**Sport and Underachievement amongst Protestant Youth in Northern Ireland: A Boxing Club Case Study.**

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**Abstract**

Published research provides support for the potential of sport to promote social, cultural and personal development. In the UK, a corresponding shift in sports development policy is evident, moving away from achieving sports-related goals towards contributing to the government’s social policy priorities. Substantial public sector investment has been made in ‘sport for development’ projects as a result. However, other scholars caution against an over reliance on the perceived ‘power’ of sport to deliver upon sport’s often vaunted claims. Strategic priorities determined from the ‘top-down’ exclude those delivering such projects from involvement in decision-making. This article focuses upon a boxing club situated in one of Northern Ireland’s most deprived wards and where the prospects of so called ‘hard to reach’ young Protestant population remain modest subsequent to the Good Friday Peace Agreement. This article will examine how the club uses sport to improve educational and employability outcomes. Taking into consideration the community context, we conclude that the club offers an example of how sport can be harnessed at an individual (micro) and community (meso) level to contribute towards these priorities. Having identified the key elements of success in practice, the overriding question concerning whether, in a broader sense, the structures exist to permit macro-level impact from a micro- and meso-level project is unpacked and explored.

**Key words**: educational attainment, post-conflict, sport for development, employability, Protestant, sport policy.

**Introduction**

This article takes a novel approach to the examination of how sport is used to enhance the education and employability of a marginalised community within Post Conflict Western Europe. The European Commission (2016) Expert Group on Human Resources Development in Sport identified a lack of insight and understanding into the potential of sport regarding employability, specifically highlighting limited examples of good practice initiatives. This article attempts to contribute to the understanding of this underexplored field within the context of Protestant youth in NI by exploring the practical application of a community boxing club situated within a working class Protestant area of North Belfast, whose primary aim remains ‘To change lives through sport and education’.

The potential benefits of sport for development programmes have been supported by a raft of academic research (Coalter 2009, Collins 2004, Kidd and MacDonnell 2007, Kidd 2008, Sugden 2010). European (White Paper on Sport 2007, Europe 2020 Growth Strategy 2010) as well as Northern Ireland (NI) policy (Sport NI Matters 2009-19) has recognised the potential for sport to support the achievement of wider positive outcomes. Sport is increasingly evident on the social policy agenda (Houlihan, 2007), within urban regeneration initiatives (Spaaij *et al*. 2013), and development interventions into low and middle income economies (Darnell 2007; Sugden, 2010). In this policy context, sport has been promoted as a means to tackle what Clarke and Stewart (1997) referred to as ‘wicked issues’, where solutions are not easily found. These issues endure because of uncertainties in defining the scope and scale of the problem, further compounded by responsibility transcending departmental boundaries within fragmented governments, therefore, necessitating collaborative responses by departments. Nevertheless, a range of theorists highlight limitations of the underpinning evidence available to support sometimes over-reaching assertions concerning the impact of sport on specific target groups. (Coalter 2007, Sudgen 2005, Kidd and MacDonnell 2007, Donnelly *et al.* 2007, Collins and Kay 2003). Moreover, debates within the ‘sport for development’ field emphasize the importance of the academic community contributing to further the ‘application of theory to practice’.(Levermore and Beacom 2009, p.248). In particular advocating knowledge transfer collaborations, whilst, identifying processes through which sports participation can be linked with civic engagement as a means to facilitate change (Coakley 2011).

Within much sport for development research, context is important (Sugden 1996, 2006, 2010, Kidd 2008, Coalter 2006, 2007, 2009, Harris and Adams 2016). Context includes the social circumstances and conditions in which a programme operates. Following this introduction, we explore this context by reviewing the operations of Lyons Boxing Club (LBC) (a pseudonym given to protect anonymity) within the societal and political milieu surrounding the organisation.

Informed by the experiences of key stakeholders, a process evaluation reviews programme data and stakeholder opinions to identify what the club does, as well as dissecting how and why they operate. This forms the basis for an exploration of the influencing factors within LBC’s delivery approach, which leads to the attainment (or otherwise) of its target outcomes. To enable this study to reflect upon subsequent changes at both the individual level and across the wider community, thematic analysis is used to explore relationships between stakeholder perspectives in context, a process supported by Braun and Clarke (2006) who advocate that thematic analysis offers a theoretically-flexible approach to analysing qualitative data. In applying thematic analysis to sport for development rationale emerges from the work of Coalter (2007) who suggests that those delivering sport for development projects cannot assume that each participant will obtain the same benefit, in the same way, for the same reasons, from any given intervention. As such the processes undertaken within this article encapsulate an understanding of social processes and mechanisms, which may lead to the desired contextual outcomes (Coalter 2010). Finally, the article concludes with a review of the broader relevance of this research, extending ultimately to debate the limitations restricting sport for development at a macro policy level in Northern Ireland.

***Research Context / Background***

LBC is situated in a suburban area of North Belfast, a locale synonymous with issues evident in Northern Ireland’s past that still impact on life today. The largely Protestant (and politically Unionist) Electoral ward that houses this suburb is listed alongside its surrounding areas as being within the top 5% of education, skills and training deprivation (and the top 20% of most deprived wards as a whole) across NI. With a population consisting of 99% white and 77% Protestant (NIMDM, 2010), the ward displays higher segregation levels than those recorded across the wider Borough Council area of which it is part, with 40.3% of people from the Electoral ward claiming at least one low income benefit.

LBC was established in the 1980s as a community-based sport and education hub. A key driver for the club is to tackle growing education, skills and training deprivation. LBC seeks to make a positive difference at an individual and community level, through activities which attempt to change the behaviours of the individual and influence both their family and the surrounding community in which the club operates. In doing so, recognition is given to the contributing factors of educational disadvantage which Batty (2013) suggests include poverty, social class and family dynamics. As such, LBC have combined sporting and educational activities through partnerships developed with an array of statutory, voluntary, community and private organisations, such as neighbourhood police, schools, alternative education providers, justice and probation bodies, the local authority, community organisations and participants’ families.

The growth of the club is evidenced through the development of a purpose-built boxing facility in 1996, followed by the installation of a fitness suite in 2006 and a computer room in 2014. From this base in the centre of a working-class estate, which defines the social and cultural identity of Lyons, the club provides a range of activities, deploying the sport-plus and plus-sport models explored through the work of Coalter (2001). In particular, LBC facilitates the following open-access and targeted programmes:

* Boxing training with a pathway to recreational or competitive opportunities;
* Probation and youth justice programmes (providing in excess of 2000 reparation hours annually);
* Targeted employability projects for those ‘Not in Education, Employment or Training’ (NEETS); and,
* A range of sporting, social and educational activities open to all through its breakfast club, after school activities, weekend youth club, summer schemes and open-access community gym.

The club opens 82 hours per week, during which time they offer structured projects (26 hours per week), facilitate stakeholder events and offer informal open access ‘drop in’ activities. Offering holistic development opportunities, these structured activities attract just over 700 unique and regular participants annually, in addition to a performance pathway where promising boxers receive elite coaching alongside Commonwealth and Olympic athletes training at the club.

LBC targets young people in the area. This group is commonly referred to as ‘hard to reach’ or more appropriately ‘hard to hear’ as such groups rarely have sufficient agency to allow their views to be heard, understood or acted upon. Beyond the activities based at the club outreach work is carried out by club volunteers who work closely with local neighbourhood police officers to identify and tackle local issues, as they endeavour to promote an alternative outlet through the club. The rationale for the club philosophy builds on work from Crabbe *et al.* (2010) which suggests sport can be seen as a physical and temporal space that allows barriers to be broken down with meaningful interaction, providing an entrance route to ongoing development.

One of LBC main funders is a UK-based ‘outcomes orientated’ funder that measures change against agreed outcomes established at the outset of the intervention. Having carried out a ‘needs analysis’ of the local community and the proposed changes that could be made should funding be secured, LBC worked in conjunction with the funder to establish outcome measures. This aligns with recommendations proposed by Crabbe (2009) and Coalter (2009) who argue persuasively that sport for development strategic decisions should be informed, in the main, by those working at a grassroots level.

The four established outcome measures may, in turn, be classified into three individual measures (1-3) and one external measure (4):

1. Improve confidence, interpersonal skills and self esteem of younger people participating in this project;

2. Increase awareness of pitfalls associated with engaging in criminal and anti-social behaviour and the devastating effects it can have on their lives and lives of other people;

3. Increase the level of qualifications and subsequent opportunities of employment for older participants. Inspire younger groups to achieve further academic and employment success; and,

4. Increase resources locally to positively impact upon young people’s lives through increased opportunities.

The broad nature of the outcome measures take account of external variables and ensure focus is on the most at need (NEETs) in the community, thus avoiding the concern raised by Spaaij *et al.* (2013) whereby projects in pursuit of narrowly focused objectives may target participants who are most likely to achieve success.

Clarity of purpose is often lacking within many sport for development initiatives, (Coalter 2007) but, from the outset, these four outcome measures provided clarity for LBC. These measures further considered the differing policy views on social exclusion to include both employment (attainment of a job) and employability (skills required in readiness for employment) and, thus broadly fit within the three policy discourses of social exclusion which Spaaij *et al.* (2013) discusses in relation to the framework presented by Levitas (2005). This involves tackling inequality (redistributionist discourse) by focusing on the processes which create inequality; addressing the behavioural factors at an individual level which include broader qualitative aspects (moral underclass discourse) and employment opportunities (social integrationist discourse) based on the number of people in employment. In practice the unique circumstances in NI have an influence on policy development, with a strong focus placed on moral underclass discourse as can be seen from the Department of Employment and Learning (2012) *Pathways to Success Strategy*, which aims to specifically address the issue of young people who are NEET by tackling barriers to learning through the provision of opportunities for training and employment for 16 - 24 year olds.

***Historical Context***

For years, NI had been affected by violence and division commonly referred to as ‘The Troubles’, the legacy of historical and ideological arguments over the constitutional right of NI to be part of either the UK or the Republic of Ireland (ROI). However, the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 brought relative peace to NI, leading to the establishment of new governance structures with political and policy influence imposed (to varying degrees) from five layers of governance: Europe; UK (Westminster); North-South cross border bodies with the ROI; Devolved Government (Stormont) and Local Authorities. Historically these structures have faced difficulties caused by the uneasy and unequal relationship between central and local government, in part due to the tradition of strong centralised controls.

Since the Good Friday Agreement, top-level negotiations have encountered complications as political power has been shared by ideologically opposed political parties on a proportional basis. Safeguards have been established to mitigate against discrimination, motivated by a need to facilitate collective representation and inclusion based on consociation theory, rather than efficiencies (Knox 2015). In this respect, NI is governing without consensus, through a mandatory coalition (Rhodes *et al.* 2003). In practice elected representatives have not been able to compromise their political positions, resulting in a lack of policy creation with many examples of top-down (not evidence-based) unilateral decisions by ministers (Wilford and Wilson 2006).

The years of conflict in NI greatly affected working class areas (McAlister and Healy 2016), as resources were focused on security investment rather than public investment (Tomlinson 2012). The post-conflict political framework has attempted to facilitate competitive growth as part of an expanding neoliberal governance plan. However, Murtagh and Shirlow (2012) have argued that this has deepened spatial and social exclusion. These factors have created a perception in working class areas in NI of ‘broken promises’ related to a ‘Peace Process Dividend’, leaving their community behind to face a life of considerable struggle.

The Department of Employment and Learning (2012, p.11) *Pathways to Success Strategy* states that:

deprived communities in NI face a double challenge of dealing with social and economic hardships, while struggling with the legacy of conflict and division, at a time of austerity.

Further evidence exists of multi-generational poverty, high levels of unemployment, public sector dependency and sporadic community tensions (Knox 2015). In turn, the instability caused by these unique political, social and economic factors has limited the imposition of a modernisation agenda (seen across the UK Public Sector) in NI and prolonged the challenges facing working class areas from the disenfranchised fringes of society who resort to criminality and violence.

The basis of the problems in working class Protestant areas can be traced across an entire generation (McManus 2015). Long-standing complacency, the result of many years of readily available employment in traditional manufacturing industry, compounded by both the ‘Troubles’ and deindustrialisation within Protestant working class areas led to an erosion of community spirit and pride (Mulveena 2012). This negatively affected attitudes towards formal education, amongst other forms of social ambition. This disaffection was noted by Sugden (1996, p.102) who identified an ‘anti school ethos’ and evidence of ‘little of no respect for education or authority’ within his case study of sport in a working class area of Belfast.

Post the Good Friday Agreement several barriers continue to perpetuate inequality:

intergenerational mistrust; negative attitudes to the benefits of education; the segregated school system; a lack of male working-class role models in schools; and weakened community infrastructure in urban Protestant areas. (The Equality Commission for NI 2015, p.6)

McManus (2015, p.60) suggests that ‘despite evidence of a historical detachment from education there has been a failure on the part of politicians in NI to address the situation meaningfully’. Purvis (2011) confirmed feelings of what was termed ‘social fatalism’ within many Protestant areas. If left unchecked, it was suggested, this issue would perpetuate and, in turn, negatively impact on future generations. This point is confirmed by the Office of National Statistics (2014) which found, all factors remaining constant: people are more likely to have a low educational outcome if their father (7.5 times more likely) or mother (3 times more likely) also demonstrates low levels of educational attainment. Indeed, Goeke-Morey *et al*. (2013) reported young people’s educational attainment expectations to be undermined by conflict, family environment and anti-social behaviour.

Nolan (2014) highlighted the trend of educational inequality across NI by comparing the achievement of A-C grades in GCSE examinations, against the ethnic background of the student. It was found that Protestant boys from disadvantaged communities managed a 19.7% level of achievement (A-C grades), which ranked them as 38th out of 40 ethnic categories. This compared to a 33.2% achievement outcome for Catholic boys from similarly disadvantaged backgrounds. Protestant girls from broadly identical backgrounds also under-achieved with a rate of 32.4%, compared to a Catholic girlsachievement rate of 43.8%. These achievement rates are far below the 81.4% displayed by the highest placed ethnic grouping, Chinese girls. In response to this report Kyle (2015) proposed a collaborative approach with the commitment of communities, families and young people, working in partnership with statutory bodies and non-traditional support services. This builds on the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent Department of Employment and Learning (2012) *Pathways to Success Strategy* which placed emphasis on the voluntary and community sectors (including sports) to provide local support (Birrell and Gormley-Heenan 2015) as part of a collaborative neighbourhood or area approach.

To view this theoretically we draw on Sugden’s (2010) *Ripple Effect* (see figure one) which illustrates the circumstances under which sport can potentially make a difference in divided societies. Under this framework sport joins up individual interventions with policy and political actors. The model works from the outside-in (top-down) and the inside-out (bottom-up). The outer circle signifies the agenda set by the political actors, the two adjoining circles involve the policy makers who use their awareness of context from social networks of sectoral stakeholders to inform the political decisions. The two inner most circles represent the community leaders, coaches and families of the participants and the inner circle is the participants themselves. Working from the inside-out this involves the intervention establishing a change in context within the target group and surrounding community. This change, in turn impacts on the stakeholders and policy makers which informs the development of future policy. New policy initiatives subsequently establish new processes and projects, and thus this cycle is sustained through regular research.

**Figure One Adopted Sugden (2010) Ripple Effect**

**INSERT FIGURE ONE HERE**

This article will investigate how LBC has positioned itself as an alternative setting through which to tackle the educational and employment under-achievement of a marginalised group, prior to exploring its subsequent micro, meso and macro reach.

**Methodology**

***Design***

A mixed-methodology was adopted in this study which engaged the two broad forms of research: qualitative and quantitative. Commencing with a process evaluation, which involved a review of existing programme data, complemented by narratives from key stakeholders, this provided the basis for this article to appraise the extent to which outcome measures were achieved throughout the range of activities offered by LBC.

Adopting alternative approaches from related disciplines offer benefits to sport for development research (Schulenkorf 2016). As such further consideration of individual and external changes present an opportunity to adopt a thematic analysis as the qualitative method of generating key themes from the raw data. Thematic analysis is an excellent tool for sports-related researchers to analyse people’s experiences, explore individual and group perspectives on an issue or identify patterns of behaviour and the influencing factors. (Smith and Sparkes 2016). Thematic analysis has been applied successfully within psychology (Bruam and Clarke 2006), positive youth development and coaching (Cote *et al.* 2009, Camire *et al.* 2014). Upon this basis, the analysis will then consider the wider implications for the sport for development sector in NI, ultimately, determining the potential micro and macro reach of such projects.

***Procedure***

The secondary quantitative approach consisted of a desk-based review of existing data obtained from LBC registers and reports. These were used to identify trends, assess outputs against stated outcome targets, as well as to inform the direction of the qualitative approach which ensued.

The qualitative data collection was based on the ‘participatory and process-led approach’ promoted by Coalter (2009, p.57) and supported by Crabbe (2009) and Bloyce and Smith (2010). This approach integrated input from a wide range of participants, support groups, instructors, volunteers, project leaders and stakeholders associated with the work of LBC, as part of a ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ examination of the programme. Specifically, this involved a participant survey (n=84) carried out by an interactive voting system, based on multiple-choice answers across four themes: demographics and background; motivations, impact and attitudes. Questions focused on understanding participants’ profiles and creating an attitudinal baseline, with follow up questions used to determine individual post-project motivations, impact and attitudes. This approach was cognisant of the benefits of adopting technology: improved engagement and honesty (Stowell 2007) as well as overcoming barriers related to low educational levels by ensuring a fit appropriate for participants (Coalter 2007). The participant survey was supported by a short questionnaire to participant families (n=12) to assess the level of support for the club.

Semi-structured interviews with volunteers (n=8), project leaders (n=2) and stakeholders (n=9) were used to facilitate discussion on the topics of engagement, effectiveness and impact of the LBC programme. Detailed notes were used as a record of events with data then transcribed and a summary noting key points provided to each individual to ensure accuracy and authenticity. During the data collection phase a number of relevant person-centred examples of impact were identified, these were later explored through follow-up face to face interviews held at LBC, as a means of illustrating the extent of the programme’s reach from engagement to legacy.

***Data Analysis***

Having generated the data, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six step procedure for thematic analysis was used to ensure a rigorous, deliberate and reflexive process of data analysis. The first step involved reading and re-reading the data for familiarisation and accuracy to allow the researchers to produce codes, as part of a data driven process whereby the content itself guided the analysis. These initial codes served as a means to summarise and manage the data; similar codes where then sorted into clusters as part of the search for themes using an inductive approach specifically related to the data rather than preconceived notions. Codes were then checked to ensure their fit within each theme; followed by an assessment of the relationships between themes. Next, the individual narrative of each theme was then checked against the overall picture for coherence and consistency. During this phase, the themes were reviewed independently by each member of the research team and with LBC project management as a means to promote creditability and consensus. This methodology was finalised by selecting examples to underline each theme as shown in Table One.

**Table One Common Themes**

**INSERT TABLE ONE HERE**

Finally, particular attention has been paid throughout this study to contextual circumstances and participant input. This approach is recognition of the identified integral methodological difficulties with outcomes-based approaches to monitoring, related to agreement in definition of outcomes and how to measure change which suggests a need to move from summative to formative approaches (Coalter 2009, Levermore 2011). It should be noted that this study focused only on perceived changes related to participants engagement with LBC, therefore cannot indicate the influence, positively or negatively, of other external factors on an individual’s or group’s behaviour. In this environment, Elias (1987) concludes researchers can only hope to produce explanations which are more suitable that previous accounts.

**Findings**

Findings are reported in two parts: First, the findings identified as part of the process evaluation and linked specifically to the programme outcome measures are presented. These findings serve as a means to determine what the club were doing and if that made a difference. This is followed by a second part focusing on the themes identified from the qualitative data collection phase to dissect implications which could be applied beyond the LBC programme.

**Part 1: Outcome Evaluation**

***Outcome Measure One***

Outcome Measure 1 involved improving confidence, interpersonal skills and self-esteem of younger people participants.

A club volunteer noted:

I would not be where I am today without the boxing club, it improved my confidence and improved my awareness of employment opportunities; I wouldn’t have had these opportunities otherwise (Interview with the researcher, 03 June 2015).

This quote was supported by the participant survey which found 54% of participants surveyed believed they had learned to take responsibility for their own actions as a result of attending LBC. Whilst 70% of participants felt they improved their interpersonal skills and overall 92% of participants surveyed agreed they had improved their personal confidence. This building of confidence within the safe environment at LBC was part of an individualised approach that provided the starting point to challenge participants to engage in other activities. Improved confidence was corroborated by an increased willingness to take part in other educational activities within the community together with an increased respect for others. These findings show the success in reengaging participants with opportunities they had previously either been excluded from or excluded themselves from, and further discussion on the underlying processes adopted is included within the thematic analysis.

It should be noted that the monitoring process used broader qualitative indicators that were linked to both obtaining employment and improving employability skills, rather than solely an outcome measure of employment. Various researchers (Levitas 2005, Coalter 2007, Spaaij *et al*. 2013) debate the value of employability skills without any improvement in employment, particularly highlighting issues of job retention, quality of job and promotional opportunities. The risks associated with raising expectations without long term sustainability relate to damaging trust and restricting future engagement (Haudenhuyse *et al.*, 2012), these limitations are discussed further within the conclusion.

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***Outcome Measure Two***

This measure aimed to increase awareness of pitfalls associated with engaging in criminal and anti-social behaviour and the devastating effects it can have for those affected. Commenting on the underlying barriers faced by young people in Lyons one community leader suggested: ‘young men are learning what masculinity means’ (Interview with lead researcher, 07 June 2015). Misunderstandings of masculinity can easily lead to involvement in anti-social behaviour, and association with paramilitary organisations as a means of demonstrating masculinity offers short term status to fill the void in the lives of young men (Purvis 2011). However, participation in the elite boxing training at LBC creates a certain status, offering an alternative focus which builds on the traditional version of masculinity within boxing, one of a beautiful body, promoting self-respect and looking after oneself against the odds (Woodward 2004). Sugden (1996, p.92) suggested that ‘boxing provides a positively sanctioned channel for aggressive masculinity, creating the impression that boxing can offer sanctuary from urban poverty and related social problems’. The importance of this was highlighted by one stakeholder:

The physical activity involved in the programme helped greatly with anger management, while the programme as a whole influenced behaviour positively (Alternative Education Teacher, Interview with lead researcher, 20 June 2015).

Despite twenty years passing since the work by Sugden (1996) and the signing of the Good Friday Peace Agreement, we reveal similar reasoning for working class communities to engage in boxing. As a means to avoid involvement in negative post-peace activities, the existence of LBC has been instrumental. Indeed, quantitative evidence from the participant survey suggests a change in attitudes and participation in anti-social behaviour and crime which is further explored within the thematic analysis.

***Outcome Measure Three***

This measure involved two elements: to increase the level of participant qualifications and subsequent opportunities of employment for older participants; and to inspire younger participants to achieve further academic and employment success. In relation to the first element a desk-based review confirmed that 100% of participants who completed LBC’s employability project (in 2013-14) went on to employment, education or training courses. The club records from a (six months) follow up (carried out by club management) with participants indicated that 60% of those previously classified as NEET secured employment following programme completion. Furthermore 57% of survey respondents felt better prepared for employment. The potential impact is clear when we consider that the Eurofound (2012, p.76) study found the additional individual costs of a NEET in the UK to be €872 per annum in public finance costs and €11,200 in resource costs. However due to limitations related to the disparity (between theory and practice) in the use of such measurements these NEET related cost savings should be considered in conjunction with the caution raised by Coalter (2007) who contends that sports organisations find it difficult to determine the contribution of individual programmes to any observed change.

***Outcome Measure Four***

The importance of the external environment is distinctly embedded in outcome measure 4:to increase resources locally to positively impact upon young people's lives through increased opportunities. LBC invest substantial resource into building mutually beneficial relationships at a local level, which involves hosting family and community events and providing volunteers to assist in partner community projects outside of their own core business. This was reinforced by a Neighbourhood Policing Officer who stated: ‘It’s impressive, the extent of the work which is carried out in a relatively small resource’ *(*Neighbourhood Policing Officer, Interview with lead researcher, 29 June 2015). While a community leader noted the potential of this work: ‘The club is in the heart of the community, staff know what is going on in the community and have respect of the community’ (Interview with lead researcher, 30 June 2015).

This process endorses previous research which suggests positive impact is generated through collaborative partnerships (Sandford et al 2006). The impact was identified by a Probation Officer who noted: ‘in the time the participants are involved with the Club (LBC) their compliance to their stakeholder organisation requirements away from the club is better’ (Interview with lead researcher 12 June 2015).

Locally, the Probation Board NI (2015, p.3) propose that ‘those released from custody on supervision [in NI] do not reoffend to the same level as those released without supervision’. However, Haudenhuyse *et al*. (2012) suggests that the involvement of mainstream organisations can perpetuate the exclusion of vulnerable youth. As such, the potential of this supporting role played by LBC towards statutory (mainstream) agencies is clear. The understanding between LBC and stakeholders ensures participants receive the same information. According to one probation officer, this situation is beneficial as ‘hearing a different voice reinforces the values promoted by the partner stakeholder’ (Interview with lead researcher, 24 June 2015). This underlines the expectation on participants to adhere to the common values presented in multi-stakeholder settings. In this respect, consideration should be given to research which suggests that sport alone cannot create positive outcomes, rather collaboration with and understanding between local stakeholders towards agreed outcomes is paramount to success. (Sugden 1995, Coulter 2007, Crabbe 2008). As such, within this environment, the role of leaders within sport for development organisations is vital. Jeanes and Spaaij (2015) explored leaders ability to act as facilitators of change, highlighting the need to address local context while challenging top-down structures of authority. This aspect is discussed further within the thematic analysis.

**Part 2: Thematic Analysis**

***Common Themes***

Four themes were drawn from stakeholder interviews. Two were linked to the operational process - Flexible individualised approach and Multi-agency collaboration. While two were linked to the influence on the individual - Boxing as a hook to engagement and the importance of Leaders unpacked through subordinate themes of Role Models, Peers, Influence, Capacity, Respect and Reinforcement. These key themes identified in Table one are explored further at this point, to distinguish the conditions necessary for success.

*Flexible Individualised Approach*

The first theme was categorised by the feeling of appreciation and understanding which stakeholders and participants felt was shown towards them by LBC, evidenced in the bespoke process for engagement and individual action plans created for partners.Stakeholders stated that the flexible approach adopted by LBC involved treating ‘participants as individuals’ (interview with alternative education teacher 27 June 2015) taking account of the participants circumstances and planning appropriate pathways.

This flexible individualised approach follows the recommendation of Coalter (2007) who suggests that consideration must be given to the process of identifying which sports work in which circumstances for individuals, as what works for one participant (or group of participants) might not necessarily work for others. The impact of this in practice was noted by a community leader:

the club provides an opportunity for a set period of time for participants to do something they wouldn’t normally have the chance to otherwise(Interview with lead researcher, 30 June 2015).

The subsequent progression opportunities were corroborated by an alternative education teacher and volunteer respectively:

The programme has encouraged participants to stay in education and assists with education and employment in an informal manner, which is effective with some participants (Interview with lead researcher, 27 June 2015)

This statement was further supported by a club volunteer who stated ‘The boxing club has helped me to think about and decide what I want to do in the future’. (Interview with lead researcher, 28 June 2015).

These findings support that of other researchers (Sugden 1996, 2010, Crabbe 2009, Coalter 2007, 2009, Harris and Adams 2016) who note the importance of context and non-authoritarian approaches for the impact of sport for development projects.

*Multi Agency Approach*

The second theme was characterised by the direct channel between LBC and those most at risk within the community, with the club acting as one trusted conduit ‘to an extensive list of services and partners’ (Neighbourhood Policing Officer, Interview with lead researcher, 29 June 2015).

Stakeholders were in agreement that the process of communication between LBC and themselves led to enhanced mutual understanding at an individual, organizational and community level. From the outset, prospective new attendees referred by the Youth Justice System (YJS) are met by the club manager for a one-to-one meeting to assess suitability and agree a bespoke programme of activities (in line with their preferences, the club ethos and their justice requirements). This approach leads to an improved inclusive service to the participant, sustained through continual interaction between the project leaders, participants and partners, and providing both challenge and support. The rationale builds on Lederach’s (2005) web approach whereby change only arises by ensuring that people are represented in building networks around an agreed focus.

The multi-agency approach builds trust and opportunity for stakeholders, a point made by a Neighbourhood Policing Officer who stated:

Sometimes we are not welcome in the community so working with the boxing club helps to promote that we are approachable, a human face, which allows us to educate and present information to prevent a pathway to crime and influence behaviour (Interview with lead researcher 29th June 2015).

This collaborative approach tackles the limitation of supply of opportunities raised by Spaaij *et al*. (2013) in relation to ‘worklessness’ initiatives and addresses concerns raised by others (Coalter 2013, Lindsey *et al.* 2015) regarding the narrow focus of many sport for development projects. As has been discussed previously, many young people from Protestant working class areas have disengaged from society as part of a generational trend (McManus (2015) and, in this context, LBC provides the engaging entry point, with support and mentoring pathways available through the range of partners, thus sustaining the process and breaking the trend of unemployment and educational under-achievement. Further follow up study is, however, required regarding long-term sustainability.

*Leaders*

The third theme focused on the importance of leaders. It was evident throughout engagement, retention, coordination and impact activities that ‘leaders have a bond with participants based on respect and mutual trust’ (School Principal, Alternative Education, Interviewed by the researcher 10 June 2015). The informal (non-mainstream) structure of LBC reduces the barriers for inclusion of those excluded from statutory organisations. Here, authority figures (such as teachers or probation officers) whom participants may feel alienated from are replaced with project leaders who gain respect due to their expertise and knowledge of the sporting activity (Coalter 2007).

The participant survey found 47% of respondents initially attended LBC because of the influence of either staff or peers, while 56% stated that they continued to attend the club because of these influences. One stakeholder commented that:

the structure allowed relationships to be built between participants and the club leaders, which created respect for the leaders and the facility, with the rules agreed at the start (School Principal, Alternative Education, Interviewed by the lead researcher 10 June 2015).

This comment supports the view that respect established between project leaders and participants is crucial to maintaining and enhancing the capacity of such interventions to achieve their objectives, while reinforcing stakeholders ethos. (Coalter 2007 and Crabbe 2008).

***Staff.***

The connection between leaders and the community was highlighted as a key element which informed the approach by LBC, with a school teacher commenting that:

‘LBC can identify other young people who are at risk of offending. This proactive approach is beneficial not just for the individuals but for the community too’. (Teacher, Interview with lead researcher 26 June 2015).

In a similar vein the participant survey identified that a third of the participants agreed that they had moved away from crime or anti-social behaviour as a result of attending LBC. The decrease potentially represents a tangible benefit to the community and economy. To do this we base these figures on data produced by the National Audit Office (2011) which concludes that, on average, each young offender costs the criminal justice system £8000 per year. While accepting the methodological difficulties (noted under outcome measure three) in accurately determining the impact of sport interventions on crime or anti-social behaviour, certain scholars note the importance of obtaining evidence at both an individual and at a community level (Bloyce and Smith 2010, Coalter 2007).

*Peer leaders.*

Aspiring coaches volunteer tosupport experienced leaders thereby informally developing influence. In doing so, pathways to volunteering remain a key element in creating self- and group-responsibility by offering mentored pathways. However, this process sees LBC maintain the tutor-participant hierarchy, which Coalter (2013) raised as a limitation of peer leaderships within sport for development. Nevertheless, the loss of positive role models in Protestant working class areas has been identified as a significant factor in the decline of morale and wellbeing within these areas (Purvis 2011). In considering the influence of peer leaders, Crabbe (2008) noted that peer leaderscan engage with participants and influence behavioural change. This occurs as participants can identify with peer leaders as someone capable of understanding the situation they find themselves in and offer informed advice. In this respect, Coalter (2013) notes the effectiveness of building relationships and trust as part of a (be)friending role - sustained through what Pawson (2006) referred to as the coaching stage involving mentoring, skills acquisition and guided pathways. The basis for peer leadership approaches is rooted in social learning theory, in which learning occurs through observation and emulation in particular (Coalter 2010). However, Coalter (2013) also raises concerns regarding peer leaders, noting the importance of recruitment, formal training (to develop appropriate knowledge) and highlighting the negative impact of high attrition rates amongst peer leaders, all factors which impact the consistency of delivery to the participants. It was evident that LBC did not provide formal definitions of the role and objectives of the peer leaders, with recruitment limited to those associated with the Club. LBC do however provide a training and mentoring programme for young people to build knowledge and skills and support their development. This helps to promote an environment whereby peer leaders endorse the benefits of an educational pathway as a clear alternative to anti-social behaviour and Paramilitarism.

*Boxing*

The final theme was boxing, with its ability to engage and influence the hard to reach. As one community leader put it: ‘Boxing harnesses the interest of the participants and gives them an outlet making a positive impact on young people’s lives’. (Interview with lead researcher, 30 June 2015). The statement is supported by the ability of sporting clubs to maintain and develop the fabric of civil society (Houlihan 2001) in conjunction with the potential of sport to improve life skills and educational performance (Kay 2009).Boxing-related sport for development programmes have been deployed across the globe as a means to positively influence individuals. The rationale for the use of boxing in the unique circumstances of NI was provided by Sugden (1995, p.210) who noted that, despite its somewhat violent nature, boxing had a ‘unifying impact upon NI where it appeared to be the only working class sport to avoid major sectarian divisions’. Sugden (1996) used the case study of Holy Family Boxing Club in Belfast to articulate how boxing had taken root in working class areas during the period of conflict, at a time when paramilitarism and segregation were manifest in everyday life. Within this context, clubs provided a venue for expressing physical and mental agility where participants could experience personal fulfilment, construct ‘positive self image and status which were recognised within and outside their community’ (Sugden 1996, p.102). This assertion is reinforced within this study and by stakeholders who identified boxing as providing a medium to help young people understand masculinity.

Taking a broader view, societal issues cannot be overcome by individual interventions (Jeanes 2013). As such boxing is a small element of a bigger social construct (Sugden 2005) that allows LBC to contribute to tackling the educational under-achievement of the area. The understanding built between local service providers ignores organizational specific outputs, prioritising agreed outcomes for mutual benefit at a population level. The process of defining local issues and building relationships as part of a bottom-up approach addresses the potential tensions identified between agencies within an area-based approach where partners are forced into collaborations as part of top-down policy decisions and face challenges of structural compartmentalization (Batty 2013) and defending territory (Houlihan 2001).

**Analysis**

***Micro, Meso and Macro level***

This study recognises the negative and lasting impact that low educational attainment can have at an individual and community level, perpetuating detachment from society whilst increasing the relative appeal of anti-social behaviour as an alternative means of securing a degree of community standing. The ‘Troubles’ have left a negative legacy in working class Protestant areas in NI and thus it falls to organisations such as LBC to offer the support structures necessary to avoid young people falling into the grips of criminality or paramilitarism. In doing so, LBC and similar non-mainstream education organisations act as trusted conduits to a range of multi-agency support structures which ultimately provide an alternative pathway (to crime or paramilitaritorism) in a safe environment. This approach is supported by Coalter (2005) who argues that the circumstances for the most effective impact in sport for development projects, involves a bottom-up approach that aligns with and supports existing community-based sporting infrastructure, and moreover utilizes local resources. In doing so, these organisations fill the void left by mainstream organisations. Indeed, Haudenhuyse *et al*. (2012) suggest that the involvement of such mainstream organisations (such as schools) perpetuate the exclusion of target groups rather than improve it. In NI these concerns are magnified due to the perceived ineffectiveness of devolved government. On this basis, the contextual circumstances within which LBC operates influence the degree to which they can move towards the asset-focused approach proposed by Spaaij *et al*. (2014) which recognizes the social benefits of cultural diversity while relinquishing power to participants. The reality means that although LBC shape programmes based on participant input and need, there are still signs of the needs-based approach where leaders determine and to some extent provide options to solve problems for participants.

The post-conflict period has witnessed the promotion of an economic agenda which although facilitating the potential for growth and direct inward investment, did so without considering the unique context of NI (Murtagh and Shirlow 2012). More recently, in NI, economic policy runs in parallel with a welfare and social inclusion agenda. Subsequently employability skills represent one of a number of outcome targets within the social remit, while acting as the starting point for progression within economic planning. The dual objectives create a balance in the tension noted by other scholars between adapting young people to the needs of markets, and regulating markets to the needs of young people (Spaaij *et al.* 2013). This point is encapsulated by Ungar (2006, p.220) who states; ‘changing the odds is preferred to resourcing individuals to beat the odds’. Yet, the localised collaborative approach discussed above is inconsistent with the complex public sector system which all too often acts as a barrier to engagement with (or by) those from detached areas of society. The frustration is fuelled by public sector fragmentation with agencies operating in silos (Birrell and Gormley-Heenan 2015), with the consequence that young people with issues are forced to engage with numerous agencies, rather than one trusted centralized contact, to gain support.

The complex web of circumstances faced by Protestant working class areas in NI guarantees that a ‘one size fits all’ approach will not work. The collaborative outcomes-based approach implemented by LBC has established a process for bottom-up input in design, offering signs of a shift from the administrative centre as collaborations are built at a micro-level through Moral Underclass Discourse and Socialist Integrationist Discourse. Supporting previous research, this study suggests that domestic sporting projects have the potential to inform debate through a bottom-up perspective (Crabbe 2009) while actively engaging those who have been excluded (Spaaij *et al.* 2013). Yet often learning from projects delivered by clubs such as LBC is not transferred vertically, hindered by the bottleneck which exists in Sugden’s (2010) adopted ripple effect model (see again figure one) in transferring information to and from the macro-level because of fragmentation and inefficiency at government level. In moving forward, government must reflect on research (Adams and Harris 2014, Coalter 2009) which cautions that a lack of theoretical and practical acumen concerning how change is realised, leads to outcome indicators that lack validity and reliability. Subsequently if the sport for development sector in NI is to truly achieve the widespread claims made, then work is needed to create an overarching sectoral strategy which encompasses Redistributionist Discourse (Spaaij *et al.* 2013) by crafting a means to challenge the conditions that led to inequalities in the first place. This can be done, by transferring learning from projects such as LBC through what Sugden (2010, p. 270) refers to as ‘practical engagement and local contextual emersion’ to inform ‘strategic planning and project implementation’.

The most recent NI Sports Strategy ‘Sport Matters’ 2009-19 established a cross-departmental monitoring group to design, implement and review the progress of sport across three common themes: Places, Performance and Participation, yet the opportunity to embed collaborations and leverage cross-departmental funding beyond the agreed sports funded outputs of the framework was limited. The future policy direction within NI does however provide grounds for optimism: the draft NI programme for government (2016) is constructed around a framework of outcomes. These outcomes provide a mechanism which seeks to overcome traditional departmental boundaries by promoting collaborative working. Indeed, planning for the next strategy for sport involves a process of co-design with key stakeholders. This approach offers opportunities for sport for development agents to collaborate across more financially sustainable social, economic and health agendas. However, to manifest itself at a practice-level, consideration must be given to reforming funding instruments which pit delivery organisations against each other and restrict collaborative working.

**Conclusion**

The contextual situation in NI suggests that some working class Protestant areas have disengaged from society as a consequence of a series of events: deindustrialisation, legacy of the ‘Troubles’ and lack of confidence in a fragmented public sector. As a result, it falls to organisations such as LBC to rebuild trust at a local level and facilitate access to the support structures necessary to reengage young people, and thus avoid falling into the grips of crime and paramilitarism. In this study we have identified and explored the conditions for effective collaborations in a sport for development project which targets hard to reach, young Protestant working class people. The planning phase offers the potential to inform both practice and policy, commencing with a pre-programme collaborative needs analysis, followed by the sharing of existing data across key stakeholders, used to inform agreed delivery plans, with outcome indicators incorporating qualitative aspects focused on the target group.

The thematic analysis recognises the core actions which contribute to LBC’s success: the importance of flexible individual action plans and programme implementation by trusted leaders acting as one part of a multi-agency approach. Success is built on the development of relationships between participants, leaders, stakeholders and the community. The programme is designed to reinforce positive values across different environments, offering an inclusive pathway for disengaged youth which facilitates the development of employability skills and supports participants to find their place in society, acting as a bridge between related social and economic agendas. These findings can add to the understanding of this under-explored field and provide supporting evidence for future recommendations on the contribution of sport to the employability of young people within a specific marginalised context.

The cross-cutting nature of sport for development lends itself to collaborative partnerships across government agendas tasked with tackling a range of ‘wicked problems’. However, this may also lead to a dilution of leadership for the sector across a diversity of competing public policy agendas. This is an issue which Adams and Harris (2014) reflected on, suggesting the sport for development sector faces pressure to straddle institutional boundaries while providing evidence of both programme development and programme outcome with no clear strategic direction or agreed operating model. In NI this is perpetuated by political priorities and the subsequent reliance of voluntary groups on the public sector for funding. This situation encourages organisations to constantly adapt their aims to follow funding sources, thus continuing a system of centralised control which is defined as part of a top-down imposition of values on target groups.

This article presents a snap shot over a period of two years and contributes to the foundations provided by previous scholars in the broader topic of sport and employability (Coalter 2007, Collins and Kay 2003, Spaaij *et al*. 2013). Within the context of Protestant Youth in Northern Ireland, the article raises questions surrounding the longevity of such projects to sustain relationships, particularly post-employment, the impact of staff, volunteer or participant turnover, long term sustainability of employment and progression opportunities, together with records of educational results. Future research is needed to assess the lasting population impact and performance effectiveness across all stakeholders involved in related sport for development work in the Lyons area. In a broader context further exploration of the effectiveness of cross-sectoral cooperation and communication is needed to promote better understanding between those involved in creating, delivering and evaluating multi agenda sport projects.

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