towards young people aged 11-25 years, in particular those who were within the care system or involved (or termed 'at risk' of involvement) in youth and/or violent gang-related crime. The project sought to initially engage young people through a variety of sports, media and arts-based activities thereafter progressing them into employment, education and training opportunities in order to break cycles of poverty, marginalisation and crime. Specifically, our discussion provides insights into programme implementation, drawing particular attention to: i) the importance of interpersonal relationships between project staff and project participants as a means to develop a sense of acceptance (Rose et al. 2012) and ii) how the accumulation of linking social capital (Putnam 2000) enabled a number of project participants to gain paid and/or voluntary employment thereby accelerating and enhancing their social mobility[1] and sense of social inclusion.

Engaging marginalised youth through recognition and acceptance

While definitions vary markedly as to what constitutes social inclusion (Spandler 2007; Haudenhuyse 2017; Morgan and Parker 2017), for youth populations, inclusion is often associated with positive transitions into adulthood through engagement with mainstream social institutions (Levitas 2005; Rose et al. 2012). According to Hogan and Astone (1986), conceptual understandings of these 'positive transitions' are open to cultural and temporal discrepancy, however, within Western industrialised societies, discourses of positive transition (and thus social inclusion) commonly centre upon active engagement with education and, subsequently, paid

[1] While social mobility is recognised a multi-dimensional concept, for the purposes of this paper we define social mobility as the movement of individuals between their class origins and their current class position (Breen 2004).

employment (Lister 2000; Levitas 2005; Rose et al. 2012). In such contexts, *dis*engagement with these expected or mainstream life-course pathways often heightens risk factors associated with marginalisation (Farrington and Welsh 2007). Furthermore, such disengagement often has implications with regard to the manner in which young people are judged and receive acknowledgement for their achievements, with those unable to demonstrate strengths and qualities associated with educational outcomes and employment routinely deemed to be 'unsuccessful' (Halsey 2007). Indeed, as Halsey (2007) observes, measuring successful transitions in such absolutist and dichotomous terms has the potential to promote a sense of worthlessness and insignificance which further marginalises those who do not meet societal expectations (Rose et al. 2012).

For Whittaker (2010), the emphasis on formal structures of recognition, such as the attainment of educational qualifications or promotion in the workplace as a means to gain and strengthen acceptance within mainstream institutions, is deeply problematic and raises the potential for the further stigmatisation, marginalisation and exclusion of those who experience difficulty in attaining positive recognition from these formal sources. As a riposte, Whittaker (2010, 78) contends that strategies to engage marginalised youth may look to veer away from a pre-occupation with academic achievement as the sole basis for recognition, aiming instead towards more informal structures and practices such as "verbal praise, or simply knowing that someone trusts and believes in you". Such thinking places centre stage the importance of interpersonal relationships in developing an enhanced sense of recognition. Similarly, Halsey (2007, 1254) notes that marginalised populations "desire connections to persons capable of offering meaningful and non-judgemental assistance" whereby they can be recognised and acknowledged for qualities that do not necessarily cohere with education and employment. In such circumstances, potential exists for positive transitions to the societal mainstream to occur.

Critically, the nature of the interpersonal relationships constructed and experienced by marginalised youth is noted to be of vital importance, with Rose et al. (2012) proposing the concept of *acceptance* to be an essential component. In short, acceptance refers to a reciprocal sense of respect, acknowledgement and trust, both from peers, but also—perhaps more importantly—from people perceived to be in power (Rose et al. 2012). For Halsey (2007), this requires those with such power to construct relationships with marginalised youth which are meaningful, reflexive, authentic, and, above all, oriented towards the preferences and values of those they are attempting to engage. Therefore, at an interpersonal level, acceptance and recognition from individuals within socially valued institutions such as sports clubs hold much potential, in particular as young people can demonstrate qualities outside of the formal spheres of recognition which dominate the inclusion landscape (Whittaker 2010). Moreover, the building of accepting relationships and the acknowledgement of informal spheres of recognition may provide a foundation for marginalised young people to integrate into the more conventional notions of social inclusion, which are often congruent with outcomes related to education, employment and training (Rose et al. 2012).

Clearly, the pivotal role that accepting relationships play as a 'building block' for social inclusion (Rose et al. 2012) would indicate that the engagement and inclusion of marginalised youth involves the construction and broadening of their relational networks, or, to put it another way, developing their reserves of social capital. Indeed, as Rose et al. (2012, 261) note, "the reciprocity of support, the demonstration of trust, and the ensuing sense of belonging" that accepting relationships display reverberates strongly with definitions of social capital. Given that addressing deficiencies in social capital is a common theme within social inclusion interventions which involve participation in sport and the performing arts (Nicholson and Hoye 2008; Lonie 2011; Nols et al. 2017), we now turn to a further exploration of this concept.

The accumulation of social capital as a conduit to inclusion

As a general principle, social capital refers to the aspects of an individual's social network which, through trust and cooperation, enables them to obtain certain types of advantage (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988; Parker 2000; Lin 2001). As such, notions of social capital are situated around its basis as an indicator of connectedness (see Putnam 2000) or as a resource that acts as a medium of exchange (see Bourdieu 1986).

One of the seminal works which explored the impact of social networks and relationships on social mobility is Granovetter's (1973) analysis of micro-level, interpersonal networks and their impact on broader, macro-level concerns. Central to Granovetter's thesis is the composition of an individual's social network and, more specifically, the nature and strength of the ties that exist within it, based upon "the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy, and the reciprocal services which characterise the tie" (Granovetter 1973, 1361). Critically, Granovetter (1973; 1983) asserts that weak ties between individuals may possess more potency in providing economic value (for example, social mobility and access to employment) than strong ties. The premise for this contention is that strong ties, founded upon a high-density relational network comprised of similarly-minded, similarly-connected individuals, are restrictive in terms of their potential to utilise the network for economic benefit (Granovetter 1983). As a consequence of the closed nature of high-density networks, the flow of unique and vital information that may enable economic prosperity to ascend becomes significantly limited in supply (Granovetter 2005). Thus, for Granovetter (2005), weaker ties act as a metaphorical 'bridge' to facilitate individual connections with a broader array of acquaintances, foster links with previously unknown relational networks, offer more novel information, and unite an individual with a wider world containing a more extensive gamut of opportunities. Consequently, weaker ties, in particular within low socio-economic groups, may be advantageous in finding paid employment (Granovetter 2005).

Building upon this initial theorising, many studies, encompassing a multitude of disciplinary and contextual perspectives, have examined the construct of social capital by utilising the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1986) as a conceptual framework for analysis. This work was concerned with the reproduction of inequalities in society and examined how these inequalities are manifested within opportunities for social mobility, primarily through the accumulation of resources that are valorised within a particular field and can be exchanged for social gain (Lin 2001; Fine 2010; Lewandowski 2012). Within this context Bourdieu (1986) identifies three related types of capital—economic, cultural, and social—which, he argued, comprise the resources an individual may require to sustain, or promote, their position in a social hierarchy. Of these, Bourdieu refers to social capital as the resources and social advantage that can be accrued via the connections that an individual retains within a specific relational network, and which may bestow opportunities to optimise economic capital (Bourdieu 1986).

Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social capital is essentially concerned with understanding the composition and nuances of the mutual acquaintances at an individual's disposal. More specifically, Bourdieu (1986) proposed that first, the magnitude of a relational network will constrain the potential for social capital acquisition whereby a larger network of connections will better mobilise social capital.[2] Second, and more critically, the quality of the relational network will enhance social capital attainment, whereby the relative 'wealth' of the mutual acquaintances help to maximise and "secure the profits of membership" (Bourdieu 1986, 249). Finally, Bourdieu (1986) specifies that social capital is expendable and unable to be stored, thus a relational network requires significant (re)investment of time and energy to maintain its value. Underpinning these assertions is the concept of habitus which operates as a guiding logic of practice informed by predispositions learnt or developed in early childhood (see also Edwards et

[2] See also Nicholson and Hoye (2008) and Sieppel (2008) for an exposition of this point in relation to participation in sport.

al. 2012). Given that habitus is developed primarily through family and institutions with which a young person may engage early in their life, Bourdieu (1986) would argue that individuals who inherit substantial reserves of social capital—via their habitus—are more favourably positioned to possess the initial connectedness to capitalise on opportunities to reinvest and further accumulate social capital. Clearly, for marginalised or 'at risk' youth populations, the opportunity to reinvest or exchange initial stocks of social capital is comparatively limited, and this may act as a key barrier to enhanced social mobility.

An alternative, yet oft cited exposition of social capital is provided by Putnam (2000, 115) whose view was developed in response to what he saw as a trend towards the absence or obliteration of civic participation in US society, in favour of personal interest, through "a striking diminution of regular contacts … that encourage casual social interaction". Utilising the past-time of bowling, Putnam sought to understand how social capital, as an indicator of connectedness (Fine 2010), might be considered as a form of public good, which could be enhanced through engagement with civic organisations, such as those related to sport or the performing arts, and which, in turn, could be utilised to develop trust between disparate social networks and bind communities together. Consequently, Putnam's conceptualisation of social capital assimilates the impact of the broader macro-system, and more specifically, how the relational network of one individual interacts with other relational networks to create and facilitate a more complex, yet potentially more dynamic and productive, set of resources on which an individual may draw.

Putnam's articulation of social capital has not escaped detailed critique, with several authors highlighting how it represents a society free of conflict, and depicts a nostalgic or sentimental romanticism of a bygone age (Everingham 2003; Epstein 2010). Others have noted that the advantages gained via social networks are often the result of deeper social processes that were not analysed by Putnam (Gelderblom 2018; Shiell et al. 2018). Nevertheless, Putnam's work, and

in particular the three distinct forms of social capital on which the work is predicated—bridging, linking, and bonding (Putnam 2000)—provides a convenient framework through which to understand the social mobility of marginalised youth.

The first of these—bridging social capital—refers to "the processes by which the development of social norms, networks and trust through social interaction link … disparate elements of the community" (Nicholson and Hoye 2008, 7). In semblance to Granovetter, this form of social capital encompasses the social ties that are constructed across and between horizontal social divisions (Putnam 2000). Consequently, membership of, or involvement in, a specific, communal activity, such as sport or the performing arts, may present a conduit through which these horizontal ties may be created. Similarly, the concept of linking social capital possesses both productive and positive connotations but encompasses greater propensity to forge social mobility given that it promotes vertical connections between diverse social divisions (Nicholson and Hoye 2008). For Collins (2009), the potential of sport to attract participants from divergent social classes in a common endeavour reinforces the promise associated with this form of social capital in generating the ties which may lead marginalised populations towards greater access and opportunity within the societal mainstream.

Whilst the initial forms of social capital which underpin Putnam's (2000) thesis present clear prospects for social mobility, the concept of bonding social capital contains a more ominous connotation (Putnam, 2000). Accordingly, and in line with Granovetter's (1973; 1983) notion of strong ties, this form of social capital accumulation invokes a tightening of relations within a homogenous group of people, by excluding individuals and groups who are peripheral to the main group, thus restricting the quantity and quality of the social ties that incubate the accumulation of social capital (Putnam 2000). Consequently, some critical scholars have suggested that this form of social capital presents a more accurate depiction of the relationship

between participation in sporting activities and social capital accumulation, given the propensity of many sports clubs to concentrate their resources on maximising competitive performance through processes of elitism, selection and exclusion (Collins 2010; Skille 2011).

To echo Nicholson and Hoye (2008), the multifarious and individualised nature of participation experiences within community-based intervention programmes will mediate the extent to which social capital is created, developed and maintained, reinforcing Green's (2008) assertion that such programmes vary dramatically in the function and outcomes that they can deliver. In addition, such thinking adds fuel to the views of those who challenge the uncritically accepted conventions which surround the positive impact of community-based interventions on social capital enhancement (see Coalter 2017). In response to such critiques, it would appear salient to examine the role of these intervention programmes in facilitating social capital accumulation, and furthermore, offer a contribution to the growing literature which attempts to unearth what features of a sport or arts-based experience may intensify social capital accrual.

The use of sport and other recreational activities as a means to tackle social problems has been a staple of UK government policy for the last 50 years, gaining particular prominence within the last two decades (Coalter 2017; Morgan and Parker 2017). Indeed, as Wright et al. (2014) report, a prerequisite of social inclusion work is that young people fully engage in the services that seek to support them, with sessions centred around activities that young people find enjoyable, such as sport, music and arts, proving to be typically effective. Consequently, and perhaps predictably, sport, as a developmental tool, has been elevated to an almost evangelical or mythopoeic status (Coalter 2007; Lee et al. 2012), where its purity and goodness can be successfully transmitted to young people 'at risk' or in need of social integration and inclusion (Coakley 2015). However, competing literature has noted how sports-based interventions (in particular) vary in the outcomes experienced by participants (see Green 2008; Morgan et al.

2019), leading critics to highlight the need to exercise caution and remain critical in attempts to understand the extent to which sport (and other cultural activities) can act as a panacea for tackling social problems (Coalter 2007; Coakley 2015).

Nevertheless, despite these concerns, many social inclusion intervention projects include sport and leisure activities as a tool for engagement, with most combining these 'diversionary activities' with support around employment, education and training (Coalter 2017). More specifically, a study by Meek et al. (2012) yielded findings which demonstrated that sport-based learning is a successful way of encouraging marginalised youth to take part in education or training who would otherwise be difficult to engage using more traditional methods. The same study found that initiatives which combine education with sporting provision enabled the targeted population to not only gain qualifications leading to increased employability, but also enhance their positive social networks. Along similar lines, a review by Hughes (2005) found evidence to suggest that arts-based interventions can be used equally successfully to engage those 'at risk' and help them into education, employment and training. Indeed, many of the specific projects reviewed by Hughes (2005) demonstrated an ability to improve individual attitudes towards learning and increase a willingness to partake in such opportunities. Furthermore, projects helped to develop transferable skills such as communication and teamwork, to further underline the potential of such programmes to enhance interpersonal relationships and social networks.

With their universal appeal, sport and the performing arts offer a firm platform for work aimed to enhance social capital due to their potential to bring people together and promote community cohesion. Indeed, projects that have utilised sports and the arts to engage young people have reported increased cohesion among participants even where this was not an explicit aim (Lonie 2011; Kelly 2017; Parker et al. 2018). However, understanding the processes involved in using sport and the arts as a mechanism for social inclusion remains under-researched (Coalter 2017)

and requires empirical evidence to expose how such programmes deliver on their acclaimed potential to foster social inclusion (Haudenhuyse 2017), a feature to which the current study seeks to attend.

Methods

The empirical findings featured here are drawn from evaluative research which sought to investigate the impact of the *Future Stars* project in terms of the subjective experiences and perceptions of those involved. As we have seen, *Future Stars* caters for young people aged 11-25 years, many of whom were within the care system or involved (or termed 'at risk' of involvement) in youth and/or violent gang-related crime. The project endeavoured to engage young people through a variety of sports, media and arts activities (from which participants select) thereafter progressing them into employment, education and/or training opportunities with the aim of breaking cycles of poverty, marginalisation and/or crime. More specifically the project aimed to: (i) reduce and prevent gang related crime by delivering programmes of activity at peak times of crime and anti-social behaviour; (ii) improve young people's self-esteem and self-confidence (including improved behaviours and attitudes) via the provision of activities, volunteering opportunities, training and work placements; (iii) develop young people's skills for the workplace through accredited and non-accredited vocational training; and (iv) impact the attitudes of businesses with regard to their perceptions of 'local' young people.

As a charitable organisation *Future Stars* worked with corporate/business partners and statutory agencies to positively impact a range of social and economic issues including: young people's involvement in crime and substance misuse, supporting young people into meaningful employment, and addressing the lack of training and development opportunities available to young people in disadvantaged communities. To this end, *Future Stars* explicitly sought to: (i) offer positive activities to engage disadvantaged young people, especially those most at risk of

entering the youth justice system; (ii) support young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to develop life and social skills and to access training, education and employment; and (iii) positively impact society by addressing anti-social behaviour, academic under-achievement and unemployment and by promoting community cohesion and citizenship.

Future Stars utilised the experience and expertise of a team of highly skilled and well-respected individuals from across the sports, arts, entertainments, education and youth and community sectors, whilst aligning with like-minded private sector, statutory sector and delivery/strategic partner organisations to ensure that the services that they offered met the needs of the young people with whom they worked. These services comprised: (i) activity-based delivery in targeted geographical areas; (ii) volunteer development/mentoring programmes and vocational training and development packages designed for young people and the wider community; (iii) work placements and apprenticeships for young people; and (iv) one-to-one mentoring and personal development opportunities for young people. Project participants are self-selecting and activities and services are available to all.

The *Future Stars* project commenced in September 2014 and ran until August 2016. The evaluation of the project was carried out between May-August 2016 whereby a mixed method evaluative research model was deployed in order to investigate the impact of the project on the young people and agencies concerned. The quantitative aspect of the study investigated the experiences and perceptions of project participants (young people) via a questionnaire survey, whilst also collating local, regional and national data on young people's engagement with this, and similar, initiatives. The qualitative aspect of the evaluation involved in-situ observations of participants during project delivery and semi-structured, one-to-one and focus group interviews with the project lead, project team members/practitioners, stakeholder/partner agencies and project participants. The present paper focuses primarily on the latter.

A total of 74 *Future Stars* participants completed project evaluation questionnaires during the data collection period.[3] Of these, 40 identified as male, 33 identified as female and 1 young person declined to state their gender. The age of participants ranged between 13 and 25 years of age (mean age = 18.8 years). 55.4% of the sample were of White ethnic origin, 14.9% Mixed, 10.8% Black, 4.1% Chinese, 2.7% Asian and 12.2% classified themselves as being of 'other' ethnic origin. At the time of data collection the majority of the young people involved in the project were living with their parent/s (59.5%), 20.3% were in supported housing, 9.5% lived with a relative (other than their parent/s), 4.1% owned a property or were privately renting, 2.8% were living in foster care or a residential children's home, 2.7% were living with friends or 'sofa surfing', and 1.4% lived with their partner. 55.4% of young people surveyed were in education or training.[4] In terms of educational profile, 31.1% of participants had achieved GCSE level qualifications, 25% AS/A Level or equivalent, 15% NVQ or equivalent, 6.9% had achieved a certificate or diploma, 1.4% had gained and degree level qualification and 19.4% had not acquired any formal qualifications.

Participants had been engaged with the project for varying lengths of time. 5.4% had been involved for less than a month, 16.2% for 1-3 months, 18.9% for 4-6 months, 13.5% for 7-9 months, 17.6% for 10-12 months, 23% for 1-2 years and 5.4% for over 2 years. Of these 24.3% of participants were engaging at least once per week, 16.2% once every two weeks, 12.2 % monthly, 32.4% less than once a month, and 14.9% of young people surveyed had just finished their first contact. In total, 12.2% of young people taking part in the evaluation self-reported having been excluded or expelled from school. 35.1% said they had been in trouble with the Police and 10.8% had spent time in custody.

[3] At the time of the research, the *Future Stars* project had worked with over 600 young people via 260 open-access community sessions. Operating across statutory, voluntary and private sector organisations, the programme had working relationships with 87 referral contacts and project partners.
[4] N = 73 (1 missing value).

A total of 12, one-to-one semi-structured interviews were carried out with project participants (young people), three were conducted with project stakeholders/partners,[5] and one with the project lead. In addition, a focus group interview was undertaken with the project team (n=6). Interviews and focus groups lasted between 15 and 70 minutes and discussion explored respondent perceptions and experiences of the project and their role within it. All interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim. Project participants (young people) took part in the research on a voluntary basis and the respondent group was representative of the broader participant population. Staff and project partners were required to take part in the evaluation on account of the funder requirements in play.

Quantitative data were obtained from project participants via self-report questionnaires incorporating tailored scales developed specifically for the evaluation. Questionnaires were administered after participants had completed a particular course or programme as part of their engagement with the project. This is with the exception of young people who attended the football programme and those who were involved as volunteers as their participation was on-going at the time of data collection. Questionnaires measured outcomes relating to confidence, self-esteem and offending behaviour, and employment, education and training. Descriptive analysis was carried out to assess the extent to which participation in the project had impacted these areas.

Qualitative data were analysed using a grounded theory approach whereby respondent interpretations of their experiences of the project were explored in detail as were the meanings which they attached to these experiences (see Strauss and Corbin 1998; Bryman 2016). The questioning style during interview was open-ended and, where necessary, further probing took place to clarify responses (see Hammersley and Atkinson 2011). Data were managed and

[5] One project partner was interviewed twice.

organised manually through a process of open, axial and selective coding (Charmaz 2014) and were subsequently analysed in four stages. First, transcripts were read in full to gain an overview of the data. Second, each transcript was individually coded and indexed allowing the different aspects of respondent experience to be captured. Third, these experiences were clustered and inductively categorized around a number of over-arching topics. The final stage of the analysis involved the formal deductive organization of these topics into generic themes, two of which we explore here: (i) recognition and acceptance as a foundation for social inclusion, and (ii) accumulating (social) capital and acquiring employment

Recognition and acceptance as foundations for social inclusion

As mentioned above, discourses surrounding an enhanced sense of social inclusion are often heavily informed by mainstream expectations related to functional life-course transitions and the accomplishment of certain (accepted) mechanisms for achieving such progress (Rose et al. 2012). Within the transition to adulthood, existing literature suggests that paid employment is often recognised as a key marker of inclusion (Strathdee 2013), with qualifications and attributes obtained through formal education cited as an integral element of this wider process (Whittaker 2010). However, for young people engaged by *Future Stars*, a number of personal, socio-cultural and logistical barriers impeded this transition, which had implications for the sense of social inclusion experienced by participants, and which heightened feelings of worthlessness and insignificance (Rose et al. 2012). For example, Louise, a project partner, noted that several project participants arrived with limited confidence and low self-esteem, which often resulted from a lack of positive recognition during their prior experiences, a scenario that was also observed by *Future Stars* project staff and those from other partner organisations. Louise expressed how these (and other) factors appeared to impact participants' appreciation of how to gain employment:

> These young people are coming from challenging backgrounds … Maybe their parents have never worked … They've not got a solid base or grounding or understanding to know where to start from. So, [it is] for us to try and help break that barrier but also give those young people the confidence that they can apply for … jobs at the same level as other people.

Similarly, Natasha, the Project Lead, when reflecting upon existing familial relationships observed how the (low) expectations of others often impeded participant understandings and aspirations related to paid employment:

> A massive barrier that we face is … families that just do not work and, you know, that's the way that [these young people are] brought up. That's what they think is normal and acceptable …

Against this backdrop, much of the initial work of the project focused upon constructing an environment in which participants were able to foster strong interpersonal relationships with project staff (Morgan and Parker 2017), through which they could be recognised for the qualities that they brought to the project. Hence, rather than formal structures of recognition being the dominant currency via which participants could gain approval, other, more informal structures of recognition were acknowledged, which enabled a sense of acceptance and trust to develop (Whitaker 2010; Rose et al. 2012). As Louise explained:

> We just made it sort of like a safe place where you could speak up and share your thoughts and that's obviously the key isn't it, empowering them.

In a similar vein, Padma, another project partner, explained how formal structures of recognition (Whitaker 2010) were often overlooked within staff-participant interactions to further facilitate acceptance and trust:

> It's having something [they can] say is an achievement, boosting their confidence and self-esteem. A lot of them come from broken homes so they don't have their academic qualifications. People can't say 'I've got nine GCSEs[6]' or anything like that' … so anyway we can boost their confidence, show them that they are capable of achieving and there is potential …

Project participants readily articulated how the environment created by project staff had helped to incubate a sense of recognition and acceptance, which, in turn, had generated an array of positive outcomes. Echoing the tenets of a social justice education[7] (Shields 2004; Carlisle et al. 2006), many young people commented on the ability of staff to make them feel welcome, at ease and understood, rather than judged, which often sat in stark contrast to their experiences of previous relationships with adults, including schooling (see also Morgan and Bush 2016). As Jack, one project participant, articulated:

> I felt very welcome … you know, chatting to them all [staff] and it was sort of like I'd known them for ages and we were laughing and joking and, yeah, it was just sort of mad how many people that I didn't know were interested in what I wanted to do…and put their time and effort in to me … You come to something like this and you're expecting … [that] you've got to speak formal, you've got to dress formal - you don't. You come

[6] The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is a set of exams taken in England usually by students at the end of Year 11 (the eleventh year of compulsory education).

[7] For Carlisle et al. (2006) the provision of a social justice education involves the enhancement of equity across multiple identity groups, developing critical perspectives among young people, and promoting social action.

> and you feel relaxed, you feel welcome, you don't feel out of place and they're the type of people that will make you motivated, not someone that's … *looking down* [emphasis added].

Another project participant, Harriet, highlighted how recognition from staff engendered a sense of acceptance, which enabled both her and others to trust the advice and guidance offered by the project team:

> They're lovely … really nice people and also they give a lot of their time … I think you grow more of a friendship … than a student-teacher type thing … You don't feel awkward when asking a question or anything.

As a result, numerous participants spoke of increased self-confidence and self-esteem which resulted from a growing sense of achievement that arose from successfully negotiating a task or situation that they had encountered on the project. Indeed, survey results indicated that the overwhelming majority of young people sampled (98.7%) 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that taking part in the project had raised their confidence and self-esteem. In addition, survey findings demonstrated that 98.7% 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that taking part in the project had improved their social and/or communication skills. Jack (project participant), recalled how Project Lead, Natasha, had impacted his own confidence levels by recognising his talents as a DJ:

> At the time I wasn't as confident … [but] she's sort of given me that first little bit of confidence, that was the first thing I'd ever done to [in front of] strangers … Lads were coming over 'Yeah, you played good'… then for someone else to want to help me I thought to myself I must be doing something right … [Natasha's] saying to me 'Don't waste the talent you've got, pursue it'.

Clearly, recognition by programme staff had the potential to positively impact participants (see also Shields 2004; Cheng et al. 2006; Whitaker 2010; Rose et al. 2012). These findings further contribute to understandings surrounding the relative role of social inclusion interventions on developing recognition and acceptance (Morgan and Parker 2017). However, there was also evidence that recognition and acceptance by project staff had helped to change the way in which some participants 'viewed themselves' and were viewed by others, to the extent that they began to reorient their aspirations and attitudes towards factors associated with functional life transitions, such as education and employment. For example, a number of participants spoke positively about their experiences of the project and the help and support which they received in relation to their engagement in meaningful activities such as education, training and employment. Survey results confirmed these comments with 81.5% of young people 'agreeing' or 'strongly agreeing' that their attitude towards work and employment had improved as a consequence of their participation in the project. Similar sentiments were apparent within testimonies provided by project staff in relation to one particular young person (Sajiv), who was described as "defensive" on entering the project and who "did not want to communicate" with staff or fellow participants. As Louise (project partner and mentor to Sajiv) explained:

> … he'd never even been on a work experience … he was never given that opportunity because he was known as a 'bad lad' … He'd always seen an adult as someone who just tells him off all the time, so he'd kind of written himself off ... The fact now that he feels confident that he can write a CV, that he can talk to someone within an interview and know what to do …

Central to this reorientation process were the efforts of project staff to offer meaningful and non-judgmental guidance (Halsey 2007; Morgan and Parker 2017) by providing dedicated and tailored (long-term) support to participants. Project staff believed that spending quality time

with young people allowed them to discern in more detail the kinds of barriers that they were facing, where their career interests or ambitions lay, the stage they were at in their employment journey, and the expectations that they held. The specifics of this process came to light during interviews with staff and were best exemplified through Jamie's (staff member) interactions with Joel (young person). When reflecting upon this relationship, Jamie disclosed:

> I think he had a lot of friction with his Job Centre about his ambitions versus his reality … but they don't have the time to sit with him … it took me about four sessions of giving him unlimited time and listening to what he thought were his barriers and to really get him buying into what then I was going to say to him, which was essentially what the Job Centre was saying … But he heard it better once I'd given him that time and he's now working at [a television company] …

Echoing Rose et al. (2012), the development of relationships which promote acceptance and trust, and which accentuate informal structures of recognition (Whitaker 2010), may provide the foundation upon which an enhanced sense of social inclusion can be constructed. However, given prominent narratives and discourses which associate social inclusion with paid employment (Levitas 2005; Strathdee 2013), it is to an exploration of how *Future Stars* participants were able to utilise these relationships to create opportunities and pathways towards employment that we now turn.

Accumulating capital and acquiring employment

Once acceptance-based relationships had been established with project participants, the next task of the *Future Stars* project was to accentuate the development of various forms of capital that might serve to enhance the employability prospects of those engaged. This primarily involved

the development of human and social capital (Strathdee 2013)[8]. In relation to human capital, project staff helped young people by providing access to practical employment support as well as opportunities that allowed them to develop professionally. Typically, this involved advising young people to identify employment goals and aspirations whilst supporting them with various aspects of the job search and application process, such as developing CVs and interview skills. In this sense, 'preparation for work' was a key facet of the project with 78.3% of young people reporting that after taking part they had gained a better understanding of the workplace and 81% stating that they felt better equipped to enter employment, education or training. Nathaniel, a project participant reflected on this process:

> When I started [on the project] I was actually going through a lot of rounds of interviews for jobs I'd been applying for … I asked Jamie and Natasha [project staff] about things they might ask me in the interviews because I have had job interviews in the past but when you go somewhere the way they do interviews is ridiculously different … I even sent Jamie one of my CVs at one point, just for some pointers because at the time I'd not formatted my CV correctly …

Data also indicated how other forms of human capital, such as gaining relevant qualifications, participating in accredited training courses, and engaging with work placements and/or volunteering opportunities, were developed. Indeed, survey results demonstrated that as a result of their participation, 59.5% of young people had completed a work placement either with or outside of the project. For some participants, such opportunities facilitated their first experiences of responsibility and ownership, while for others they provided an introduction to leadership roles. More specifically, this involved participants taking responsibility for managing aspects of

[8] In relation to the current paper, we define human capital as the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competencies derived by an individual through education, training and experience (Becker, 2006).

project delivery and ensuring success, which, in turn, helped them to develop a level of independence and a range of transferable skills.[9] Harriet was one participant who benefitted from these opportunities:

> We had to do all risk assessments, we had to make letters and consent forms, we also had meetings … booking out the venue … every process from day one until it ends … I'm the group leader so I spent one night … trying to find different venues … finding out prices and phoning [a volunteering charity] to try and get all our bookings and stuff, so yeah that's helped [with my] independence.

That said, findings revealed that it was the accumulation of social capital that had the most significant impact on developing participant employability prospects. The majority entered the project with few social contacts and limited networks of people who could facilitate social mobility. Consequently, an important, initial, step in the process of social capital accumulation was to develop connections and friendships with fellow project participants. Drawing parallels with Putnam's (2000) concept of bridging social capital, data indicated how engagement with the activities offered by the project enabled participants to meet other young people whom they would not ordinarily come into contact. As, Padma (project partner) explained:

> For the last two, three years, there's been a lot more residents coming in who are … asylum seekers and refugees and they keep themselves a lot more to themselves than the other residents so you don't find them mixing in as much but the programmes gave the opportunity for everyone to come together.

[9] Survey results indicated that young people gained a range of other skills such as leadership and organisation, with around three quarters stating they felt 'fairly' or 'very confident' in being a leader (75.7%) and 70.3% feeling 'fairly' or 'very confident' in organising themselves.

The accumulation of bridging social capital enabled project participants to enhance their sense of community cohesion and develop a set of strong ties (Granovetter 2005) within their relational network. That said, and as already noted, the development of stronger ties has been largely explained as possessing a limiting effect on social mobility (see Granovetter 1983) given that bridging social capital rarely traverses diverse social divisions. However, competing literature has highlighted how, for those lacking in reassuring or positive social networks, accruing bridging social capital has an altogether more positive impact and can provide a foundation for the accumulation of linking social capital (Kemp 2010). This was affirmed by Aimee, another project partner:

> A lot of the young people we're working with are experiencing social isolation so it's getting them out the house and I suppose socialising … making contact with their own peers because I think a lot of the young people we work with have negative experiences of their own peer group …

Project participants further reiterated the facilitative effect of bridging social capital by highlighting how engagement with the project equipped them with the ability to reach out to other people and overcome some of the prejudicial assumptions that they brought to the project. One such example was provided by Tyrone, who observed:

> You do make friends with people that you don't expect and people are not … as you would prejudge them to be for stereotypical reasons, so you do make friends easily.

Nevertheless, despite the accrued benefits of bridging social capital on community cohesion (Putnam 2000; Kemp 2010), it was the development of weaker ties (Granovetter 2005) that enabled project participants to enhance their individual prospects and sense of social inclusion.

Typically, such connections were constructed by putting project participants in direct contact with potential employers who could assist social mobility by offering opportunities for employment or work experience. Consequently, the data provided several examples as to how project participants acquired linking social capital and created vertical connections between divergent social classes (Putnam 2000). Primarily, this involved project staff utilising existing and well-established connections with local businesses and organisations. Project participant Joel, articulated how these connections had assisted him in acquiring an episode of work experience at a local television company, which had benefited both himself and others:

> It [the work placement at a television company] has given me good experience and I'm learning new skills … There's three [project participants] and we rotate around … At the moment I'm on reception so I'm learning customer service … then I'll be moved on to events … and then the post room … so it's good experience, [it will] look good on my CV.

Given that sports, arts and music activities were used by the project as the main tool for engagement, it is perhaps unsurprising that many of the young people held an interest in entering careers within these sectors.[10] Indeed, the types of work experience on offer reflected this. One project participant, Quentin, confirmed, that these experiences had assisted in the development of skills which had enabled him to feel confident to communicate appropriately with a broader range of people and across social divides:

> I've done work experience at a [university] Sports Centre … work experience at a [community] sports centre. With the work experience you have to learn how to deal with

[10] In terms of overall outcomes, 43.2% of the young people surveyed reported obtaining employment after being involved with the project. Of these, 34.4% had been in post for 1-3 months at the time of the research, 31.3% for 4-6 months, 18.8% for less than one month, 12.6% for 7-12 months, and 3.1% for more than one year.

> different people and how to have conversations … it just helps to develop people skills ... makes you more employable.

Along similar lines, fellow project participant Sonny described how he had experienced enhanced employability prospects as a result of the linking social capital:

> Before the programme I've never even looked for a job, I've never had an interview or been on a work placement. Now I've had an interview with real employers, a work placement with the team at [shopping centre] and built new networks to help me get a job in retail.

While these findings indicate that project participants benefitted from the linking social capital that had been generated with employers and voluntary organisations (Putnam 2000), the data also provided insights into how a broadened relational network founded on weak ties (Granovetter 2005) had altered the perceptions and preconceived ideas of employers regarding the young people concerned. For example, project partners revealed that there was a tendency to make negative assumptions about young people on the basis of where they were from geographically and the actions of their peers, which were typically associated with crime and anti-social behaviour. As Louise (project partner and retail business operator) reflected:

> Our staff didn't really know how to handle the young people at first either, so it's been a learning curve for them ... They just labelled these young people as 'Oh, they're from [that suburb]' or 'They're from [that suburb], they can't be much good'. So it's … how adults view young people as well which I think [now] would be a positive one … There's lots of negative attitudes when it comes to the media and young people … It's one of those things, it takes a while to undo a perception or an idea that people might have…

> [These connections] break down and build mutual respect between both the adult and the young person …

One final, yet important sub-text to the analysis of social capital accumulation and its impact on social mobility for the participants of *Future Stars*, was the opportunities for advantage (Bourdieu 1986) that project partners (and their organisations) stood to gain by being associated with the project and, more specifically, the charitable foundation that managed its implementation. The charitable foundation itself was established by a high-profile former professional sportsman and project staff observed that the opportunity to be associated with this 'name' was a clear attraction to potential project partners in enhancing their own relational networks, ties and social capital (Putnam 2000; Granovetter 2005). As Natasha, the Project Lead, observed:

> A lot of the businesses we've worked with, it's funny actually because they're not that keen to work with the young people, they're keen to work with [the Foundation] … Our name provides a really great hook for young people but also for partners and businesses.

However, as Natasha went on to concede, this, in turn, was mutually beneficial to project participants in providing access to employers and opportunities to accrue social capital. She continued:

> … but then when they meet the young people that we work with they're actually really surprised by how they come across and how they work … So, yeah, businesses are always quite surprised … it is usual that they're excited to be on board with the [Foundation] but they have that added element of surprise when they get a young person and they're actually brilliant. It's always just great to change that perception, that negative perception …

Clearly, the opportunities provided for young people through *Future Stars* underline the facilitative impact of social capital accumulation on social mobility. Moreover, the findings demonstrate how the interactions between project staff and the project partners created a norm of reciprocity based upon a mutual sense of trustworthiness through which all partners raised their prospects to benefit socially and economically (Coleman 1988).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to explore the ways in which community-based interventions involving sport and the performing arts might present an alternative means to enhance the employability prospects of marginalised young people. In particular, it has sought to demonstrate how understandings of social capital might be applied to such contexts and how, in turn, these understandings might be made manifest via instances of social inclusion, social mobility and life-course transition.

Whilst tentative in nature, the findings from the *Future Stars* project indicated that as a consequence of a lack of positive recognition during their early years, many participants had a low sense of self-worth which, when accompanied by an absence of familial encouragement around social mobility, resulted in negative perceptions of paid employment. In light of this situation, project staff intentionally overlooked formal structures of recognition concentrating instead on more informal structures (Whittaker 2010; Morgan and Parker 2017), which enabled a sense of acceptance and trust to develop through everyday interactions and which, in turn, facilitated a range of positive outcomes. As a consequence, numerous respondents spoke of increased self-confidence and self-esteem which resulted from a growing sense of achievement that arose from successfully negotiating tasks or scenarios emerging from project participation. In addition, such experiences positively impacted the way in which participants came to view themselves, whilst reorienting their aspirations and attitudes towards factors associated with

functional life transitions (Hogan and Astone 1986). Typically, these experiences involved a (re)engagement with formal education and/or employment, which helped to further increase a sense of social belonging through the achievement of conventional markers of social inclusion (Whitaker 2010; Rose et al. 2012). Moreover, the relationships that the project was able to facilitate between young people and employers helped to change the way that a number of local businesses came to view young people. Findings showed that employers had a default tendency to make negative assumptions about young people on the basis of where they were from geographically and/or the actions of their peers. However, after meeting and spending time with project participants there was a positive shift in employer attitudes. Indeed, participants believed that taking part in the project had helped to change negative opinions of young people in the community simply because the project had provided the public with an opportunity to interact with young people and to see the positive activities that they were involved in.

Of course, such findings should not be taken to infer that interventions of this nature are a panacea for various social ills. On the contrary, we suggest that certain contextual conditions related to community-based interventions must be visible in order to promote the potential of these programmes to contribute to understandings of social assimilation and inclusion. Our findings demonstrate that uppermost within these conditions is the necessity for marginalised young people to generate trusting relationships with key personnel associated with the intervention concerned. In keeping with Shields' (2004) notion of a social justice education, we have demonstrated how positive interpersonal relationships can enhance the wider personal experiences of young people. As such, these findings, however tentative, reveal how, at one level, such projects may operate as catalysts for personal and social change.

What is clear is that the philosophy and practices of *Future Stars* project staff was critical to the establishment of trust, recognition and self-worth on the part of participants which, for some,

led to more positive and productive life-course choices. It has been argued elsewhere that adopting such a philosophy presents significant practical challenges amidst a policy landscape which predicates the sustainability and survival of community-based interventions upon funding regimes which prioritise short-term impacts and the attainment of pre-agreed numerical indicators (see Green 2007; Spaaij et al. 2013). That said, the findings of this paper underscore that when participation facilitates positive personal connection, there is potential for social capital to be acquired and employability prospects to be enhanced.

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