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SPORTS STUDENTS AS MENTORS FOR BOYS AND YOUNG MEN: DEVELOPING AN UNDERGRADUATE MODULE TO ADDRESS BOYS' EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

Paul Hopkins, Colin Baker

ABSTRACT

The article describes the development of the Sports Students as Mentors for Boys and Young Men undergraduate module developed for sports students attending universities in six European countries, sharing a common concern for boys' early school leaving. The module provides students with knowledge and skills of mentoring work along with strengths-based Positive Youth Development methodology and its 5Cs framework, enabling them to work with young males in educational settings, to motivate them to stay at school and improve their educational attainment and vocational choices. The module also instructs students on support for young male mental health, teaching them this is a key issue affecting educational performance. This article outlines broad contextual issues before outlining key steps, concluding with future development aims.

Keywords: boys' education, early school leaving, mentoring, positive youth development/5Cs, sports students, higher education

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INTRODUCTION

From November 2017 to December 2019 a partnership of five European universities from the Czech Republic (CZ), Greece (EL), Ireland (IR), Spain (ES) and the UK, and an Italian NGO (IT), collaborated to develop an undergraduate module for sports students: *Sports Students as Mentors for Boys and Young Men*—SSaMs (SSaMs, 2019). SSaMs aims to provide students of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with sufficient knowledge, skills and confidence to mentor boys and young men in schools and informal education settings who are underachieving at school. In doing so, the ultimate aim is to motivate them to stay at school and improve their educational attainment and vocational choices. The module also instructs students on how to support young men's mental and emotional health; this is a key issue affecting their educational performance and outcomes. For students these knowledge and skills can be utilised in the sports workplace, particularly sport in the community work. The module, which has already been implemented at the University of Thessaly (EL) during 2019, its components and details of its formative progress are freely available to view and download online from the SSaMs website. This paper describes the module's development, first briefly outlining broad contextual issues, before outlining key steps and concluding with future development aims.

SSAMS CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

The European Union's (EU) Europe 2020 strategy seeks to reduce the proportion of early leavers of education and training to less than 10 % by 2020 (European Commission, 2010), and the indications are that progress is being made, recent data showing a reduction from 17% in 2002 to 10.6% in 2018 (Eurostat, 2020). Research suggests that positive health and wellbeing is important for academic achievement (PHE, 2014), and pupils who feel confident about their learning develop the ability to cope with challenges (Aronson, 2002). However, not all pupils are able to realise these benefits: those experiencing disadvantage are more likely to fail academically and to disengage or drop out of education altogether (Thomas, 2000; Weinstein, 2002) due to inequalities in opportunity, attitudes and access to resources (Becker & Luthar, 2002). The link between poor mental health and risk of dropping out (Breslau, 2010; Breslau et al., 2011) has focused attention on promoting emotional, social, cognitive and physical development in order to help break the cycle of disadvantage (Joint Action on Mental Health and Well-being, 2017). High-quality education is central to this with respect to providing a context and an environment in which whole-person development is promoted. This may usefully combat negative academic

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experiences, such as alienation and poor academic achievement which serve to affect confidence, self-belief and mental health negatively (Brannlund et al., 2017; Becker & Luthar, 2002). It is concerning, therefore, that the rate of early school leaving (ESL) is higher amongst boys than girls in all EU member states [except Bulgaria and Romania (European Commission, 2017)]; males are more likely to leave education with a lower secondary education at most, yet on educational support to prevent ESL there are "a shortage of initiatives specifically targeted at boys" (EURYDICE, 2010).

European country	Male	Female
Czech Republic	6.4%	6.0%
Greece	9.4%	6.4%
Italy	17.5%	11.8%
Republic of Ireland	8.4%	5.4%
Spain	24.0%	15.8%
UK	11.7%	9.8%

Table 1. 2015 male and female rates of early school leaving for countries involved in the SSaMs programme (European Commission, 2017)

Underpinned by an ecological framework that emphasises interactional effects impacting students and the wider school and community context on achievement (Becker & Luthar, 2002), the SSaMs project recognises the role of education as a known social determinant of health influencing employment, income and housing outcomes; all of these factors critically affect male health (Macdonald, 2005). In this respect, ESL affects wider society by impacting economic growth, poverty, criminality and social exclusion (Brunello & De Paola, 2014). Indeed, a higher standard of education is associated with increased financial income and better health outcomes, those with higher levels of educational attainment having lower death rates from common chronic and acute conditions (Telfair & Shelton, 2012). The project's approach is also consistent with the World Health Organization (WHO) policy objectives concerning intersectoral collaboration to address health concerns and outcomes in respect of "actions undertaken by sectors outside the health sector, possibly, but not necessarily in collaboration with the health sector" (WHO, 2008, p.2), and the role of schools as a setting affecting health and action on social determinants to address male health (WHO, 2018).

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Why sports-based mentoring?

Adopting the maxim that policy should translate into practice if it is to be effective, trainers should provide practitioners with the skills necessary to implement practices that produce the intended outcomes. Sports personnel are well placed to work with boys and young men in schools, informal learning environments and youth sport, and there are many examples of male health-related initiatives utilising male affinity with sport as a conduit of work with boys and men (Hunt et al., 2014; Pringle et al., 2014; CTCT, 2019). Sports personnel routinely work with young males on health improvement and social concerns in schools and non-formal education settings, and there is evidence of sports coaches working with boys as mentors in a small number of UK schools (Eaude, 2008; Gulati & King, 2009; Beattie et al., 2014). However, these personnel generally lack the knowledge and skills required to work effectively in supportive education, health, and social contexts (Parnell et al., 2013), and there is very little evidence of dedicated training for sports coaches and personnel in addressing male-specific concerns.

Innovation

Given the broader international context of the SSaMs project and the varied skill-set of the participants, an innovative approach was adopted to develop SSaMs, drawing on best practice to achieve the project's intention of developing a module suitable for use in different national settings, within the collective experience of boys' ESL. The SSaMs consortium consisted of academics and practitioners with wide experience of work with boys and young men in health and education contexts—and participants with no experience of gendered work, but who contributed knowledge of sport and community work skills to SSaMs. A participating HEI reported that the project was innovative in terms of –

a) applying a gender lens to tackling a universal problem across member states (lower educational attainment and early-school leaving among boys);

b) drawing on principles of best practice to engage boys around positive models of mental health;

c) looking beyond boys and young men as the problem by drawing on established practices of mentoring to engage boys and young men;

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d) exploiting different examples and analogies from sport to enhance mentoring strategies used in the programme; and drawing on different socio-cultural contexts from partner countries to find more holistic solutions to address common problems. (SSaMs Final Report IR, 2020).

THE SSAMS DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

Needs Analysis

As a principal project activity, a needs analysis was undertaken via a survey to investigate what was happening in the partner countries concerning activities being undertaken by HEIs sports science departments to –

a) Improve educational and health outcomes for young males in the participating six countries;

b) Explore student opinions of mentoring work with young males;

c) Inform the development of the national contexts of the SSaMs Learning Materials.

The needs analysis consisted of a HEI survey (HES) and a Student Stakeholder Questionnaire (SSQ). All five participating HEIs took part in the HES and SSQ; in Italy this was facilitated with an Italian university via the Italian partner NGO. The HES and SSQ content and questions were jointly agreed and administered in partner countries by the SSaMs consortium, with the UK HEI responsible for data collation and producing a report for the consortium to inform SSaMs development.

Responses to the HES

Fifty-one representatives of universities out of a total of 101 HEIs contacted in the six participating member states responded; this included three responses from universities in non-participating EU states (Cyprus, Finland and Sweden). 10% of responding HEIs demonstrated interest in activities to reduce ESL. 11 HEIs indicated work by Faculty of Sport and Exercise teaching and research staff to reduce ESL; 4 IR, 4 IT, 1 EL and two HEIs from non-participating EU nations (Cyprus, Finland).

Seven responding HEIs indicated that they undertook research into reducing ESL; eight also reported teaching provision. Seven HEIs indicated involvement in practical mentoring work

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with young people in the local community to support their academic achievement; 3 IR, 3 IT, with one in a non-participating country (Finland). Responses evidenced that no male gender-responsive mentoring programmes existed in any responding HEI, and mentoring that is undertaken is gender-blind and targeted at both males and females.

HEI representatives were asked if they perceived mentoring work with schools and youth groups to reduce ESL as a potential area of work for sports science students. 13% of responding HEIs indicated a positive interest in this area of work (4 IR; 1 CZ; 3 EL, 3 IT; 2 other - Sweden and Finland), and 15% of responders indicated that they would like further information about the work. Respondents were also asked if a module providing knowledge and skills of mentoring work with young people would be compatible within the sports science programme modules of their respective HEI, for which 20% HEIs gave positive responses.

After ascertaining interest in generic mentoring work with young people, HEIs were then asked if a module providing knowledge and skills of mentoring work specifically with young males to reduce ESL was compatible within the sports science programme of their HEI. Interest in this area from responding HEIs was reduced, but still elicited 11% positive responses indicating interest (4 IR, 3 CZ, 1 EL, 1 IT, 2 other – Finland and Sweden). A further 10% of responding HEIs were interested in receiving further information.

Overall, responses from Ireland and the non-English language countries about the module's potential was more enthusiastic than from the UK, as typified by qualitative feedback: "I'm not really in a position to complete the survey as it stands. I can make some estimates for you, and tell you that this kind of work is quite distant from the focus of the academic department at [UK university name withheld]". A reason for this might be that the UK has many community sport projects working on or around male health and social concerns, including those based with professional sports clubs, but that academic grounding in this is not perceived to be a necessary requirement for this area of work. We contend that higher education is not yet realising the opportunity for provision of sports-based courses addressing an identified need for training in this area. Conversely, neither are professional sports organisations necessarily realising the potential benefits of educating practitioners in male gender-responsive work, despite opportunities for potential commissioning of work by education, public health and local authorities.

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Cognisant of these issues, the SSaMs consortium sought to develop a module applicable within diverse HEI contexts that provides a demonstrable rationale for work with boys and men, whilst acknowledging a scarcity of governmental involvement in male gender-responsive work in a wider European environment; further, the resource recognises the pioneering work already underway in the Republic of Ireland in the form of the Irish *National Men's Health Action, Plan HI–M 2017 – 2021* (HSE, 2016) as an exemplar of gender responsive policy. From a policy perspective, the SSaMs consortium's precursory scoping of government programmes found that boys' and men's concerns are often overlooked in the majority of the members' countries: the notion that *this is how men are* is common. Work with boys and men, whilst not part of the everyday discourse, is at least familiar in English speaking countries but less so elsewhere. Indeed, an interesting challenge arose as the project progressed with respect to sensitivities within HEIs concerning the overt focus on boys and young men in respect of gender equality, despite wide discrepancy in rates of male to female school ESL.

Responses to the SSQ

SSQ. Part 3. Q2: Support I would need as a sports student for mentoring work with boys and young men?
"A mentor for myself. A person who has been a mentor to young men and boys previously to facilitate my (cpd) learning process in this field. A link with other mentors who are at same level of experience in relation to working with the demographic". *Male student, IT Carlow, Ireland*

Table 2. Example of an SSQ response

For the SSQ, which sought to investigate students' perceptions concerning the need for, and nature of components of a sports-based male mentoring course, a total of 168 responses were received from students across the five partner university institutions. Students indicated a preference for a practice-based rather than an overtly theoretical course and described the skills and competencies they perceived would be required to deliver a male mentoring module, including -

a) a *mentor for the mentor* (highlighted as a prominent theme by students);
b) an introduction to psychology (non-sports-based);
c) counselling skills;
d) communication skills;
e) information about child development and welfare.

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Accordingly, the SSaMs consortium focused on a practical coaching approach to mentoring: couching mentoring in familiar and engaging terms in order to incorporate these views in the completed module. It was acknowledged that accommodating all of the needs, skills, and competencies identified by students was not possible due to time constraints; however, some of these were likely to be met by other provision within HEIs.

THE MENTOR LEARNING MATERIALS

Mentoring is a well-established, non-formal method of improving academic attainment. On addressing youth unemployment, the European Commission recommendations include enhancing support for non-formal education workers—for example, those in mentor roles (European Commission, 2014). The SSaMs learning materials are informed by the Mengage (UK) *Unit Award in Mentoring Boys and Young Men* materials (Mengage, 2020) which provide practical knowledge and skills for people interested in mentoring young males. In providing an AQA Unit Award certificate, the Mengage materials utilise the strengths-based Positive Youth Development (PYD) methodology (Lerner, 2005), which in turn underpinned the SSaMs development methodology. Strengths-based mentoring is used in sport settings to develop key athletic strengths; PYD specifically utilises a system familiar to sports personnel, with slight variations, called the 5Cs. This approach develops a young person's strengths, each C relating to a domain that can be worked on with a young person according to his or her individual developmental needs (Lerner et al., 2013). The 5Cs are:

1. **Competence**—enabling and having a positive view of a person's actions in specific areas: social, academic, cognitive, health, and vocational.
2. **Confidence**—a sense of self-worth and self-efficacy.
3. **Connection**—having positive bonds with people and institutions: peers, family, school and community.
4. **Character**—a respect for societal and cultural norms, possession of standards for correct behaviour, a sense of right and wrong and integrity.
5. **Caring**—having sympathy and empathy for others.

A principal rationale for adopting the PYD strengths-based approach for SSaMs was its compatibility with both a salutogenic (Super et al., 2018) and social-determinants-focused model of improving male health (Macdonald, 2011). The men's health policy experience of Ireland and

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Australia has indicated the importance of a strengths-based approach to male health (Macdonald, 2005; Smith et al., 2018), and the SSaMs project's focus on developing basic learning skills is intended to help boys secure the 5Cs. Further, PYD and the 5Cs framework is currently administered in practice as a mostly gender-blind methodology, and research into PYD and its 5C indicators on gender is limited to a small number of studies (Conway et al, 2015; Gomez-Baya et al, 2019). The SSaMs work informs practical strengths-based work with young males and exemplifies a gendered approach using PYD.

YOUNG MALE MENTAL HEALTH

It has been long established that poor mental health is associated with poor educational attainment and early school dropout (Cornaglia et al., 2012; Brännlund & Edlund, 2017); "for boys, mental-health problems during the early and late teens were (equally) strongly associated with lower grades" (Brännlund et al., 2017, p.6). Given that we were asking sports-based mentors to assist boys' educational performance, we asked what sports-based mentors could actually do to improve boys' mental health. It would not be ethical to ask sports students to take on roles for which they are not professionally qualified; therefore, our focus was on using PYD/the 5Cs framework as a means of exploring internal and external assets and using or developing these to increase resilience. Where mentors encountered mental health concerns beyond their remit, signposting to appropriate services is advised, and a core component of SSaMs was that all students would undertake and demonstrate competence in understanding personal boundaries and safeguarding concerns. A stance of *anything that makes you scared – note and report it* is strongly encouraged, and student mentors are expected to work to the safeguarding protocols of the school in which they are working. Further, there is a requirement, as recognised in the SSQ for a *mentor for the mentor* to ensure students are able to develop and refine their skillsets. Whilst sports students will be working in support of boys' mental health, they may encounter mentee scenarios that affect their own mental health, or which are beyond their capacity to assist. In these instances, the *mentor for the mentor* would be the SSaMs course lead who will also be working in liaison with the schools that the sports students are attending. SSaMs students are also provided with a Mentor Reflection Workbook to record both their own and mentee perspectives on how they are progressing toward attaining the 5C goals and to record any significant observations.

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BARRIERS TO SSAMS IMPLEMENTATION

During SSaMs development a number of issues arose concerning the focus of SSaMs, including –

a) Gender-responsive work with males is more familiar in English speaking countries than in non-English speaking nations;
b) There is commonality of boys' educational underachievement and ESL across Europe. Other than in Ireland there are limited policy contexts in individual nations to act as a driver of this area of work;
c) Without knowledge of why single gender-responsive action may be required, authorities tasked to implement equalities work will, in all likelihood, default to a gender-blind position. Either or both equality legislation and authorities' understanding of how this should be implemented hindered SSaMs in one country;
d) HEI sports departments generally focus on sports performance. Whilst sport in the community, at least in UK and Irish contexts, is a known concept and well-developed area for sport and leisure organisations, provision of gender-responsive courses is an unfamiliar concept to European HEI sports departments.

Government policy can act as a driver of research and practice in this area of work. Indeed, countries such as Ireland and Australia already provide examples of interventions, but it is important to understand *why* gender-responsive work is needed in order to help locate this as an accepted feature of health-based interventions. The WHO *Health and well-being of men in the WHO European Region: better health through a gender approach* (WHO, 2018) policy document indicates an acknowledgement of need and recommendations for action, but this is not mandatory, and it remains to be seen whether individual nations take heed and respond with meaningful activity.

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CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

The finalised SSaMs module and materials were launched in partner countries during November and December 2019. The completed module, translated into partner country languages, consists of six hour-long teaching sessions supported with a further six sessions of practical mentoring work with boys that students are expected to undertake with local schools, to be arranged by their own HEIs. Components of the module include *train the trainer* materials and accompanying PowerPoint presentations, as well as student texts relating to each module session and complementary resources. The module sections are detailed below (Table 3).

Section 1.	Why work with young men?
Section 2.	What is mentoring?
Section 3.	Effective mentor-mentee relationships and safeguarding
Section 4.	Positive Youth Development and the 5Cs
Section 5.	Practical strategies to promote life skills through the 5Cs
Section 6.	Supporting the emotional and mental health needs of boys and young men.

Table 3. SSaMs modules

The module is designed to be flexible and can be used as a stand-alone resource to be run on consecutive days or weeks, or its components can be used discretely to support work in work in other areas. Whilst the focus was very much on sports students working with boys the module would likely have strong appeal to, and have a use in, other academic areas with an interest in work with young males in health, educational and social contexts. SSaMs was implemented at the University of Thessaly in Greece in the spring 2019 semester. Other SSaMs consortium partners are currently exploring implementation of the module and the University of Gloucestershire will be implementing SSaMs as part of its *Your Future* programme.

The SSaMs consortium consisted of partners from Palacký University, Czech Republic; University of Thessaly, Greece; IT Carlow, Republic of Ireland; CESIE, Italy; Universidad de Murcia, Spain; University of Gloucestershire, UK. For individual contacts and further information please visit: https://www.sportsmentors.eu/

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