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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The Views, Values, and Experiences of Sport and Employability of Young Adults in a Deprived Community in the North of England

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Abstract

Young adults in deprived communities in the United Kingdom (UK) are less able to access sport and leisure activities compared to more affluent peers. Physical activity (PA) can enhance life skills and facilitate employment. This project aimed to critically explore how sport, PA and employment were perceived by community leaders and younger adults as development opportunities. Appreciative inquiry was used to engage community leaders and young adults to reflect on their experiences living and working in a deprived community. Interviews, workshops, and community action methods were transcribed, thematically analysed, and used to share back insights with wider stakeholders. Participants were positive about their neighbourhoods but recognised significant cultural and gender barriers to achieving their goals. Community leaders and younger adults identified how their cultural and household experiences influenced the choices of community engagement. Participants identified education as important to them and their families and expressed frustration that opportunities for local sport and PA were not geared for the development of life skills and to enhance their employment opportunities. The results suggest how sport and PA infrastructure could be more strategically aligned to health, well-being, and social integration with a focus on skills development and building experiences related to employability.

Keywords:

Children and young people, disadvantaged, employment, equality, healthy lives, physical activity, reduced inequalities, sport

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Introduction

Participating in sport and physical activity (PA) has multiple physical and social benefits (Garner-Purkis et al., 2020). Participation in organised youth sport (i.e., structured and rule-based PA) is thought to positively

predict involvement in other community activities and increase social capital for individuals and groups (Perks, 2007). Sport, exercise and PA can act as a vehicle for wider social development and social change in deprived communities.

Although traditional school-based PA is known to be largely ineffective in engendering life-long engagement in PA (Kirk, 2005), there is an argument for youth participation in physical activities based on encouraging healthier lifestyles, enhanced academic achievement, emotional positivity, and higher levels of confidence (Chalkley et al., 2015). Enhancing social inclusion/cohesion and reducing high rates of crime (Skinner et al., 2008; Waring & Mason, 2010; Morgan & Parker, 2017; Jugl et al., 2023) are just some of the reasons for maintaining sport participation.

There are a range of social and contextual reasons why young adults withdraw from sport or are difficult to engage (Balish et al., 2014), which is why benefits are not equitably realised across more deprived populations. However, schools in deprived areas have introduced a range of initiatives to tackle low sport participation rates and increase long-term engagement (Dagkas & Stathi, 2007). Plus-sport / Sport-plus programmes (Coalter, 2009) have been used to address broader social cohesion, and this is often achieved by developing and sustaining sport organisations in underserved communities (Whitley et al., 2013). The focus has been on social outcomes and sport is a secondary consideration. The potential value of using sport and PA as a vehicle to alleviate broader social issues and target marginalised youth is evidenced in policy and strategic funding (Morgan & Parker, 2017), with an increase in sports-based programmes aiming to address worklessness and social exclusion (Spaaij et al., 2013) and to address wider life chances in more deprived areas.

Social mobility refers to an individual or group's ability to improve their current status in relation to social class or position in society (Breen, 2004). This is often determined by the household occupation/income (Social Mobility Commission, 2022). Socioeconomic status, social class and home

environment all impact the perception of participation in sport and PA, with those from a lower socioeconomic background typically less engaged and underrepresented (Tandon et al., 2021). Young people living in deprived areas also have reduced access to sport and PA opportunities compared to their more affluent counterparts (Atkinson & Kintrea, 2004). This disparity of access increases inequalities (Edwards et al., 2015) in aspiration, health outcomes, life expectancy and quality of life (Pampel et al., 2010; Leonard, 2017), limiting growth in social capital and well-being (Atkinson & Kintrea, 2004; OECD, 2022).

Sport for Development and Employability

The impact of sport for development (SfD) relates to sport and PA-based interventions designed to support and achieve non-sport goals. These outcomes include gender empowerment, health promotion, positive youth development, employment and employability (Darnell et al., 2019) and encompass areas such as 'sport for positive youth development' (PYD) and 'sport for life skills' (Damon, 2004; Holt, 2016; Hermens, 2017). PYD is a strength-based perspective that understands children, and young people have 'resources to be developed' rather than using the deficit model that identifies 'problems to be solved' (Lerner et al., 2005; Burkhard et al., 2020). Sport development activities are also promoted to address local social tension, and sport and PA are seen as a method to enhance social mobility in communities deemed most marginalised (Morgan et al., 2019). For example, youth employability has been a persistent concern for several decades and appears worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic: in the UK, 54% of those losing employment were youth (16 to 18 years) (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Youth unemployment has risen, and the number of employed young people has fallen, with specific concerns relating to poor

levels of participation in career-oriented planning (Morgan et al., 2022). Employability skills are those that are necessary for getting, keeping, and succeeding at a job and include abilities that enable people to get along with their fellow workers and supervisors and make sound, critical decisions (Crawford et al., 2011; Social Mobility Commission, 2019). Unlike occupational or technical skills, employability skills are generic in nature, cutting across all industry types, sectors and job seniority.

Economic evaluations of large sporting events have demonstrated an economic impact by generating additional employment and the potential for long-term economic gains (Ruiz, 2004). But perhaps more significantly, involvement in sport and PA participation can equip young people with specific ‘core’ and ‘soft’ skills that may raise their level of employability (Morgan et al., 2022). Research by McDonalds (2015) suggests that many employers consider soft skills such as teamwork and communication more important than academic abilities yet, within academic literature soft skills are considered somewhat neglected (Hurrell, 2016). Attitudinal and social gains are associated with cooperation, leadership, respect and teamwork, enabling young people to enhance their participation in sport to achieve social inclusion. The critical factor appears to be a commitment to enabling personal development through sport, focusing on individuals who are considered disadvantaged or ‘at risk’ (Coakley, 2011).

Study Objective

Youth from deprived communities do not often have equitable access to sport and PA, and this leads to poorer outcomes and inequalities. Barriers exist and are known, but thus far, research has yet to explore these through the lens of the people who experience them. The objective of this study

is to foster a shared and critical understanding of the challenges faced by young people in deprived communities regarding sport, PA, and employability, particularly within their cultural contexts, with the goal of proposing strategic alignments of sports and PA infrastructure with health, well-being, social integration, and employability.

Methodology

The research focused on redressing deficits experienced by individuals in a specific community by giving voice to individuals who have typically been excluded (Warwick-Booth et al., 2021). An embedded researcher was hosted in a Community and Voluntary Sector (CVS) organisation to engage with and include the participation of ‘non-academic partners’ who have insider knowledge to shape and contribute to the research that intentionally sought to benefit them at a local level (Daly-Smith et al., 2020). The role enabled a policy understanding with stakeholders who would implement the findings (Giampapa, 2011) and was based on ensuring equitable engagement, social processes and outcomes (Martin, 2008). Embedded researchers also pose challenges to the systems in which they work by engaging with nuances and complexity in local contexts (Giampapa, 2011; Gradinger et al., 2019), facilitating subsequent implementation activity, sharing knowledge between researchers and stakeholders (Cheetham et al., 2018).

Study Design

Appreciative Inquiry was used to inform the study design. Appreciative Inquiry is an asset-based approach to organisational engagement that uses questions and dialogue to help participants uncover existing strengths, advantages, or opportunities in their communities, organisations, or teams (Bushe, 2012). Using Appreciative Inquiry as

an approach involved focusing on the four core principles (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) and the ‘4 D model’:

1. Discover: grounded observation to identify the best of what is
2. Dream: vision and logic to identify ideals of what might be
3. Design: collaborative dialogue and choice to achieve consent about what should be
4. Delivery: collective experimentation to discover what can be.

The study was based around public engagement and co-production through two rounds of consultation with community leaders, health and wellbeing organisations, and a group of young adults (aged 18-25 years) from a specific and deprived local area. This participatory approach ensured appropriate engagement and interaction between all parties (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995) with direct access to local priorities and perspectives. Funding for the embedded researcher and internships was achieved via charity and civic support. Ethical approval was granted by Sheffield Hallam University [ER 30099685].

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

Stage one: Community leaders. Participants were identified through recommendations from the CVS organisation and then via ‘snowballing’ (Parker et al., 2019), allowing local people to suggest potential participants via local knowledge and networks. Interviews were arranged with those selected for their perceived ability to identify sport, PA, and employability issues, as well as their applied experiences working in the locality. The sample size was determined by the availability of VCS leaders and the capacity of the researchers based on available time and funding restrictions.

Interviews took place face-to-face or via video link. They were structured around

the Appreciative Inquiry model to explore local assets (people, organisations, and infrastructure), opportunities around sport, PA, employment, perceptions of youth and young adults, and aspirations for the future. Interviews were recorded on MS Teams and transcribed verbatim. Findings were presented, discussed, and themes shared with a stakeholder group, the CVS Board of Trustees, before stage two commenced.

Stage two: Young adults. Participants were invited to respond to an explanatory flyer distributed locally, electronically, and on paper. A video was also produced and shared to convey information about the project and reach a wider audience; sent out via the CVS organisation and the University's Twitter feed. The term ‘expression of interest’ (EOI) was used rather than ‘application’ to make the recruitment process accessible and non-threatening. EOIs could be submitted by video, voice-note, via a phone call, in writing, or through the completion of a survey, supporting consent and GDPR requirements. The sample size was selected based on the anticipated numbers to deliver an engaging co-production activity in a safe and trusted space for the participants, coupled with budget limitations for the voucher payment per participant.

Recruited participants were asked to consent to session participation and anonymised data collection. Workshop sessions, running for 90 minutes bi-weekly for eight weeks over the summer (a total of four sessions), were held and included ‘ground rules’ to encourage honesty, confidentiality, and respect. Sessions also included group discussions, breakout conversations, and facilitated activities to explore experiences, beliefs, views, and values around key themes. Particular attention was placed on ensuring all interns had a voice and that they could review their participation at any stage.

Session one included a topic introduction - 'sport for employment' The following questions were used to frame discussions:

1. What experiences have you had with work through you, friends, and family?
2. Can sport and physical activity help people get good jobs? (And if so, how/why?)
3. What does your future life look like, and what will work look like for you?

Session two explored employment skills linked to PA and sport, focusing on hard and soft skills, behavioural traits, and character traits (Balcar, 2016).

Session three included a consolidation activity, and participants were asked to continue reflecting using 'discover', 'dream', and 'design' in relation to their life experiences. Finally, a conversation was framed using the questions 'What do you want to achieve?', 'What gets in the way?', and 'What help do you need?'.

Session four included preparation for a short group and individual presentation in the research centre, to which stakeholders, participants, and families were invited and where the study outcomes were shared. In each session, data were captured through voice notes recordings and the use of flip charts, sticky notes, and whiteboards.

Data analysis

Interview data from stage one and stage two were collated and analysed systematically using a Thematic Analysis (TA) approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019): familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for

themes, reviewing 24 themes, defining themes and analysis write-up. TA is a flexible qualitative methodology that is not theoretically bound, producing patterns of meaning or 'themes' in the data through coding, categorising, and review. Theme descriptors were created to articulate the shared meaning of the themes across the community leader interviews and co-production sessions.

Results

Stage One

Five men and five women aged between 32 and 54 were interviewed. Six interview participants worked with the CVS host organisation in client-facing roles such as link workers or project officers. Other interview participants worked for delivery organisations, the local council, and youth services. All participants had significant (10 years plus) experience in community-facing roles and direct experience within the locality of focus. Participants came from a range of ethnicities representative of the area and population.

The view of the local area held by the community leaders was highly positive and outlined its potential. While outsiders use terms such as 'disadvantaged', 'underserved' or 'deprived', the view of the interview participants presented a richness of characters, collaboration and opportunity. Four key themes were identified via the interview process as outlined in Figure 1:

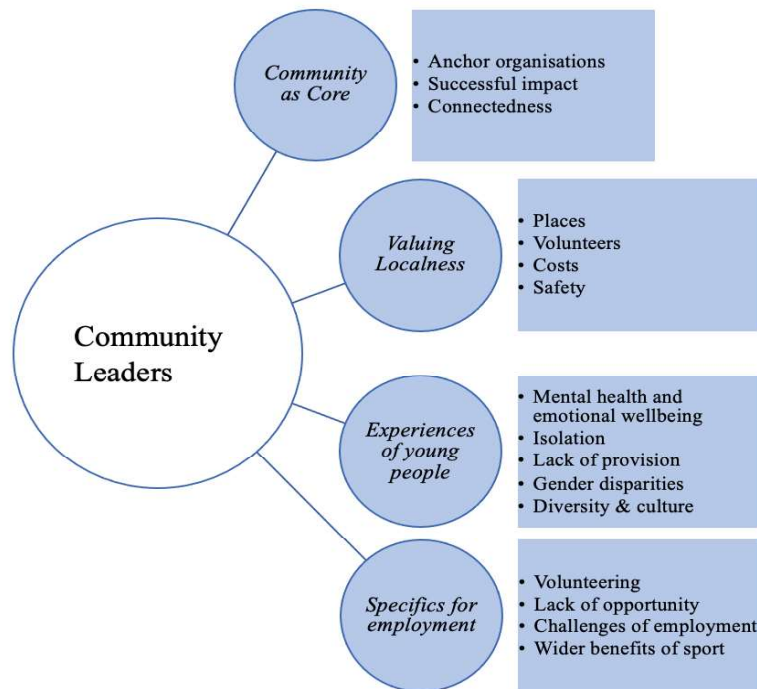


Figure 1. Themes from community leader interviews:

Community as core. The community leaders were focused on their roles in the anchor organisations and their links across the community; “The centre is like a bridge to reach the people in the community”. They were all able to define what success meant to them in that context; “success is a child who was 13 coming to me at age 22 and saying, “I made it through” and “the purpose of our project is to reduce the likelihood of them (the clients) entering into criminal justice system”.

Most leaders stressed their connectedness to community groups to help people connect with their communities, develop their sense of belonging, and focus on health and wellbeing. For example, “I serve as a pipeline, part of a one-stop shop so people get connected with local services” Or “to support people, who otherwise would struggle to get along, to look for services and ideas for connection in their community”. The area was seen as having lots of potential and the irony was that “The area was falling

into that trap of being deprived but not quite deprived enough to be able to access some of the funding across the city”.

Valuing localness. This component refers to the place and the way that the organisations, infrastructure, processes, systems, and financial situations operate. This includes the lack of assets, services, and funding from a personal, professional, or population deprivation perspective. Localness reflects ‘knowledge of community culture—the way we do things around here’. The theme refers explicitly to places, physical infrastructure, and facilities.

There was the acknowledgement of the lack of provisions or available places to go (sporting or otherwise); “There’s no place to relax, a small gym, a community centre, a place where they can also go to discuss things. A small place where they can just sit and discuss things around a table, they don’t get this. The leisure facilities in the area are run down and underused, and there is a lack

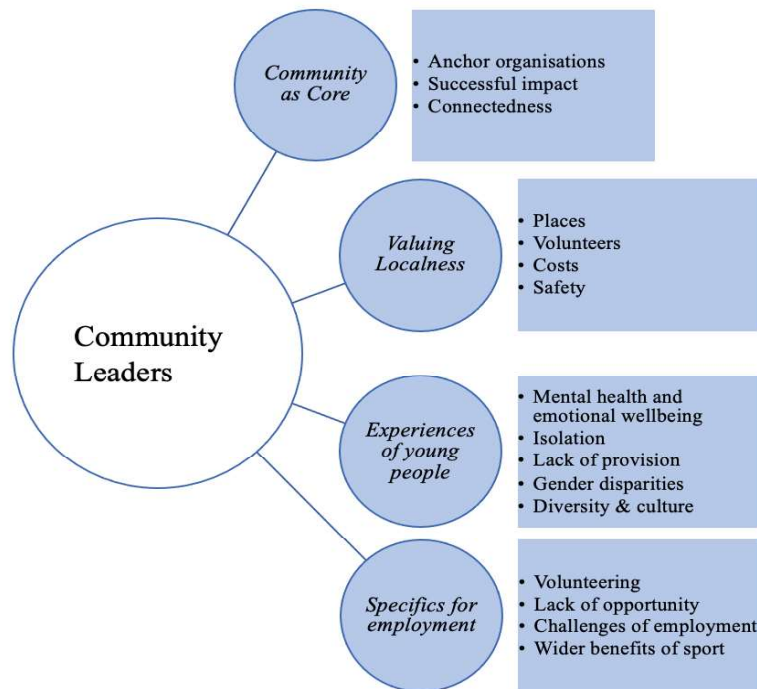


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of options for community spaces.” These problems are relatively common in more deprived areas, and there is generally a lack of supervision for evening activities, particularly for girls. As commented, “In the evening, there's nothing open this far from the city centre, so there's nothing in that sense happening.”

Assets and employment opportunities were referred to; “It (the area) has a thriving high street, lots of local businesses and a post office... and we’re surrounded by industrial estates with lots of employment opportunities.” The area also benefited from people who would engage: “I feel the community is steeped in more of a sense of community and a willingness to participate and to do good.” Some referred to people as contributing to the local area, for example, “there are a lot of local people who want to do some good stuff. We’ve got volunteers with a range of different skills, and we’ve got a range of different talents and backgrounds.” The resilience of local people was highlighted: “The area, I think, is a really interesting area that has huge amounts of potential and has done some brilliant things, mainly through the kind of grit and determination of local people.”

There were also limitations around facilities or access to sport and leisure, specifically highlighting a lack of local swimming pools and mentioning the cost related to larger and sometimes multigenerational families. Cost of access is a barrier to accessing leisure facilities; “we go to the [a local leisure venue] and things like that, but still, it’s quite expensive.” In addition, leaders recognised the focus on access for some groups over others; for example, “it feels like a bit of a black hole in the city for me around about 14 – 16 plus age group” - “the children when they are between 12-25, that is the time they’ve got a lot of energy, but they can’t do anything.”

Safety was an additional factor, specifically, parents' concern for their children when they did go out, exacerbated by the lack of available activities: “I have spoken to people here who don't feel safe sending their young kids out in the evening.” “15, 16, and 17-year-olds, even 18 or 20—their parents, they hold them back, and they say don't go out, just stay home. I don't want you to do any problem or anything.”

Experiences of young residents. Leaders referred to a range of issues associated with mental health and isolation and emotional well-being but also that “the younger generation at the minute want things here and now, they are not necessarily willing to work for it, or they want immediate results as a result of their work.” Gender difference was a pervasive sub-theme: “They don't have a particular place to go, the girls. The boys, they used to have some. They used to go to play football or go to a private gym. But the girls, they don't have enough, they have no opportunity at all,” and “for girls, I would say the majority of what I've mentioned is all male-dominated, and there is probably a lack of opportunities for girls in the community.” The challenges young men face with confidence or mental health in relation to employment were explicitly mentioned. Notably, this differed with challenges females may face “A lot of it's true confidence. I would say, particularly with young men, that they’re less confident using different ways of communicating and communicating with different people.” Despite the underlying difficulties within the area, belief was still high that there was potential in the young people of the area and that, with the right support, they could achieve.

Diversity and culture were frequently mentioned in community leader interviews. The reference to gender difference, “girls being told to stay home or it's not safe is

because of the context of religion,” and social cohesion was important. “It will take time to mix cultures and accept the changes, accept other cultures. It's good to learn from the other cultures; you know they will be thinking differently.”

The dominant request was for new or re-purposed facilities in the community “If there are facilities for the kids, for the young, for the adult, you know, for the men, the woman, something like that. So, like one place it has all these.” There was an emphasis on a single place where many activities could take place, similar to a leisure facility, “One place can help if that person could just go to that one place, and they will find everything in that one place. I can do exercise, helping with employment, you know all the things. It will be in one place that will be great, to be honest.” Increased utilisation of community assets was mentioned, with interviewees focusing on underutilised spaces.

Specifics for employment. The need for voluntary activities that are meaningful and lead to paid work was raised frequently and is a sub-theme. Local employers were deemed important for developing specific skills for applying for work, such as CV writing and interview preparation. All interviewees regarded volunteering as a tool to help gain skills and experiences “volunteering can be a good springboard to different skills and opportunities. I think that with volunteering you've given up your time. You've learned something new.” The need for education and support for people to increase employability skills “We could offer certain skills to help get people job ready and maybe whether that be interviewing skills or workshops on filling in application forms or something like that.” Job fairs were mentioned regularly as ‘valuable.’ Frustrations with the lack of opportunity for youth employment in the area were

highlighted. “If they want you to do the paid work, they found they haven't got anything in here. They have to go outside of the area” and “it's really difficult for young people to get that first step on the ladder.” Access to employment was thought to be affected by certain postcodes that were known to be more deprived. This recognition of place as a disadvantage was particularly emphasised, based on local stigma: “A certain young person from a certain postcode would be seen as untrustworthy or whatever.”

Employment and employment-associated challenges of being from the area were frequently mentioned. “We're in a really challenging period anyway for any sort of employment and young people.” The paucity of experience and engagement was mentioned in several interviews, reflecting local knowledge. “The sad position that we're in is that a lot of young people, although they might learn how to write a CV, they've got not a lot to put on it because they've not had experiences yet.” However, it was suggested that the opportunity would be taken up if offered and supported. Sport was mentioned by some of the interviewees as valuable in building employment skills and personal confidence, “sport massively helps find transferable skills that employers would look for.”

Stage 2

Twelve young adults were recruited via the EOI, and 10 participants (referred to here as ‘interns’) attended the first co-production session, with one failing to attend subsequent sessions. Nine interns attend all sessions and the presentation evening. All interns were second and third-generation British Asian and Asian, five women and four men, ages ranging from 16 to 27 years. The themes that were identified within this data are outlined in Figure 2.

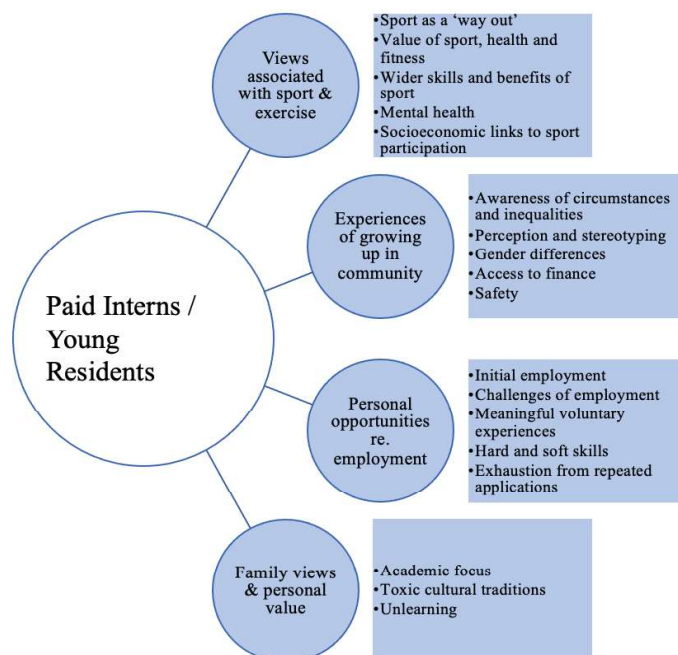


Figure 2. Themes from paid interns co-production activities:

Views associated with sport/exercise. Links between sporting activity for those from 'bad backgrounds' suggested that greater resilience and confidence could be achieved and that sport was a 'way out' of a current set of circumstances. "They had that Mo Farrah documentary; he came from a bad background, but sport helped him to improve his life". The idea that sport participation teaches resilience was often mentioned "if 'summat' doesn't go right you learn, and you push yourself" and "How you respond to failure in sports determines how you respond to so many different aspects of life." Participants recognised the association with life skills, "like gaining confidence, teamwork, communication skills, that sort of thing; it's good for your physical and mental health" and associated life skills with other development "It gives you skills that you use in interviews to impress people." It was also recognised that sports and PA can positively impact work and jobs, "Healthy body, healthy mind. So, if you're in a better state of mind, you perform better in your job".

Types of sport were discussed, and it was recognised that different sports had a variety of outcomes, "Sports gets people out of bad activity" "Asians used to do boxing and think they were better than everyone and attack people for no reason, sometimes sport gives them an excuse to do bad things." In addition to this, some sports were socially or culturally associated, "some sports, like tennis, for example, it's mainly made up of people who are richer, like they had rich families to start with." This view reflected how participation in certain sports may be linked to socio-economic status, with those from a higher SES perceived as more likely to participate in such activities as tennis. This limiting factor was linked to opportunity: "If they are living in a deprived area or if they come from a low social class, then they probably won't be able to access sport."

Values and experiences of growing up in an underserved northern community. Young residents of this community are highly aware of their environment, personal circumstances, and the disparity of opportunities and life chances, and they appear to compare

themselves with those living in more affluent areas. It is well recognised by the young people that others have it easier and have more opportunities, whilst barriers exist to them. “There's a big disadvantage of being in a deprived area like this one; the people who live in the well-developed areas have it much easier.” Likewise, “I came from a dysfunctional and financially deprived background, and I was obstructed from doing so many things.” There were also concerns raised relating to how others from different areas perceived those living within this community. “There are people in this community who are pricks, and people think you're one of them, like you know, people who do bad activities and drugs; people think you're the same and don't wanna talk or make a relationship with you.” Participants are aware of the dangers and safety issues within their community, and when asked if a miracle was to take place, what would be different? All participants linked their answers to improved feelings of safety when going out within their local area.

However, it was also recognised that some specific opportunities were exclusively available to young people due to living in a deprived area. “When I was looking to apply for some universities, they had circumstantial grades, so if you came from a certain area or were a certain ethnicity, they would lower the grades for you.” Gender was a further diversifying factor with greater freedom and different opportunities available for young males than their female equivalents. This was discussed, “In this community, there aren't enough opportunities for girls like, you know, youth groups and stuff because I've tried looking, you will find endless activities for boys like my brother has endless activities, but for me, I can't find any.” This raises the question of why young females have less access to activities and opportunities than young males living within the same area.

Finance is seen as a significant limiting factor, as is safety and access to activities and recreational spaces. “If they don't have any money to spend on extracurricular activities and stuff like that, then it's harder for them to improve their quality of life.” Moreover, “Finance, it's always money; definitely, money is the answer to everything. People on free school meals don't get as many opportunities.”

Experiences and opportunities related to employment. Access to employment opportunities is limited, and part-time work/volunteering opportunities are hard to find. “I'm wanting to start volunteering to get experience, but there's a lot of restrictions and stuff”. Similarly, “I volunteered at a charity shop, but then Covid hit, so I had to stop.” Volunteering is recognised as valuable with the potential to lead to employment: “I volunteered with them for 7 months, and now I'm actually working for them, and they are paying me, I'm really glad I've got that job.” However, some recognised that volunteering opportunities need to provide a specific experience with direct benefits rather than just be a 'CV filler'. “I hear too many times, it looks good on your CV, it's almost like a robotic statement rather than actually appreciating the experience and letting it change and develop you.”

Those who had paid work frequently did not enjoy it or feel valued by their employers: “My part-time job ever since I started at 16 was at McDonald's, and I've absolutely hated it; I think sometimes they forget you've got a life elsewhere.” Others had invested time writing applications and looking for employment experiences but failed to obtain any, so the process of applying for work was seen as confusing. Negative past experiences were a significant factor in confidence, self-worth and self-belief. Many participants reflected on feelings of failure when being turned down or

rejected. “I wasn't able to get any jobs last year; I had like 20 places not got back to me” “I went through so many job interviews; it wasn't easy to get a job. I kept failing and failing. I always ask myself, why? Is it cause I'm a girl? Is it cause I'm Asian?” This raises the question: Do all young people struggle to maintain employment, or is this something more common among disadvantaged youths, certain genders and those from ethnic minority backgrounds?

Employment skills within employment were split in discussion between hard and soft skills. Technical (hard) skills gained through hands-on training and character-based (soft) skills such as openness to criticism were understood and recognised as important qualities for employment. However, there was a shared understanding: “Communication, teamwork, time management, critical thinking, decision making, adaptability, and conflict management are all important.” Participants were aware of the tensions in organisational activity, “They say they want creativity, but I don't think they do really 'cause they just want someone who does as they are told.” Young residents saw soft skills as highly important to employers. These were understood to be developed through a broader range of spaces and activities, including sport and PA. In contrast, hard skills were seen to be developed on the job, in school, or through specific training.

Family views/culture and personal values.

‘Asian Parents’ were often mentioned, reflecting values associated with high academic attainment and focusing on higher-status job roles. “Asian parent mentality, they think grades are everything.” Similarly, “I've always been pushed for good grades cause Asian parents.” Many parental concerns were referenced, “My Dad just thinks you need a degree and then you're a good person; if you don't have a degree, you're not a good

person” and “You have to be good academically to have a good life.”

Additionally, sporting activities were seen by parents as conflicting with academic goals. “If their child goes and does sport, they think they're not gonna get a job out of that; they don't support you when it comes to sports.” Similarly, “My parents never encouraged me to do sports; they are entirely wanting you to get a good grade and think sport will compromise it all.” Opportunities and expectations for females were often significantly lower than those for males regarding activities, expectations of life outcomes and parental support to achieve success. Expressions of priorities are gendered; “Gender plays a big role in cultures, especially Asian. The male gets more support, more opportunities, more control over their life than a female.” and “My Mum won't let me play football cause I'm a girl, and you're not supposed to”.

Concerns relating to ‘toxic cultural trends’ and a negative impact on mental health were also raised. Participants recognised their history and culture as influential, “The thing with mental health is that it stems from culture and parenting.” Similarly, “I think also, preventing toxic cultural traits on people from a young age because even though we're in the 21st Century, mental health isn't considered normal in every culture.” It was recognised that experiences while young were hard to ‘unlearn’, so family or cultural behaviours can determine future trends and behaviours. Relating to safety and recreational spaces, the young residents expressed their concerns. “I'd be scared going to High Hazels Park; my dad keeps saying oh, people get stabbed there.” There is perhaps a learned fear to “Stay away from the car park and stay away from the bottom 'cause it's very dangerous” from those who recognise the risks for some young people.

Discussion

This study sought to achieve a shared and critical understanding of the challenges faced by young people from a deprived community regarding sport, PA, and employability, particularly in relation to their cultural contexts and values. This suggests how a sport and PA infrastructure could be more strategically aligned to health, well-being, and social integration. The appreciative inquiry approach enabled a participative approach to engage with young residents and community leaders.

Our research is consistent with previous research highlighting how individuals from deprived areas are typically less engaged and under-represented in sport and PA due to socioeconomic status and social class (Tandon et al., 2021). A sense of pride and appreciation for the local area and its residents was prominent in young residents' and community leaders' narratives. A close connection with others from the area was prevalent, and there was a recognition that leaving the area may not be desirable due to this connection and the proximity of family. The area was an important part of their lives and identity.

The key themes and sub-themes contrast with some of the previous research that has stressed multiple physical and mental health benefits of participating in sport and PA (Garner-Purkis et al., 2020). The contextual factors are perhaps more figural in this work, demonstrating that experience is diverse and more nuanced in relation to cultural and structural features. Based on this finding, the discussion will focus on the contextual factors that provide significant learning about how sport and PA can be understood as a driver for employability.

Sport for Development: Structural Features
Policies and strategies developed by Sport England, Streetgames and The Sport for

Development Coalition have promoted sport and PA as a means of benefitting poorer and more diverse populations and sport programmes have represented an important opportunity for young adults to develop 'life skills' (Holt, 2016; Hermens, 2017). It is widely acknowledged that the local sport facilitation infrastructure enables people to participate in sport and PA and, for some, experience success in relation to community and employment environments (Danish et al., 2004).

Developing sport programmes is considered particularly essential for young people of colour, some of whom are disadvantaged and underserved, experiencing poorer long-term outcomes (Newman et al., 2018). Different cultural groups are differentially engaged in sport, and this is somewhat influenced by household expectations and parental pressures that influence involvement in sport and sporting programmes (Kay, 2006). Asian parents, in particular, emphasise that social mobility for their children will more likely be achieved through high educational attainment and success (Shah et al., 2010) at the expense of engagement in sport. Girls and women of colour from working-class backgrounds are particularly influenced by cultural barriers, with this group being the most overlooked and underrepresented within youth sport (Mann & Hacker, 2024). There is also a criticism of sport approaches as 'a panacea for social disharmony' with sport and PA benefits being largely 'unproven' and lacking epistemological sophistication (Coalter, 2007; Sandford et al., 2006; Morgan et al., 2019).

There was agreement and deep discussion concerning young girls and women from ethnic minority groups and working-class backgrounds and cultural barriers to vocational activities. As a result, these groups are the most overlooked and underrepresented within youth sport and have

significant health inequalities (Mann & Hacker, 2024). This is consistent with previous research that highlights that there are certain cultural expectations and parental pressures surrounding the gender roles of young people from ethnic minority groups (Kay, 2006). The focus of curricular activities over vocational opportunities is referred to as 'ethnic capital'. It transmits high educational values and aspirations from parents and parental peers to children (Chakraborty et al., 2019). It is understood that these high aspirations and 'ethnic capital' are why more working-class Asian students enter higher education than their white peers (Modood, 2004; Zhou, 2005). Much activity in community spaces of this nature may well be effective, impactful and enjoyed by the identified audiences; however, it may sit outside the context of academic evaluation. More work is required to analyse and understand the current programmes deeply rooted in community spaces. Additional targeted programmes and specific evidence of impact are also required to fully understand the role, contribution and possible benefits of sport for the development of society and within specific population groups.

Sport for Development and Employability

Concerns have been raised that SfD and employment initiatives focus on developing personal responsibility and are used as a form of social control (Parker et al., 2017). It is believed that further research in SfD and employment is needed to provide a more detailed analysis of the role that sport plays in developing employment skills and employability (Coalter et al., 2020). Marginalised young people are understood to be most affected by reduced opportunities and social inequalities (Henehan, 2021; Lambovska et al., 2021). Research suggests that in addition to impacting young people's physical and mental health, many young

people have also suffered negatively, relating to their confidence and motivation to successfully engage in employment-focused activity (Morgan et al., 2022). However, whilst sport has many recognised benefits for employment initiatives, some question how ethically sound they are, such as Parker et al. (2017).

Programmes aiming to support socially vulnerable youths in developing their life skills in a meaningful way are often described as PYD programmes (Damon, 2004). It is believed that using this strength-based perspective and creating positive sporting experiences in which young people can immerse themselves results in improved emotional and cognitive life skills, increased self-worth and reduced depressive symptoms (Jonker et al., 2011; Eime et al., 2013). When adopting this approach, coaches are recognised as key figures in the process, enabling life skill development and the transfer of learning (Newman et al., 2018). However, previous research indicates a disparity in the delivery of PYD, with some coaches having specific strategies and others struggling to articulate successful delivery (Camiré et al., 2012). Additionally, the success of utilising PYD to support socially vulnerable youths is contested, with some arguing that there is a lack of sufficient theory relating to PYD research (Hodge et al., 2013) and a lack of measurable, identifiable developmental outcomes (Coakley, 2011). More applied research is required in this area to address the criticisms and to explore and fully understand the impact, benefit, and potential of targeting PYD programmes with intended social and employment outcomes. Additionally, applied guidelines rooted in practice as a result of such further research are required to support and encourage others to carry out meaningful and effective work through sport and physical activities in underserved and diverse community spaces.

Conclusion

This study highlights the intricate and multifaceted challenges young people face in deprived communities concerning sport, PA, and employability whilst outlining the critical influence of cultural and socioeconomic contexts. The appreciative inquiry approach revealed that young residents have a strong sense of community identity and pride despite socio-economic constraints. Personal, situational factors and connection to community and place influence preferences and engagement with sport and PA, challenging previous research that often overlooks such contextual factors.

Findings in this paper suggest that a more nuanced understanding of cultural and structural elements is essential for developing effective sport and PA programs, especially with outcomes focused on social development and employability. These programs must be strategically developed and delivered purposefully to promote health, well-being, and social integration, with a particular focus on supporting marginalised groups, such as young women from working-class backgrounds, who face significant cultural barriers and health disparities.

The study also highlights the critical role of SfD initiatives in enhancing employability outcomes. However, concerns about these programs' ethical implications and efficacy require further research and more applied evidence of effectiveness. Sport for Development and PYD approaches show promise but require more robust theoretical foundations and measurable outcomes to validate their effectiveness. Global and national policies may be required to establish the role of SfD better and to encourage improved application of the approach. This research calls for a deeper exploration of sports' role in supporting socially vulnerable youths and ensuring that SfD initiatives are equitable and impactful.

Strengths and Limitation

This is a novel paper with a combination of unique features, including the use of Appreciative Inquiry, the focus audience and the co-production process with paid interns. These approaches are strengths of the work, demonstrating positive and demonstrative community-focused research practices. Participatory methods and appreciative inquiry were used as core methodological approaches. While these methods provide rich data and insight, it is essential to critically consider the challenges and barriers that can occur when using this approach (Smith et al., 2022). Areas where this work could be improved include a larger sample size, broader and deeper recruitment and specific approaches that limit potential bias when interpreting data.

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Disclosure statement

The authors report that there are no conflicts of interest in this work.

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