

Maximising the potential of people in sport and life: lessons from Benson Community Project

Kathryn Leflay- University of Wolverhampton

Rus Smith- University of Wolverhampton

Abstract

This paper explores how one particular community sport project in the West Midlands uses a coaching for development approach to maximise the potential of people in sport and in life. It has frequently been suggested that it shouldn't be a taken for granted assumption that positive development will simply occur, rather, key decisions need to be made about the best way to shape sports projects to maximise the chance that they will result in successful outcomes . This paper examines how one club 'coaches for development', and in doing so, supports individual development-one of the outcomes identified by Sport England in their 2016 strategy- Towards an Active Nation. An independent evaluation of Benson Community Project was carried out by the University of Wolverhampton in 2019. Observations of sessions were carried out over a 5 week period. Observations were followed up by semi structured interviews with 6 volunteer coaching staff to capture in depth accounts about the project. Four emergent themes were identified from the observations and interviews. These were safe space, freestyling, relationship strategy and alternative pathways

Background

Sport's voluntary sector is recognised as playing crucial role in delivering the outcomes set out by Sport England in their latest strategy- Towards an Active Nation. In recognition of the many positive outcomes often associated with sports participation, Sport England identified 5 diverse outcomes on which sport projects should seek to measure themselves. These 5 outcomes are identified below:

- Physical wellbeing
- Mental wellbeing
- Economic development
- Community development

- Individual development

The idea that participating in sport can achieve wider outcomes other than the development of sports skills is aligned with the concept of sport for development which assumes that sport is inherently good and provides a positive developmental function, whether that is improving health or fulfilling a social function such as diverting young people away from crime and anti-social behaviour (Kay and Bradbury, 2009). Sport for development projects use sport as a hook for engagement, with the development of personal and social development taking equal, if not greater priority, than learning sports skills (Coalter, 2013). Although sport for development projects are not a new phenomenon, the requirement to evidence impact has become crucial.

The potential contribution of community sport organisations through their networks of volunteers and stakeholders to the development of individuals has been widely recognised in the sport literature (Coalter, 2007). Claims about individual development are often based on the assumption that for young people, sport has one or more of the following effects:

Fertilizer effect- This assumes that involvement in sport supports personal growth.

Car wash effect- Through involvement in sport, an individual can be cleansed of negative traits and behaviour.

Guardian angel effect- Sport guides individuals in success orientated and civic centred directions in all areas of their lives.

(Coakley, 2011. P.308)

Sport England considers individual development to include a range of factors including educational attainment, employability, self-efficacy and the development of softer skills, for example leadership, communication and responsibility. Using sport to tackle anti-social behaviour is also included in the category of individual development by Sport England with a specific recommendation that research should aim to shed light on the link between sport and anti-social behaviour.

Although it has long been assumed that sport fulfils a positive developmental function for individuals, academics and policy makers have issued caution about assuming that such developments will occur on their own. Models of personal development that use sport, including Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) and the 5 C's model, draw on

the idea that meaningful development is ‘taught not caught’ with deliberate decisions being made in a coaching environment to maximise the opportunity that development will occur (Fraser-Thomas, Cote and Deakin, 2005; Hellison, 2011). It has been suggested that several factors are likely to impact on the likelihood of whether development occurs (Coakley, 2011). The environment is viewed as crucial since development is unlikely to occur if participants don’t feel safe, valued and supported. The coach’s philosophy is also seen as important. Research indicates that positive developmental outcomes are most likely when coaches are trained to teach an explicit philosophy of nonviolence, respect for self and others, as a part of overall development, confidence in physical skills, and a sense of responsibility to self and others.

Drawing inspiration from the theme of the 2019 UK Coaching conference ‘maximising the potential of people in sport and life’, this paper aims to show how one particular project uses coach for development approach, and in doing so, maximises the potential of participants in a manner that extends beyond sport.

Benson Project

‘When we set up Benson we thought we were setting up a football club’

Benson Community Project (BCP) is a West Midlands based project based in Smethwick, a ward which is in the top 25% of deprived wards in the country. BCP was set up to provide local people with the opportunity to participate and enjoy sport in a safe and supportive environment. Operating six days a week, BCP is run *‘for the community and by the community’* using sport and physical activity as a way to form positive connections with individuals as well as their families. Inclusivity, respect and fun are core values, and these values run through all aspects of project delivery. In line with Sport England recommendations, coaching staff at BCP consider the wider context of people’s lives. They recognise that many young people face a number of interrelated problems, including poverty, lack of education, unemployment, crime, low self-esteem and low aspirations. Sport is not viewed as a cure for these problems, rather the project aims to provide a non-judgemental and supportive space where young people feel like they have a voice and that they are valued. External stakeholders have voiced their praise of the project, for instance representatives

from Street Games and Birmingham County Football Association had the following to say about staff at BCP:

'They have inspired so many to take part, go places and become a valuable member of the community where others have judged that they aren't welcome'.

Helping individuals overcome difficulties to become the best they can be is a core aim of the project. BCP has a reputation for being there for the community. Volunteers at BCP offer support, guidance and signposting to other services when required.

Evaluation

An independent evaluation of how BCP supports individual development was undertaken by the University of Wolverhampton. Observations were undertaken over a 5 week period. The aim of the observations was to understand the culture of the project, and in particular, observe how coaches interacted with participants. As a follow up to the observations, six semi-structured interviews were conducted with volunteer staff from the project. Semi-structured interviews are an effective method of gathering rich data about personal experiences. In this instance the questioning aimed to capture responses about how the project supports individual development. Coaches were given the option of choosing a pseudonym for the write up of the research. Two of the coaches interviewed as part of the study opted to provide pseudonyms.

Results

Safe space

Creating a safe space where young people can play, have fun and be themselves is at the heart of BCP. For many young people who come to the project, sport provides an escape where they can switch off from other areas of their life including bad educational environments, turbulent home lives and poverty.

'People love coming to Benson because they can be themselves. When they get in that cage they're free, free of family free of friends, they go and make new ones and have fun along the way' (Paul)

For many young people, socialisation is a primary motive for sport participation (Street Games, 2016). Attending the project allows young people to develop new social relationships with their peers and coaches. Through meeting new people and widening their social circle, the young people attending the sessions grow in confidence and are more prepared to enter unfamiliar environments in the future.

As the start time of the evening sessions approaches groups of young people start drifting in. Errol explains that when they first started the project many young people were worried about

walking down to the sessions in the dark. Now they meet beforehand and walk down together for safety.

'When we started down here a lot of the kids wouldn't come down this street because it was dark then kids talk and they come down together' (Errol)

At the gate, everyone arriving for the sessions is met with a smile and a greeting from the coaches setting a positive tone for the evening. Inevitably, there are occasions where other areas of life are brought down to the project.

'You have to try and understand how they feel and how they do things because sometimes that kid's having a bad time at home and he'll come out and he's angry. And sometimes he'll walk up to the gates and me and Paul will say come here and say you alright, what's happening?' (Errol)

A person centred and individualised approach allows the coaches to identify when a young person might be feeling upset or angry. Recognising this was seen as important for offering support and potentially being more lenient if someone's behaviour was out of character.

Freestyling

An informal and relaxed setting was identified as being appealing to the participants, and this was something that was identified on feedback forms regularly. Rather than replicating the rules of other environments that the participants encounter such as home and school, staff at BCP aim to create a culture built on mutual respect and trust allowing participants the freedom to be themselves. Coaches and other volunteer staff at the project are visible, without being agents of surveillance and control.

When you enter the sports hall the noise is deafening. There are about 30 girls screaming and laughing as they play football. The girls' football is held inside and away from the mixed football to ensure that girls are not excluded based on religious requirements. There are no age groups here, it is everyone in together. It works though. Everyone is involved and having fun. The older more experienced players are supporting the younger players. Laura rarely steps in, unless it is to have the final say on whether a goal has been scored. For some of the girls, Benson has just been the starting point, sparking their interest in football. A number of the players have joined teams at school or as part of a local club, but they still keep coming to Benson.

Laura, the coach of the girls' football session reflected on BCP's approach compared to some other clubs and projects.

'When you're in football, there are some strict coaches out there and at the age of five to 10, I don't think they need that. They need enjoyment, happiness, to have a laugh with them and let them be themselves. At school you have to be quiet all the time, it's a more relaxed

environment at Benson. It's an escape. They talk about coming here as freestyling, that's the word they use' (Laura)

The use of the term freestyling is quite telling about the way participants view their experiences provided by BCP. Freestyling implies freedom and doing things your own way. In contrast to more formal coaching sessions, staff at BCP adopt the philosophy that the development of skills should not be prioritised at the expense of fun. Instead, they are guided by participants in terms of what they want to get out of the sessions. Rather than working 'on someone', the coaches aim to 'work with' young people.

'If you want to say what you want to improve, then talk about it and we'll work with you' (Paul)

The coaching relationship is based on mutual respect, encouraging young people to take responsibility for their own development, if and when they want to progress.

Relationship strategy

Coaches are friendly and approachable which allows participants to come and have discussions about football or life in general whenever they need it.

'With some people they look down at kids. You've got to try and understand them because sometimes you got to be like a father figure. Paul is always saying to them, if you want to talk to someone you can come and talk to us'. (Errol)

Coaches play a vital role as catalysts in supporting participants with their personal development. In an environment that prioritises personal and social development, relationships are developed, and over time, horizons expanded. One of the coaches who was a former participant of the project discussed how being supported by staff at BCP had led to his own development.

'It's the relationship we have with them. We can talk to them about everything. You can go to them and ask them and they give you good advice. They can go out their way and help you. I've got more communication skills, like how to communicate with someone, how to speak with someone, politely, with manners. So they've helped me with that. So if I went to a job interview I would know how to present myself and speak' (Jack)

One of the critical factors that was used to explain the popularity and success of BCP was reliability and being there week in week out whatever the weather. The longevity of the project was also seen as crucial, especially for building trust and respect which are not built

over night. Errol pointed out that other projects have started up in the area, but they only last a short time reducing any impact they might have.

'You have to gain their trust so they've got confidence in you and the main thing with Benson, we are reliable. It doesn't matter what the weather is, we are here. Can you remember last year when we had the bad weather, we were actually in the snow playing. It's fantastic because as I said, we don't let people down. There's a lot that come and they're here one week and gone the next week'. (Errol)

Participants at BCP are empowered and given ownership of the project in a way that is consistent with the philosophy of the project being 'for the community, by the community'. The coaches are keen to ensure that the project meets the needs of the community through consulting with them to ensure that the offer meets their needs.

'You do what they need, what they want. So things like in there now, they'll decide that they want to play basketball, they want to play cricket or play tennis, whereas you go to a club and its tennis or football or whatever. They're not limited to what they can do. We work with them, whatever they want. People say 'you run Benson'. No, the community runs Benson. Whatever they want, they get. If they want something we'll do our best to give it to them. So we don't restrict them. (Errol)

There was an awareness of the barriers that might be facing young people from deprived backgrounds when attempting to access sports clubs. One such barrier is not having the correct clothing or equipment that often leaves young people excluded from participating in organised sport.

A coach in a club would say you need studded boots, or you need this and you need that. You have already severed that child from the enjoyment of simple play. That to me is the biggest crucial point.

This barrier is removed at BCP through allowing young people to attend in clothing of their choice as long as it doesn't pose a health and safety risk.

Gangs, crime and anti-social behaviour

There was recognition from the coaches that gang culture and crime are not uncommon in the local area. West Midlands Police are a notable stakeholder, recognising the work the project does working with young people, particularly in terms of offering a positive alternative to gangs and crime. BCP was often discussed as providing a diversionary environment where young people could come and play and keep out of trouble. The regularity of sessions was seen as important to keep young people off the streets. The more sessions available at BCP, the less time they needed to spend on the streets, potentially getting into trouble.

'By providing what we provide it's a distraction, a diversion technique' (Paul)

'If we do it 6 days a week like we are there's only 1 day of the week where there's people on the streets'. (Merv)

The volunteers at BCP adopt a non-judgemental approach, instead, seeking to understand young people's motivations for getting involved in gangs and criminal activity. One of the founders of BCP discussed financial pressures that might make young people from the local area more susceptible to becoming involved in crime.

'Criminality is classified as a second income with the lower paid so they can fall quite easily into that trap'. (Paul)

Getting involved in criminal behaviour is sometimes a necessary act to help support the family rather than an indication that someone is innately a bad person. By considering the act of criminal behaviour as external to the person, staff at the project aim to give everyone a chance, no matter what their background

'We don't care who you are, where you are, if you've been a criminal, as soon as you arrive at Benson you are equal. Once you're with us, you are with us as you are. It's down to you as an individual and your ability, you as a person we will talk to'. (Errol)

Understanding the reasons why young people may get involved in criminal activity enables the coaches to see the world from their point of view and help them to explore alternative options. Former participant Jordan discussed how being involved in the project and working with the coaches, encouraged him to consider his options in life leading him to becoming a volunteer at the project. Prior to attending BCP, Jordan was heavily involved in local gang culture. He was persistently in trouble with the local police, resulting in several arrests throughout his teenage years.

'It's made me realise there's more to life. There's not just one road, there's two' (Jordan)

The project became a positive and developmental form of community service that allowed Jordan to become move beyond a criminal label and focus on his future. Jordan now has a full time job in the motor industry and is no longer involved in crime. This is one of many examples that illustrates the life changing effects the project has on participants.

Through the project, individuals who have been involved in crime or gangs are able to shake off negative labelling and are given a clean slate. For those with the interest there are opportunities to gain coaching qualifications and to become leaders on the programme. Jack had progressed into his coaching role from being a participant in the programme. He discussed how the project had steered him away from trouble, giving him a purpose, and allowing him to become qualified.

'I was with a group of friends and we used to be on the road, doing bad things all of that. We said one day, let's go and play football. We came down here stadium in Smethwick. They let us get involved, let us play football and it got us off the road a lot more. And I started showing myself to Paul and Errol and then became a coach. If I hadn't gone to Benson I'd be selling weed or something like that. They gave me the push and the qualification. It's not just about playing football. They're helping you further along'. (Jack)

Although attending the football sessions was the hook for this individual, it became apparent that other opportunities were on offer to support his personal development as well as career progression.

Although the project aims to be supportive of all young people, there is no tolerance of gang culture. That must be left at the gate so as to preserve the core ethos of the project.

'We have guys who come down and say we're a gang. We say no, not in Benson you're not. You leave that out there. Come in, enjoy the football and meet other people or you don't come'. (Errol)

Although BCP clearly provides diversionary activities, they don't assume that playing sport on its own is transformative in terms of personal development. Although it is introduced in a low key and subtle way, staff in the sessions make the most of opportunities to emphasise particular values and support participants to develop skills that are transferrable to other areas of their life.

'We say to the kids, you've got to remember that you're a unit. I always use this car business I say if I take out the engine what will happen, the car can't go anywhere can it'. (Errol)

The importance of teamwork was also picked up by Laura who emphasised how everyone in the team contributes in football to achieving an end goal. Team work was further reinforced by Merv who discussed how he uses peer coaching to encourage team work.

'One girl in my female football session was getting upset because she had never scored a goal. But it's like I said to her, "How did that ball get to the goals in the first place? You passed it to the striker, and then it's gone in, so you're a part of that goal." You are always reinforcing team, team, team'. (Laura)

'If I get a little kid that has just started football, I'd say, "Come over here and help this one. Can you work with him? I'm going work with you, but work with him. Help him, show him where to stand and show him what to do. They do that, as well so, it's teamwork on the pitch at the same time'. (Merv)

Another developmental area the coaches were keen to promote was inclusion and an appreciation of diversity. For Laura reinforcing the importance of inclusivity involved stepping in and using questioning if someone is being derogatory about someone else in the group.

'You want them to value the differences and the diversity of everybody else. We're all different individuals. When they first come to us, they don't realize other people and their opinions matter too. Some people come to us quite selfish but when they go on to progress through so many sessions, they change and they realise. I would say that probably doesn't happen, automatically though. When working one to one I'll call them aside and say, "Is that really the right way of behaving? That person has feelings just like you." (Laura)

Laura's approach reflects the view that positive development is something that should be taught. Through reinforcing these values and using questioning to encourage young people to see the world from someone else's perspective the development of empathy is being encouraged.

Conclusions

Consistent with previous research there are a number of factors that lead to individual development through participating in the project. The project provides a safe space to play not only in terms of the facilities, but also the culture that is created by the coaches. The culture of the Benson connects with the needs of young participants, giving them a space to have fun and develop friendships. Coaches are present for support and to reinforce the core values of the project but crucially they are not agents of surveillance and control. In adopting this position the experience for young people on the project is markedly different from other environments such as school where there is a clear cut power dynamic between teachers and pupils. In line with a person centred approach, the relationships between the coaches and participants are built on trust, mutual respect and consistency. Participants are given ownership of the project from the activities that are on offer to individually what they want to get out of attending the project. Through long term delivery of the project, the coaches have built credibility and have demonstrated that they will be reliable and present week in and week out. A non-judgemental approach is adopted when it comes to working with individuals who have been involved in crime and anti-social behaviour. Coaches aim to understand the world from the participant's point of view to best support them and offer them alternative pathways. The core values of the project underpin developmental opportunities at Benson for instance, working as a team and valuing diversity. Not only are these values useful for participation in the project, but they are also transferrable to other aspects of life.

References

Coakley, J. (2011). Youth sport: what counts as 'positive development'? *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 35, p.306-324.

Coalter, F. A. (2007). *Wider Social Role for Sport: Who's Keeping the Score?* London: Routledge.

Coalter, F. (2013). 'There is loads of relationships here': developing a programme theory for sport-for-change programmes.' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 48 (5), p. 594–612. doi:10.1177/1012690212446143.

Fraser-Thomas, J.L., Cote, J. and Deakin, J. (2005). Youth sport programs: an avenue to foster positive youth development. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 10, p.19-40.

Hellison, D. (2011). *Teaching personal and social responsibility through physical education* (3rd Edition), Champaign Illinois: Human Kinetics.

Kay, T. and Bradbury (2009). Youth sport volunteering: developing social capital? *Sport, Education and Society*, 14, p. 121-140.

Street Games (2016) Understanding the lives of disadvantaged young people: key findings and issues to consider for sport.

<https://www.sportengland.org/media/10629/sport-england-towards-an-active-nation.pdf>