Volunteer sports coaches as community assets? A realist review of the research evidence

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Abstract

It is widely believed that volunteer sports coaches, working in community sports clubs, can make a range of contributions to the social, physical and moral development of individuals, particularly young people. Although there is some existing research on volunteer sport coaches and their role in community engagement, the research base is fragmented and is limited, primarily, to the national contexts of North America and Australia. This paper reports the findings of a systematic analysis of the international research evidence that supports claims for a wider social role for volunteer sports coaches. The analysis suggests that the evidence base for such claims is weak, lacking robustness, rigour and a clear theoretical foundation. If, therefore, there are growing expectations about the individual and community benefits that volunteer sports coaches can deliver through sports activities, we argue that it is imperative to understand more about the needs, motivations and priorities of this large volunteer workforce. This research adds new evidence-based critical insights to the issue of community sport as a form of social engagement, and the role of sports coaches as convenient community assets.

Key Words: Volunteer sports coaches, realist review, community sport

Introduction

Community based sport is an extensive social enterprise that is run, almost in its entirety, by volunteer sports coaches. In the UK, it has been estimated that over 8 million

people engage in sports activities in their communities each week under the guidance of 1.1 million active sports coaches, three quarters of whom are volunteers (North, 2009). Sport and sports coaching are, by any measure, large scale community engagement activities. Moreover, a number of recent studies have suggested that participation in community sport has the potential to deliver a wide range of individual and social benefits (Eime, 2010; Nathan, 2010). In this work, recognition is given to the significant role of interpersonal relationships (such as peers and family) in mediating the quality of the engagement process. As a result North (2007) has suggested that, "It is not stretching the logic too far to think that strong community focused coaches could play a similar role!" (p. 11). It is in this context that community sport is acknowledged, politically and academically, as a significant pedagogical space for civic engagement where volunteer sports coaches might be viewed as valuable 'community assets'.

Increased global pressure on public spending has encouraged national governments to re-examine the relationship between public institutions and local communities. In the UK, the Coalition government's 'Big Society' agenda is a case in point. Appearing to extend New Labour's (1997-2010) concept of sports volunteering as a form of civic communitarianism (DCMS/SU, 2002), the current UK Coalition Government conceptualises communities as 'dynamic' sites for positive social action As the Prime Minister, David Cameron argued in an inaugural 'Big Society' speech in 2010, "we need to create communities with oomph – neighbourhoods who are in charge of their own destiny, who feel if they club together and get involved they can shape the world around them" (Cameron, 2010). In this regard, community as a site of social action has long been held to potentially empower individuals and/or collectives in providing autonomy and control of their surrounding environment (Painter et al., 2012). It is this belief that conceptualises

community action as the result of community members taking meaningful, purposeful, and shared action to address community problems.

There are signs that different versions of the Big Society are appearing elsewhere in the western world. In the USA, for example, Community Solutions is a national programme that seeks to catalyze community resources in generating community-based solutions, such as employment opportunities for disconnected youth (The White House Council, 2010). In New Zealand, The Conservation Department's, From Seed to Success, provides training for community groups on how to establish and sustain local projects, and establish strategic partnerships with other community groups. These examples indicate a growing focus on localised social action, linked to an assumption that more engagement in something (such as sport) is 'a good thing'. Yet despite the long history of localism as a form of social fix, it is not always clear *how* engendered localism fosters greater community engagement.

Given that 'community' appears to be used increasingly as a panacea for addressing a wide range of social issues, it perhaps unsurprising to find that the label community remains a politically contested concept (Finlayson, 2007). For instance, Hamalainen and Jones (2012) concluded that policy-makers tend to apply a bureaucratic definition of community borne out of the nexus between political ideology, individual beliefs and contemporary challenges (e.g. the rise of obesity). As a result, definitions of community are rarely based on local interpretations. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Painter *et al.* (2012) recently concluded that there was a lack of clarity and coherence in the literature that supported claims for a relationship between localism and community engagement. Put more simply, the concept of community engagement lacks conceptual clarity that would allow its translation into the level of tangible outcomes that is often claimed.

Community sport, with its focus on local engagement and heavy reliance on a volunteer workforce, is an ideal candidate for bringing the concepts of localism and community engagement to life. There is certainly an expectation in the UK that sport will provide a dynamic setting from which to promote social and health benefits for both individuals and communities (e.g. DCMS/SU, 2002). That said it is therefore difficult to reconcile the UK Coalition Governments recent decision to dismantle the Physical Education, School Sport and Club Links Strategy (PESSCL) where much sports volunteering took place. PESSCL was a shared responsibility between the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and was identified as a mechanism to increase participation in high quality school sport within and beyond the curriculum; For example, School partnerships (family of secondary, primary and special schools working together) which were a strand of the PESSCL strategy, were expected to collaborate with community providers to generate pathways into community clubs. Evidence from a small scale survey of 12 sports partnership by The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted, 2011) found that;

"They have a unique knowledge and understanding of local and national organisations, the resources available and the roles that teachers, coaches and volunteers play in providing a coordinated, cohesive and coherent approach to increasing participation and raising standards in PE and sport" (p.5).

Yet despite evidence of the impact of Sports Partnerships, the UK Coalition Government has refocused resources towards pupils playing *more* competitive sport, and withdrawing national ring-fenced funding by giving schools financial autonomy in deciding how to

organise sport at a local level. It could be argued that the current UK Coalition Government approach towards sport, and community sport, represents a political, economic and ideological shift in the state withdrawing from traditionally funded state provision.

The aim of the study reported in this paper, was to conduct a review of the international evidence base on the role of sports coaching in the community, and particularly on the role of volunteer sports coaches and their contribution to community action. This is the first review of its kind, and is important because both the workforce (volunteers) and the context (community sport) are expansive with increasing government expectations placed upon them. Yet, both areas are under-researched and poorly understood. The study uses the current 'Big Society' agenda in the UK as its starting point, but then broadens the discussion into wider community and community sport initiatives around the world. The paper is organized into the following sections: First, we examine the concepts and theories that have shaped community discourse in order to conceptualise community social action. We then provide an overview of the methods used to identify and synthesis pertinent empirical evidence. The discussion and conclusion then consider the implications for future research.

Concepts, Theories and Policies

The concept of localism engendering increased community action is not a unique idea. Historical parallels with the UK's 'Big Society' can be drawn with the Poplar movement in east London in the 1920s (Thane, 1978), local socialism in the 1980s advocating a 'new urban left' (Gyford, 1985), and New Labour's community

empowerment in the 2000s (Department of Community and Local Government, 2008a). Yet despite this, there would appear to be a conceptual drift in the way 'community' has been used by consecutive governments and therefore it seems pertinent to consider the functionality of the term. A starting point is to use community as a way of talking about those social configurations in which activities are defined as worth pursuing and participation is justified in terms of developing competence (e.g. increased self-efficacy). A sports club, with its extensive voluntary workforce, encapsulates the notion of community participation, because it is encompassing in the sense that it is about something, meaning that it is more than a set of relationships as found in concepts of network. Wenger's (1998) communities of practice framework is useful here in outlining how members of a community engage in joint enterprise, are bound around a social activity with members who share a repertoire of procedures, and create routines and styles that members themselves have developed; Communities exist because participation has value to its members. The value of Wenger's framework is that it moves community beyond a static definition and towards a more dynamic structure that, potentially, contributes to greater social engagement.

The current focus on community engagement in policy and practice in the UK and elsewhere has led to questions about the ways in which agency and structure enable or inhibit civic engagement in both volunteering and voluntary organisations (Mohan, 2011). Under a host of labels (e.g. the Big Society in the UK; Social Innovation in Europe) much is made of the potential role of volunteering in civic society. Drawing from the volunteer/community literature, programmes such as the Big Society define volunteers as individuals who engage in unpaid work that benefits others to whom they have no obligation (Gottlieb and Gillespie, 2008). Moreover, volunteering is acknowledged as activity driven by moral and altruistic ideals, together with opportunities to enhance

personal self-esteem. In the UK, volunteers and volunteering represent a significant social enterprise. The Citizenship Survey 2008-2009 estimated that 26% of adults in England and Wales volunteered formally once a month (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2008b). In Australia, the Bureau of Statistics (2008) reported an increase in volunteer participation (24% in 1995, 32% in 2000 and 35% in 2006). Yet despite the apparent popularity of volunteering, not-for-profit organisations report that sustaining volunteers' engagement in volunteering activities continues to be a challenge. In the USA, for instance, Eisner *et al*., (2009) reported how 61 million individuals volunteered in 2006, but one third of them failed to continue the following year. In Australia, an independent panel commissioned by the Health Department (The Future of Australian Sport - Crawford, 2009) concluded that despite volunteers being the "lifeblood" of community sport, sports organisations struggled to secure sufficient volunteer numbers. Both reports identified a number of reasons for the unsustainable nature of sports volunteering including: a lack of development and support, undervaluing volunteers' contributions, and a failure to provide strong leadership. For Eisner *et al*. (2009), if not-for-profit organisations value highly skilled volunteers, they need to create an experience that is, "meaningful, develops skills, demonstrates impact, and taps into volunteers' abilities and interests*"* (p. 35). Moreover, it is clear that the trend towards longer working hours, alongside increasing economic costs (e.g. compliance obligations, travel, and accreditation), place increasing demands on volunteers' abilities to contribute to community sport.

The long held practice of pursuing social policy goals through sports development is widely acknowledged (Coalter, 2007; Houlihan & White, 2002). In the UK, The New Labour Government is a case in point where sport was promoted as a way of engendering a host of social outcomes (DCSM, 2002). In the context of community culture, sport, as a

transformative tool, has been used to address both community disadvantages (e.g. sports facilities) and individual disadvantage (e.g. criminal behaviour). The difference between these two positions is important because as a report by The Centre for Social Justice (2011) report 'More Than a Game' made clear, "sports policy has frequently been formulated with the former in mind, but often justified in terms of its impact on the latter" (p.26). It is valuable, therefore, to identify the theory of change that appears to underpin assumptions made by politicians and programmers for the benefits of increased sports participation. It could be said that much is claimed in the name of sport, but an understanding of the transformative mechanisms of sport in facilitating increased social capital for both community and the individual appears to be missing from the empirical literature.

While delimiting the term community is a critical endeavour if communities are to be conceived as sites of social action, there is also a need to acknowledge that geographic communities don't operate in isolation. It is important, therefore, to acknowledge the connectivity between communities, and how this might facilitate inclusive or exclusive social capital for participants (Hariss and De Renzio, 1997). For Putnam (2000), together with Bourdieu (1990) and Coleman (1988), participation in sport offers numerous opportunities for individuals to connect with each other, and with other communities. Nonetheless, despite the consumption of social capital by government organisations as a way of conceiving positive social interactions, little attention has been given to the dark side of social capital. That is to say, where bridging (inclusive) refers to the development of overlapping networks that generate positive social capital, bonding (exclusive) social capital describes how closed or tightly constructed networks can reinforce an exclusive identity (e.g. private golf clubs). As Hoye & Nicholson (2009) commented,

"sport is often a site of division on the basis of a person's race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality or ability……sports clubs are often not the egalitarian institution they purport to be" (p. 450).

Advocates of the benefits of sport to society have long held that sport participation can deliver a whole range of social outcomes. In 1999, in the UK, a government minister argued that sport: "can help to develop individual pride, community spirit and capacity for responsibility that enable communities to run regeneration programmes themselves" (Policy Action Team, 1999). More recently, the UK's Coalition Government has adopted a number of strategies designed to deliver a youth participation legacy from the London 2012 Olympics. One recent initiative is the development of explicit links between schools and local communities:

"National Governing Bodies of Sport, together with local partners, will create a
new satellite club on a school setting, linked to an existing community 'hub'
club, and run by coaches and volunteers from that hub club. By being located
on a school site, the satellite club is within easy reach of young people, but is
distinct from school PE as it is run by community volunteers (DCSM website,
2012a).

It is claimed that such structures will, in turn, increase opportunities for community sports participation, thereby improving health, community safety, skills, employment and economic growth (Sport England, website 2012a). Similar claims have been made in the USA, where Eyler (2011) writing in the President's Council on Sport, Fitness and Nutrition Digest concluded that, "Policies that influence how a community is designed and developed can influence physical activity" (p.4). Yet pursuing the capability of community

sport to bring about social action, (such as increased sports participation) there are, inevitably, additional costs. In Australia, Crawford (2009, p. 31) concluded that,

"If participation levels are to grow or even be sustained, policy makers and sports administrators must find new ways to encourage and support volunteerism. Governments, at all levels, will have to increase their investment in community facilities if grass roots sport is to flourish".

These examples point to the high levels of faith in the value of community sport. Through increased 'connectedness', it is argued, participants can develop social skills in the form of increased social capital allowing them to engage, with confidence, in a growing range of social contexts (Bailey *et al*., 2009). Moreover, and in partnership with school sport, it could argued that community sport offers numerous opportunities for informal play, organised competition (e.g. sports leagues), and skill development.

There is a growing appreciation that any form of behavioural change, such as those in the area of health or social engagement, is likely to be the outcome of both individual disposition and localised support (Kay & Bradbury, 2009). In the context of the London 2012 Olympics, for example, it is anticipated that community sport will take the lead in delivering a mass sports participation legacy which, it is argued, "will inspire a generation to become more active," (Communities and Local Government website, 2012). The delivery of such a legacy will, however, be heavily reliant on sports clubs and community based sports programmes that are staffed mainly by a volunteer workforce (e.g. coaches, club committee members). In recognition of the challenges facing this volunteer network,

the launch of the London 2012 mass participation sports legacy strategy identified 'recruiting, training and deploying 40,000 'sports makers' to organise and lead grassroots sporting activities' as one of its central activities (DCSM 2012b). This signals the Government's belief that sport has the potential to make a positive impact in young people's lives, and that this is contingent upon the quality of the engagement process. The role of the volunteer coach, it would appear, is pivotal to this whole agenda. At the same time, there is recognition that the volunteers themselves can gain much from the engaging in the volunteering process (Gottlieb and Gillespie, 2008). It could be argued, therefore, that putting 'volunteering', 'coaches', and 'sport' together represents an ideal scenario for delivering a whole host of personal and social benefits for individuals and communities. The purpose of this project was to search for existing evidence that could support this argument.

Methods

In this review, we sought to analyse the scale and quality of the existing research base on volunteer sport coaches and community sport. The questions that directed our study were:

1. What is the strength of the evidence, nationally and internationally, to support claims made for volunteer coaches to be major community assets?

2. Are there any changes that should be made to the organisation and delivery of community sport to maximise volunteer coaches' ability to deliver individual and community benefits in two key areas: health and wellbeing, and social inclusion.

Realist Review Method

We adopted a realist approach as advocated by Pawson and colleagues (2005). Traditional systematic reviews seek to identify and synthesise research that demonstrates clear alignment with 'gold standard research' (e.g. randomised control trials (RCTs) methodology). Derived from the biosciences, gold standard research, epistemologically, ontologically, and politically, conceptualises knowledge construction as an outcome of scientific rigor that is characterised by the experiment-manipulation axis in a controlled environment (Clegg, 2005). In this domain, the question that drives interventional studies and systematic reviews is, quite simply, "what works"? This approach, however, is not always appropriate in the social sciences where questions posed can be contextually driven: i.e. "what works, in what circumstances, and how?" In this situation, a realist review is more appropriate because it seeks to synthesis research by examining the configurations between contexts, mechanisms (e.g. processes in which human participants engage using available resources to effect change - Wong *et al.,* 2010), outcomes, and the theories that underpin them. A realist review, therefore, considers processes as well as impact and, in so doing, acknowledges the impact of context in shaping the outcome of any complex social intervention.

An important element of any systematic review is appraisal of the methodological quality of the evidence literature. Where both systematic and realist reviews use terms such as rigor and relevance to judge evidence, the application of these terms to the review process is different. Traditional systematic reviews judge quality by a hierarchical approach, with RCT's at the top. In the social sciences, however, such an approach is not always helpful because complex social interventions sometimes require eclectic methods (e.g. impact evaluations, participatory action research, documentary evaluations) in addressing complex social questions (Pawson *et al*., 2005). In this review, and beyond identification of studies by their topic and settings focus, we used the quality criteria rigor

and relevance to identify the ways in which a study articulated mechanisms and process that had shaped the intervention, and the ways in which theory had been used to explain the success or failure of an intervention. It was by adopting this composite approach that we hoped to identify "the weight of evidence" in addressing our research questions (Gough, 2007).

Activities

The study involved three main activities: literature search, literature review, and critical synthesis. Phase 1 was a scoping search to provide an overview of the available literature. Key search terms included: health and well-being, social inclusion, community sport, coach education – with, in each case, 'volunteer coach' used as a linking term. Databases searched included: Medline, ERIC, SportDiscus, Sociological Abstracts, PsychINFO and the Cochrane systematic review database. Manual searchers were then conducted, to include resources from the grey literature (e.g. conference proceedings) and websites such as Google Scholar. Only peer reviewed, English-language literature was identified for consideration.

The review was conducted between Feb 2011 and Oct 2011 and the plan was to take decisions about when to stop the search based on tests of saturation; that is, whether identified studies added new knowledge to our understanding of the field. However the reality of review methodology is that the search process is dictated by the literature available. Initial searches produced a large amount of irrelevant returns. For example, we identified a number of studies that examined community sport (n= 4475), but few of these studies focused on the interventional role of volunteer coaches in facilitating behavioural change. It also became apparent that few studies in the context of volunteer coaching had

sufficient rigor to be included in this review (i.e. empirical data, theoretical framework). At the end of this phase of searching abstracts and titles, we had identified 66 potential papers for review.

The next step involved 'progressive focusing' in refining the search process (Pawson *et al*., 2005).   Papers were reviewed again by applying inclusion criteria, which followed the realist logic of enquiry (i.e. context, mechanisms), and these were used to further screen relevant studies:

a.   Research in which theory is explicitly acknowledged in underpinning the intervention;

b.   Where researchers actively sought to capture the perceptions of impact from participants (e.g. stakeholders, policy managers, volunteer coaches);

c.   Theory of change from policy to practice was addressed;

d.   Research that acknowledged the contextual factors that influence any intervention and therefore where refinement and adjustment are required in applying to local situations.

Exclusion criteria centred on studies that failed to provide detail on these conditions. From these criteria, an extraction tool (in the form of a data matrix) was developed and applied to the literature. Data extracted included: 1st author, context, theory/concept, method, outcome, and implications. At the end of this process, a total of, 19 papers were identified as being relevant to the research questions of this study (see table 1)

INSERT TABLE 1

The final phase of the study involved analysis and synthesis to construct a review narrative. This phase allowed for an interpretation of the literature against the aims and objectives of the review. Although the volunteer coach literature is sparse and fragmented, we identified a number of themes that offer lines for future research in this area: context (community sport), mechanism (volunteers, parent-coaches), and outcomes (health, social capital), and these are discussed more fully later in the paper. More importantly perhaps, the review raises serious concerns about the growing weight of expectation on volunteer sport coaches to deliver a wide range of social outcomes, compared to the weakness of the evidence base to suggest they can deliver. It is on this point, offering new and robust insights to a topic, that the value of a systematic review of literature to research is most evident.

Strengths and Limitations of this review

It has been argued that the quality of a review is derived from explicitness and reflexivity (Gough, 2007). In this method section of the paper we have reported the review process. In terms of reflexivity, Silverman's (2005) definition was used (i.e. the self-organising character of any situated activity) and to ensure the research was rigorous and robust, an external, independent panel was formed to evaluate the strength of the evidence, identify any potential changes and explanations, and point to further directions for the review process. The panel was made up by experts drawn from sociology of sport, community sport and physical activity, and sport policy and governance. The panel commented, for example, about the lack of empirical research focusing on volunteer coaches' pedagogy,

and suggested this might be explained by the limited evaluation skills and resources in community sports clubs and governing bodies of sport, rather than the limited agency of coaches' practices. The panel also directed us to the event-management literature where a number of studies have examined the role of volunteers. Ralston and Downward (2004), for example, suggest that volunteers are important in generating a wave of expectation and citizenship from their experiences, thereby creating optimism and positive word-of mouth impact. This signposting led us to consider the strategic role of coach managers in the support and development of this valuable, albeit transient, volunteer workforce. The external panel, drawn from the key review disciplines and review users, offered a multi-disciplinary expert insight to the review narrative.

We need to make explicit the boundaries of this review. The limitations of the review theoretically and practically, were influenced by three factors: the amount of territory that could be covered in the time scale made available by the funding; the logistical limitations on identifying and locating relevant material; and limitations on the recommendations that can be delivered, particularly where it is difficult to deliver generalisable 'truths'. It is the case, for instance, that there is large amount of research literature around youth development, but this literature was outside of the scope of this review because it didn't always focus on the active role of volunteer coaches to facilitate behavioural change. Nonetheless, where large gaps in the review are evident (e.g. volunteer coaches facilitating behavioural change), this is a consequence of the limited evidence base in volunteer coach/community sport rather than any specific limitations in the review process.

Results and Discussion

We identified 19 studies that examined the generative role of volunteer coaches in a community context. Overall, the literature was fragmented in terms of national context (Australia, n=3; Finland, n=1; Germany, n=1; North American, n=11; South Africa, n=1; United Kingdom, n=2), and theoretical/conceptual frameworks used (social capital, n=2, social positioning, n=3; motivation; n=3, health settings, n=1; professional development, n=8; organisational capacity, n=1; Olympic values, n=1). In terms of methods, sources returned were dominated by cross sectional data (survey, n=9; interviews/focus groups. n=8). Since the evidence base for the role of volunteer coaches as facilitators of individual and community benefits is sparse, the following section offers the results from a thematic analysis of the evidence literature. The product of this approach is the construction of a narrative account from which we consider the evidence of context, mechanism and outcome in relation to the research questions that framed this review. In addressing question 1, findings from the view are presented under three broad themes (social connectedness, volunteer coaches as pedagogues, and positive youth development). Where the nature of the review evidence is uneven and discursive, question 2 draws on the wider literature in considering future research.

Question 1: **What is the strength of the evidence, nationally and internationally, to support claims made for community sport and volunteer coaches to be major community assets?**

Social Connectedness

The review found that although there is some research on volunteer sport coaches and their role in community engagement, coverage is very limited. In the context of mental and social health, Kokko *et al*., (2009) study of Finnish sports clubs, and Pierce *et al*., (2010) study of mental health awareness in rural clubs in Australia argued that community

sports clubs were ideally positioned to deliver positive health pedagogies, particularly in partnership with health advocacy organisations. In Kay & Bradbury's (2009) study of young volunteer sports leaders in the UK, individual benefits accrued through community sports participation were a form of 'social participation' fostering, potentially, the development of individual empowerment, networking opportunities, citizenship and social capital. Community sport, they argue, facilitates "social connectedness" through sports volunteering. In considering the generative role of community coaches, Burnett (2006) marked the coaches' role in enabling "linking capital by facilitating access to resources that are highly valued in the community" (p. 292). In this study, social capital was used as the organising framework to examine interactions between coach agency and social structure. Nevertheless, and despite evidence of the efficacy of community sport, little is known about how volunteer community coaches might enable such participant outcomes. At best, claims made on behalf of sports volunteer coaches appear speculative and theoretical.

Volunteer coaches as pedagogues

Reflecting the motivational literature (e.g. Duda and Balaguer, 2007), the role of coaches in creating positive sporting experiences for participants was clearly acknowledged in returned sources (Busser & Carruthers, 2010; Kim *et al.,* 2010; Feltz *et al*., 2009; Douglas *et al*., 2006). However, locating studies that focus on the pedagogical role of coaches has been difficult, despite the often stated claim that volunteer coaches occupy a position of centrality and influence in the athletic setting (North, 2007). For, Busser and Carruthers (2010), the majority of volunteer coaches tend to be co-producers; in other words coaches engage in coaching because they have a child interested in that sport. These findings reflect similar UK coaching demographics where sports coaches tend to drop out of the role when their children withdraw from the sport (North, 2009). As a

result, experienced, well-trained and knowledgeable coaches are lost to the sporting system. The impact of the transient nature of this workforce is significant. Although changing youth behaviours is the outcome of multiple influences (e.g. culture, organisational structures), evidence suggests that parents are significant in modelling and supporting change behaviour. Leberman & LaVoi (2011) for instance argued that a strong, positive association between parental support and young people's physical activity levels exists, and the three most important types of parental support were involvement, encouragement, and facilitation. We are unaware of any empirical study that has analysed the generative role of parent sports coaches in facilitating positive youth development in a community setting.

A large number of sources returned were situated in the professional development field (n=8). Studies focused on the impact of coach training on: coaches' self-efficacy (Busser, 2010); athlete-coach relationships (Smoll *et al.,* 1993; Douglas *et al*., 2006); and mental health pedagogy (Pierce *et al*., 2010). Subsequent studies focused on how volunteer coaches learn (Lemyre *et al.,* 2007), perceptions of coach learning (Wright *et al*., 2007), and coach training content (Vargas-Tonsing, 2007; Macdonald *et al*., 2010). Overall these studies adopt a cross sectional methodology that offered a temporal snap shot of the potential of formalised coach training to impact on participant's behaviour. Missing from the evidence literature however are longitudinal studies that capture the dynamic and fluid relationship between volunteer coach and professional learning opportunities. The effectiveness of any CPD programme or activity is seen in its ability to change learners' behaviours and outcomes in positive ways (Griffiths & Armour, 2012), and at different stages in the learning chain. Although this review identified the emergence of coach learning as a field of study, there is a paucity of empirical research that addresses *how* and

why volunteer coach learning is enabled in the context of volunteerism and community sport.

Positive Youth Development

A number of studies examined how fostering positive youth development was an outcome of the composite impact of coaches, parents, policy makers and sports organisations (Macdonald *et al.*, 2010; Vella *et al*., 2011). In Vella *et al.* (2011) study, coaches described their role in developing participants' social competences and life skills, although the study was not able to substantiate coaches' interview responses with their practices. Focusing on the strategies that youth coaches employ, Camire *et al*. (2011) identified the construction of explicit coaching philosophy, building meaningful relationships, clear coaching goals, and an ability to 'transfer' life skills. Evidence from these studies would suggest that the construction of a positive learning environment for young people through sport is an outcome of programme design and coaches influence. Yet despite worthy aspirations from policy makers and coaches themselves concerning youth development, existing literature suggests that this is a challenging and perhaps unobtainable goal (Nelson *et al*., 2006). Presently, there just isn't a strong enough empirical or conceptual base to suggest that volunteer coaches have the training, support and role clarification to achieve what is increasingly expected.

Question 2: **Are there any changes that should be made to the organisation and delivery of community sport to maximise volunteer coaches' ability to deliver individual and community benefits in two key areas: health and wellbeing, and social inclusion**

As previously described, there is some research evidence to support the claims made for the potential for sport participation to make a positive impact on participants' physical, mental and social health. There is less evidence, however, to suggest that volunteer sports coaches can deliver the kind of sports participation legacy, with attendant community benefits, that have been claimed. Hence, although volunteer sports coaches are characterised as significant enablers of sports participation experiences for adults and youths within a community (DCSM, 2012b), there has been very little research into their motivation, aspirations, retention and recruitment. It could be argued that if sustained engagement is valued, organisations need to consider supporting volunteer coaches in terms of personal development and personal growth opportunities. This is a complex issue however and demanding to deliver in practice. Judge *et al*., (2009), for instance, found that volunteer coaches received very little formal training or coach education that prepares and supports them to deliver the expected outcomes from sports participation. In the UK, similar findings have suggested that formal coach education and CPD provision have little impact on coaches' practices (Cushion *et al*. 2003).

The UK sporting infrastructure is comprised of a dynamic mix of public, private and 'Third Sector' (voluntary) provision. In this regard, the UK's sporting landscape reflects that of other Western Countries (e.g. Canada, USA, and Australia). In the UK, the majority of sports provision is centred round local sports clubs, which tend to be run by volunteers. Whilst recognising the potential of sports clubs as sites of community engagement, recent work has identified tensions in terms of their operational challenges. The tradition of sports clubs in the UK is one of a strong sense of independence, autonomy and resilience (Taylor et al., 2003). Yet, sports clubs operate in an inter-dependent space, operating alongside both regional/local (e.g. County Sports Partnership) and National Agencies (e.g. Sport England) charged with promoting greater sports participation. More

recently, research has begun to examine the 'marketisation' of the voluntary sector (Eikenberry, 2004); in other words, how voluntary organisations are being encouraged to become more market driven by adopting the language and practices of the market (e.g. modelling organisational structures and attracting financial resources). The tension of such a development, as Taylor and Garrett (2010) argue, is that sport in the UK has typically been viewed as a mediator of community welfare and a prized form of social practice. Importantly, these authors ask whether the voluntary sector can realistically deliver a "service agreement" (in government terms) *without jeopardising the trust and support between coach and participant*" (p.110).

Participant outcomes – Health and social inclusion

In a number of sources, it was acknowledged that individuals who participate in community club-based sport are significantly more likely to achieve positive health experiences, and volunteer coaches play a significant role in facilitating this outcome (Kokko et al., 2009; Pierce et al., 2010). Certainly local sports clubs offer both structured (organised, competitive) and unstructured (social) opportunities for participating in sport, with the potential for a range of health and social inclusion benefits. In addition, the Commission of the European Communities (2007) White Paper in Sport offers clear examples of these arguments at the level of policy; "Sport organisations are encouraged to take into account their potential for health-enhancing physical activity and to undertake activities for this purpose" (p.4). Within the context of community engagement, the White Paper makes clear that it perceives club community sport organisations as a way of promoting active citizenship. It is unsurprising, therefore, that successive UK governments have promoted sport as a mechanism for addressing social problems linked to issues of health, inequality, poverty and disaffected youth (e.g. DCSM/SU Game Plan, 2002).

An analysis of the epidemiology literature provides clear evidence that physical activity engagement in childhood can lead to improved cardiovascular health, positive mental health, improved body composition, and reduced risk of obesity in adulthood (Aburto et al., 2011). Moreover, research suggests that good physical activity habits during childhood can lead to positive life style choices in terms of life-long health (Department of Health, 2011). Although few studies have considered how community sport and volunteer coaches can facilitate health outcomes, there is some evidence to suggest this will be a difficult challenge. In the domain of youth sport coaching for example, both Bergeron (2007) and Fraser Thomas et al. (2005) have suggested that inadequately trained volunteer coaches are simply not in a position to realise the health benefits of physical activity. At the same time, Wiersma & Sherman (2005) note how youth sport culture has been characterized by excessive adult involvement, intense pressure, and violence. This suggests an important role for sports organisations and a responsibility to support and educate volunteer coaches.

Implications for future research

From this systematic review of the literature, we would argue that research attention needs to be directed to the following areas. First, there is a need to examine the pedagogical role of the volunteer coach in shaping and influencing the extensive health/social wellbeing agendas that are so prominent in many countries across the world. Currently, claims to community action through sport seem to identify the volunteer coach as a curiously passive actor in changing behaviour; as a mere organiser. Second, future research could usefully consider the connections between community sport and school sport in developing positive health behaviours among young people. Thirdly, research is

needed to evaluate how a strategic approach to enhancing community health and well-being might more be effective by coordinating the work of different advocacy agencies such as government departments of health, education, sport, community regeneration and inclusion.

Conclusion

What is clear from this study is that despite the appeal of the many claims made about the wider social value for community sport, there is a distinct lack of empirical evidence to support claims for a causal relationship. In the context of community sport, there are three main reasons for this paucity of evidence: a lack of large-scale and long term evaluation programmes (Bailey, 2005); the difficulty of capturing sport impact beyond the "pure happenstance" of sports participation (Long et al., 2002, p. 3) and, as Tinning (2010) recently described it, the 'unfashionable' nature of community sport as a research topic. Despite this, long-held beliefs about the value of sport engagement and its ability to foster individual empowerment, networking opportunities, citizenship and social capital, persist. It is unsurprising, therefore, that successive governments in the UK and elsewhere have promoted sport as a mechanism for addressing expansive issues such as neighbourhood renewal, inequality and the problems caused by disaffected and disengaged youth. At a political level, much is claimed for sport and, more recently, community sport and volunteer coaches. At an academic level, however, claims tend to be more modest because of a lack of empirical evidence to support a causal relationship between sports participation, community engagement and individual empowerment. The gap between these two positions needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency if sport is to resist unrealistic claims made on its behalf, in which it is bound to fail, and retain its integrity.

It is clear from our review that there is a lack of theoretically informed, empirically based research that addresses important questions about processes and mechanisms, and the long term impact of community sport on challenges such as improving social cohesion and increasing levels of physical activity for health and wellbeing. There are, however, examples in the literature suggesting that, in the short term at least, community sport has the potential to facilitate the development of capital through increased connectedness with networks and communities (e.g. Positive Futures; Football 4 Peace International). However, while aspirations for sport as a form of positive social action and engagement are laudable, it is clear that the mechanisms that can bring about sustained behavioural change in individuals and communities are poorly understood. If there are expectations that volunteer sports coaches, as community assets, will, through sports activities, deliver individual and community benefits, it is imperative that we understand more about the needs, motivations and priorities of this large volunteer workforce. This need would appear to be particularly pressing in the current economic climate and in the context of the UK Coalition Government's ambitions for the creation of the 'Big Society' and similar ambitions worldwide.

Acknowledgements

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