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Sport-for-development, critical pedagogy and marginalised youth: engagement, co-creation and community consciousness

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ABSTRACT

The principles of critical pedagogy proposed by Paolo Freire have been widely cited as presenting the necessary intellectual tools to underpin sport-based programmes that are targeted towards marginalised groups. Yet, despite the widespread advocacy for Freire's educational philosophy, to date there have been few attempts to present theoretical articulations of how these pedagogical principles might be more precisely understood within the context of sport-for-development (SfD). One example, proposed by [Spaaij, R., & Jeanes, R. (2013). Education for social change? A Freirean critique of sport for development and peace. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, *18*(4), 442–457. https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2012.690378], offers a framework for 'critical SfD education' and emphasises the necessity for programmes that are co-created, inclusive and directive. However, there are an absence of studies that apply this framework directly to examine SfD programmes. This article seeks to offer some form of corrective in this respect by providing empirical insights which illustrate the utility of the principles outlined by Spaaij and Jeanes within the context of programmes that employ sport as a vehicle for individual development. The article draws upon the qualitative elements of two evaluations of sport-based programmes, both of which were concerned with providing support and vocational training for young people residing in areas of high deprivation in the United Kingdom. Findings reveal how the pedagogical methods employed within both programmes highlighted a co-created, inclusive and directive ethos, to demonstrate the benefits of adopting an educational approach that is community conscious and designed in concert with the themes and conditions of participant lives. Further studies are required to substantiate the suitability of Spaaij and Jeanes's framework within SfD practice, and there is a clear necessity to develop and empirically test further theoretical frameworks that are infused by the tenets of critical pedagogy but are more specific to the realm of SfD.

Introduction

Since the advent of sport-for-development (SfD) as a practitioner and academic field, advocates have heralded the value of sport as an educational device through which a range of social issues can be addressed (Giulianotti et al., 2019). While research has been critical of the 'mythopoeic status' attributed to sport as a means to address social challenges (see Skinner et al., 2008), it is widely accepted

that utilising sport in this manner can provide a foundation upon which relationships can be constructed that engage participants in a process of personal change (Morgan et al., 2021). However, given the complexities associated with many SfD contexts, including those encompassing the social integration of marginalised communities – the specific context for this paper – consideration of the pedagogical approach employed by the leaders of such programmes is of vital concern. The tenets of critical pedagogy developed by Paolo Freire (1996) have been cited regularly as presenting the necessary intellectual tools to incubate effective, co-created sport-based programmes that are targeted towards marginalised groups (Giulianotti et al., 2019; Morgan et al., 2021; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). While the challenges and tensions of implementing critical pedagogy to sport-based contexts have been well documented (see for example, Spaaij et al., 2016), a wealth of research has alluded to or demonstrated how sport-based programmes founded on the principles of critical pedagogy have proved valuable in enabling positive outcomes for participants across diverse contexts (see, for example, Kwauk, 2016 – Samoa; Nanayakkara, 2016 – Sri Lanka; Rynne, 2016 – Australian indigenous populations; Sherry & Schulenkorf, 2016 – Papua New Guinea; Spaaij et al., 2016 – Cameroon and Kenya; Nols et al., 2019 – Belgium; Hoekman et al., 2019 – Vietnam; Morgan et al., 2021 – United Kingdom).

Within much of this research, the relationship between 'teacher' and 'learner' is central to the application of critical pedagogy. However, despite the widespread advocacy for Freire's educational philosophy, the academic framing of critical pedagogy within SfD is often applied using relatively broad strokes. There have been some attempts to articulate how Freirean pedagogical principles might be better and more precisely understood within the context of SfD[1], including one example of a 'critical SfD education' provided by Spaaij and Jeanes (2013). In brief, these authors provide direction as to the ways in which Freirean pedagogy might be utilised in SfD education and propose three general principles which call for sport-based programmes to: (i) be co-created and built around the themes and conditions of participants' lives; (ii) adopt teaching methods that increase awareness of social issues and develop a sense of agency among participants; and (iii) be directive, without being authoritarian (Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). Despite the relevance and clarity of these suggestions, there appears to be an absence of scholarship that applies these principles directly to the examination of SfD programmes. Furthermore, these suggestions may also have applied significance within the field of SfD education.

This paper seeks to offer some form of corrective in this respect by providing empirical insight into the utility of the principles outlined. To this end, the paper draws upon two evaluations of sport-based programmes, both of which were concerned with providing support and vocational training for young people residing in areas of high deprivation in the United Kingdom, and who were considered to be 'NEET' (not in education, employment or training) or on criminal justice trajectories.[2] Critically, the paper demonstrates how the pedagogical approach adopted by programme staff drew parallels with the principles proposed by Spaaij and Jeanes (2013). Moreover, the paper reveals how staff grappled with the theoretical tenets of critical pedagogy to engage participants in a process of critical consciousness and build a foundation for a co-created programme design.

Relationships, critical pedagogy and marginalised youth

Within educational initiatives focused upon the social integration or development of marginalised young people, research has largely supported the notion that the construction of positive relationships may constitute a pathway to enable young people access to equal opportunities and achieve economic success (Duron et al., 2020; Gowdy & Spencer, 2021). Where sport-based programmes are concerned, research reveals similar findings, highlighting how the quality of relationships between programme participants and programme facilitators is a vital mechanism to enable personal development (Crabbe et al., 2006; Morgan & Parker, 2017; Nols et al., 2019; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). For example, Morgan and Parker (2017) argue that acceptance and recognition from individuals within socially valued institutions, such as sports clubs or charitable organizations, may provide a

young person with a sense of belonging that has the potential to enhance self-worth through the acknowledgement of strengths and qualities which fall outside of more conventional spheres of recognition (i.e. academic achievement or success in the employment market). More specifically, Morgan and Parker (2017) demonstrate how positive interpersonal relationships may enhance both the sporting and wider personal experiences of vulnerable young people especially via informal mentor/mentee interactions. In particular, they demonstrate how an emphasis on the establishment of trusting relationships between participants and project leaders may have a significant impact on young people in relation to feelings of recognition, acceptance and belonging and which may, in turn, enhance social assimilation.

This emphasis on the importance of relationships, which are constructed upon mutual recognition, acceptance and trust, resonates with the philosophy of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996). Indeed, and as noted, Freire's articulation of critical pedagogy has been frequently proposed as salient to programmes that employ sport as the foundation for social change, and in particular as an approach to education with marginalised (or 'oppressed') populations (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Morgan et al., 2021; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013).

Freire's philosophy of critical pedagogy is based around several key themes, all of which challenge traditional notions of education. Uppermost is Freire's critique of hegemonic knowledge production, and the propensity for traditional forms of education to act in a way that often reproduces the dominant perspectives of society. Consequently, for Freire (1996), hegemonic knowledge production serves to dehumanise oppressed (or more marginalised) populations, by reinforcing accepted pedagogical practices which see knowledge being passed on (or more accurately, passed down) from the 'more knowledgeable' to the 'less knowledgeable'. Freire's critique of this 'banking' concept of education outlines how this approach represents nothing more than a depositing of information between 'teacher' and 'learner' which, in turn, acts as a platform to reproduce hierarchical structures of domination (Freire, 1996). Moreover, the paternalistic nature of 'banking' education serves to limit curiosity and critical awareness, regulate human action and constrain creative and imaginative capabilities, as learners conform to the apparently 'natural' discourses of society (Freire, 1996).

In contrast, at the heart of Freire's philosophy of education are three interconnected concepts – dialogue, critical consciousness and praxis (Vaughan, 2011) – which encourage learners to problematise and look critically at their position within the social world and challenges them to consider how their 'reality' may be transformed. Freire points to the importance of *dialogue* as a basis on which to problematise, create knowledge and 'give voice' to the marginalised (or oppressed). Fundamental to dialogue is the construction of relationships that are horizontal between 'teacher' and 'learner', as opposed to the more vertical relationships typical of 'banking'. While differences in power between 'teacher' and 'learner' may only be minimised, rather than eliminated (Spaaij et al., 2016), horizontal pedagogical relationships enable dialogue to emerge and ensure that ideas are presented in the form of guidance, rather than instilled, to further empower the learner and co-create learning (Giulianotti et al., 2019). As Freire (1996, p. 70) remarks:

> … dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's 'depositing' of ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be 'consumed' by the discussants. Nor yet is it a hostile … imposition of their own truth … It is an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another.

Freire argues that through dialogue, the practice of 'problem-posing' is enabled, which is central to the development of a *critical consciousness*. Here, the transmission of information as an educational process is abandoned in favour of a learning approach that is co-created, to generate knowledge and understanding about power in society (and how this shapes the structural conditions of people's lives). Consequently, 'problem-posing' empowers learners to become critical co-investigators in knowledge creation rather than passive, docile learners (Freire, 1996), and enables them to (co-)construct a new understanding of the world from which they can act upon it (Vaughan, 2011). Indeed, as Freire (1996, p. 62) states: 'Whereas banking education anesthetises and inhibits creative power,

problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality'. Furthermore, the use of dialogue to develop a critical consciousness automatically enables participants to reflect upon their lived experience (Vaughan, 2011). For Freire, critical reflection is inextricably linked with critical action – a dynamic termed praxis (Freire, 1996). As Spaaij et al. (2016) have convincingly argued, Freire's notion of praxis is the intentional process of reflection and action that is directed towards the structures of society to be transformed. Importantly, reflection and action must occur simultaneously to have transformative effect (Freire, 1996) and, relatedly, can be advanced through the acts of dialogue and critical consciousness, to further highlight how the conceptual basis for critical pedagogy is interconnected in nature (Vaughan, 2011). Thus, critical pedagogy is forged *with*, and not *for*, marginalised individuals (Freire, 1996), thereby further emphasising the importance of relationships as the foundational element for educational programmes that implement sport to address issues of marginalisation and exclusion.

As noted, while the broad tenets of critical pedagogy have been frequently applied to frame analyses of SfD programmes, there remains a dearth of proposals or suggestions that seek to apply its over-arching philosophical principles to inform a critical pedagogy that is specific to the SfD context. However, one set of suggestions, that have incorporated critical pedagogy to inform their recommendations, are those presented by Spaaij and Jeanes (2013), who propose three general principles with regard to the practical implementation of critical pedagogy in SfD programmes.

First is the requirement for programme design and the curriculum to be constructed around the themes and conditions of participant lives (Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). Central to this principle is the necessity for programme leaders to develop a detailed appreciation of the daily challenges confronting participants and developing a raised consciousness towards issues and tensions present within the communities in which programmes are offered (Duron et al., 2020; Henderson & Thomas, 2013; Morgan & Bush, 2016). As Nols et al. (2019) observe, this necessity creates an immediate challenge for many SfD programmes, given that leaders of such programmes are often sports coaches with skills in sport pedagogy rather than a sensitivity towards community consciousness. Indeed, this 'training incapacity' (Lawson, 2005) has been noted as a fundamental stumbling block in efforts to use sport as a means for social transformation in marginalised communities (Morgan & Bush, 2016). Nevertheless, according to Spaaij and Jeanes (2013), where local knowledge of the conditions of participants' lives can be obtained, the dialogic cycle at the heart of critical pedagogy can begin. Consequently, this early dialogue enables individual needs and goals to be established collaboratively and participants to take responsibility for defining their own lives (Parker et al., 2019). Furthermore, the foundations are instilled for the curriculum to be co-created and tailored towards these individual needs and goals, as opposed to standardised and pre-packaged, and imposed from the 'top down' (Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013).

Second, Spaaij and Jeanes (2013) propose that programmes need to consider which teaching methods are most likely to increase awareness of social issues and develop a sense of agency among participants. While this principle is largely couched in notions of SfD education that reflect pedagogical challenges that arise within 'Global North/Global South' programmes (Giulianotti et al., 2019), the implication suggests that concern is necessary for how commonly applied teaching methods, which are often didactic in nature, may be disempowering or ineffective for promoting learning among certain groups (Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). Indeed, as Morgan and Bush (2016) note, many SfD programmes are targeted towards individuals who are vulnerable to educational withdrawal, where their disengagement and disaffection is often attributed to the traditional methods employed by educators. A substantive body of literature has emerged to promote the virtues of inclusive pedagogy, where all participants are provided with a welcoming learning environment, have equitable access to learning resources, and the opportunity to reach their potential (Florian, 2015; Florian & Beaton, 2018; Patey et al., 2021). While there are clear overlaps between inclusive pedagogy and critical pedagogy, such as the importance of shared ownership for learning, choices in activities and the creation of positive relationships between students and educators (Griggs & Medcalf, 2015; Patey et al., 2021), the necessity to be responsive and reflexive in teaching

practice is also noted. Irrespective, the implementation of pedagogical methods that are sensitive and responsive to the needs of learners is presented as fundamental (Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013).

The final principle offered by Spaaij and Jeanes (2013) is that the educational process should be directive, without being authoritarian or manipulative. In this sense, Freire's notion of dialogue is foremost, whereby educators seek to create an open and democratic learning environment, which is respectful of differences in ideas and opinions, and where the educator operates actively and critically, rather than neutrally or passively (Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). To exemplify this, Nols et al. (2019) report how a sport-based programme in Belgium implemented the practice of a 'sharing circle' where programme leaders and participants came together to create a reflective and open conversational culture. This two-way relational approach enabled participants to learn to communicate in a respectful manner without prejudice, and to understand the value of humour, responsiveness and equality during delivery sessions. While the practical difficulties of providing space and time for such activities in sport-based programmes has been rehearsed elsewhere (see Spaaij et al., 2016), it is clear that, in theory, there are significant benefits to nurturing a culture that promotes transformative action and stimulates young people to be active agents in the educational process (Nols et al., 2019; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013).

Research context and background

The findings presented in this paper are taken from the formal evaluation of two separate projects both of which utilised sport as part of a broader package of activities designed to support young people who resided in locations classified as highly deprived (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019). *Future Stars* was specifically targeted towards marginalised young people aged 11–25 years, in particular individuals placed within the care system or involved (or termed 'at risk' of involvement) in youth violence and/or violent gang related crime. Implemented in a metropolitan borough in North West England, the project sought to engage young people through a variety of sports, media and arts activities and progress them into employment, education and training opportunities in order to break cycles of poverty, marginalisation and crime. More specifically, the project aimed to reduce and prevent gang related crime by delivering activities at peak times of anti-social behaviour, and to improve participants' self-esteem, confidence, behaviour and attitudes. Participants were exposed to a variety of activities including volunteering opportunities, training and work placements, some of which enabled individuals to undertake accredited and non-accredited vocational training.

Similarly, *Sporting Champions* was focussed on young people aged 12–25, with a specific emphasis on 16–21 year-olds deemed 'at risk' or not in education, employment or training. The project was delivered in conjunction with a network of youth organisations in 12 cities across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, in areas of high deprivation. Specifically, the data presented from the *Sporting Champions* project is taken from three separate research sites in South East England, the North of England and South Wales respectively. *Sporting Champions* offered year-round sporting activities alongside a package of personal and social development support comprising vocational accredited training to enhance participants' readiness for employment and further enhance their life-skills. Participants were also encouraged to undertake peer mentoring and volunteering opportunities as and when appropriate to do so. Here, interactional engagement between mentor and mentee was based on the power of 'shared experience' in relation to adverse lifestyle circumstance, with notions of 'safety' and 'trust' serving as the bedrock upon which relational accountability could develop and where regularity, frequency and consistency of engagement were paramount (see also Parker et al., 2019).

Our attempts to present insights from four separate fieldwork sites provides a clear challenge in outlining how a critical pedagogy approach may be implemented. It is also a limitation in presenting how local knowledge about the *Sporting Champions* programme was (co-)created and adapted to each specific context (Freire, 1996). However, it does provide some indication of how programme

staff laid the foundations of Freirean philosophy and aspired to implement co-creation. In this sense, we highlight initial attempts by staff to move away from a 'deficit' model of programme design to one informed by a 'strengths/assets'-based approach.

Methods

The evaluations of *Sporting Champions* and *Future Stars* were commissioned by the respective project funders and both employed a mixed methods research design. The findings presented here draw exclusively from the qualitative elements of both projects, which comprised 25 one-to-one, semi-structured interviews and 10 focus group interviews, involving 74 participants. Data collection for the *Sporting Champions* research took place between August 2015 and February 2017 and comprised six focus group interviews with project participants (two per research site; 33 participants in total), three focus group interviews with project staff (one per research site; 11 participants in total), and nine one-to-one, semi-structured interviews with project partners (three per research site).[3] The participant cohort was ethnically diverse and the programme sought to engage young people through a variety of sports-based activities and to support them in their journey towards adulthood. Access to participants was facilitated by project staff as was the arrangement of focus groups (including locations), and while this presented a limitation to the study, young people were selected for interview on the basis of their availability and willingness to take part in the research. Interviews and focus groups lasted between 15 and 90 min and were recorded digitally before being transcribed verbatim.

Data collection for the *Future Stars* research took place between May and August 2016 and comprised three one-to-one interviews conducted with project stakeholders/partners,[4] 12 with project participants (young people), and one with the project lead. In addition, a focus group interview was undertaken with the project team ($n = 6$). Interviews and focus groups lasted between 15 and 70 min and similarly all were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim. In response to an open invitation from project staff, participants (young people) took part in the research on a voluntary basis and the respondent group was representative of the broader participant population, primarily white, working class. Staff and project partners were required to take part in the evaluation on account of a funder requirement.

In the case of both projects, interviews explored participant perceptions and experiences of the respective programmes and their role within it. While the interview guides differed between one-to-one and focus group interviews, there was consistency across both in relation to the themes discussed. These included topics such as: educational histories and experiences, personal interests and passions and lifestyle/vocational ambitions. In turn, the questioning style during interviews was open-ended and, where necessary, further probing took place to clarify responses (Bryman, 2016; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2011). All interviews were conducted by the second author. Both projects received university ethical approval and written consent was obtained from all participants (or parents/guardians) prior to data collection taking place. In addition, young person assent was obtained prior to participation in an interview or focus group. Project staff were present during a small number of the focus group discussions on the *Sporting Champions* project where participants were under the age of 18. In terms of methodological sensitivity, the power dynamics of the interview process and the vulnerability of respondents was taken into consideration throughout the data collection process (see Ahmed Shafi, 2018).

The analysis of the data was undertaken by the second author via a process of open, axial and selective coding. This led to the subsequent formation of a conceptual framework whereby respondent interpretations of their experiences of the project were explored in detail, as were the meanings which they attached to these experiences (see Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Accordingly, the data from both research projects were coded, managed and organised manually and were subsequently analysed in four stages. First, transcripts were read in full to gain an overview of the data. Second, each transcript was individually coded and indexed allowing the different aspects of

participant experience to be captured. Third, these experiences were clustered and inductively rationalised into several over-arching topics. For the purposes of the current paper, the final stage of analysis involved the formal deductive organization of these topics into generic themes. More specifically, both sets of qualitative data were revisited and examined using the principles of SfD education outlined by Spaaij and Jeanes (2013) as an analytical lens through which to generate these themes.

Results and discussion

Principle 1: participant-centred programme design

As with many sport-based initiatives, the design of both *Sporting Champions* and *Future Stars* was constrained and influenced by funder requirements around pre-determined aims and key outcomes (Morgan et al., 2020). Although adherence to these influences and constraints was necessary to ensure programme survival, there were indications of how staff attempted to tailor and adapt the design of the interventions to accommodate local contextual factors and develop critical consciousness. While there was limited evidence of staff integrating features of co-design on a structured, formal or regular basis (e.g. via discussion circles – see Nols et al., 2019), data from both projects demonstrated how the design of interventions and activities were informed by a detailed community consciousness, which involved the acquisition of a comprehensive understanding and appreciation of the themes and conditions of project participants' lives (Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013).

The basis for this understanding was achieved by project staff endeavouring to obtain local knowledge about participants, both by spending time in the respective communities, and through dialogic encounters with participants themselves. For example, project staff at *Sporting Champions* spoke of their strong sense of duty towards the young people whom they served. As such, they understood the importance of good relationships in promoting positive youth development and made a conscious effort to understand the lives of their participants. As a project manager in South Wales observed:

> They [our project staff] get to learn about these young people, they learn about their backgrounds, their relationships, what they do in school and they're constantly talking to them and developing them as people, not just the sporting aspect or anything like that, they're overseeing their development as young people.

Similar reflections were provided in relation to the staff at *Future Stars*, where the necessity to have an intimate understanding of the social, historical and contextual circumstances facing project participants was critical before preparing the content of interventions (Morgan & Bush, 2016). As a project lead at *Future Stars* explained:

> It's really important to have [project staff] … that understand the needs of the young people. They are all aged 16–25, have come through the care system, been at risk of homelessness … They have multiple needs, one of which is mental health, so we have to have somebody that understands their needs and is patient, that constantly gives them their praise, understands the benefits and the impacts of how they are with them …

While not conclusive, the above testimony describes how understanding the needs and context of participants was a crucial step in the efforts of staff to construct a more horizontal relationship with young people. Furthermore, these relationships provided a platform for 'problem-posing' and dialogue to emerge, to promote critical reflection on lived experience and the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1996; Morgan et al., 2021; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). Project participants also spoke of the benefits of staff taking time to understand them as individuals and to use this information to design the development agenda (Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). Interestingly, the sport aspects of the programme provided the context for participants and staff to interact in a more informal fashion, and develop the necessary trust upon which horizontal relationships could be constructed (Morgan et al., 2021). Critically, participants appreciated the informal nature of their interactions with

staff whereby the distribution of power was formulated on a more neutral plane (Adler & Adler, 2003; Ryen, 2011). Speaking of his own experiences of the programme, one *Future Stars* participant reflected on how his initial impression of project staff had helped form the basis for further inter-action and co-created dialogue:

> I'd come in [to the project] and I felt very welcome … you know, chatting to them all [staff] and it was sort of like I'd known them for ages and we were laughing and joking and, yeah, it was just sort of mad how many people that I didn't know were interested in what I wanted to do … and put their time and effort in to me … You come to something like this and you're expecting … [that] you've got to speak formal, you've got to dress formal – [but] you don't. You come and you feel relaxed, you feel welcome, you don't feel out of place and they're the type of people that will make you motivated, not someone that's … looking down [on you].

Equipped with contextual knowledge, staff from both projects had the freedom and flexibility to put into place individualised support plans for participants and were able to move at a pace best suited to each of the young people concerned. Naturally, there was variance across projects and across indi-vidualised plans, with some participants requiring intensive support over a significant period of time, while others required less assistance over shorter periods. Irrespective, staff emphasised the impor-tance of helping young people to move forward in manageable steps by setting small, achievable goals that were co-created with project participants (Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). As one *Future Stars* project lead noted:

> … We build a timeline with a young person. So, we'll start off where they are now, what experience do they have? What skills do they already have? And then we'll work up … everybody's path is different, but you sort of gauge something by taking small achievable steps and that really helps a young person to visualise … So, it's about realising the actual reality of the situation where a young person will be like 'I left school because I don't enjoy it and I want to be a dancer and I want to teach it' … so that's what we try and do. Realistically, we just sit down with them and work out a manageable timeline.

While this testimony appears to replicate traditional elements of one-to-one personalised support (Nols et al., 2019), it also provides a clear example of project staff aspiring to integrate a strengths-based approach to co-design and delivery (Schulenkorf, 2017), and recognises the importance of individual, tailored support within wider sport education programmes to foster critical consciousness (Freire, 1996). Indeed, several participants on both projects reported that they enjoyed working collaboratively with staff and appreciated the opportunity to co-con-struct their goals and programme design. This further reinforced the understanding nature of staff and their commitment to establishing critical consciousness by building interventions around themes, interests, and conditions which related to the lived experiences of participants (Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). As one staff member from the South Wales site of *Sporting Champions* outlined:

> When you ask them [project participants] the difference between our members of staff and how they commu-nicate with kids, they're not just there to turn up and deliver a session, they're there to engage with the young people. I think there's a massive difference between engaging with the young people and sort of facilitating something for them to do.

Similarly, testimonies from partner organisations of *Future Stars* outlined how the engagement of participants was often seen as evidence of an explicitly co-creative approach, attributing the colla-borative mind-set adopted by staff as a distinguishing feature of the project. More specifically, a project partner from a youth-based charity observed how a commitment to co-created and tailored programmes had enhanced participants' sense of awareness of the possible versions of their future selves (see also Markus & Nurius, 1986; Morgan et al., 2021) and increased their sense of agency in realising their aspirations (Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013):

> [A key strength is] … their ability to engage with young people … I like the way they work. It's not that 'being done to' is it? It's that 'working with' young people … getting them to develop their own interests and strengths … It's definitely collaborative work with young people rather than 'Come to this course' you know that more traditional NEET type stuff where it's kind of forced upon them.

While explicit attempts to formally engage young people in programme design were less visible, this testimony reinforces the commitment of staff involved in these projects to aspire towards a collaborative approach to their curriculum (Parker et al., 2019; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). Furthermore, it outlines how consideration of appropriate pedagogical methods was central to implementing an SfD education, a theme which we now explore in more depth.

Principle 2: consideration of appropriate pedagogical methods

The second principle outlined by Spaaij and Jeanes (2013) places considerable importance on adopting methods of teaching and learning that enable deeper engagement from participants and enhance their sense of agency. As Spaaij and Jeanes (2013) remind us, critical pedagogy is not simply about the tools and methods used by pedagogues in educational settings, but also about reflecting upon individual realities. In this sense, several of the youth participants within the two programmes reported that they had experienced personal challenges engaging with traditional forms of education. While such circumstances may have resulted from an educational system that served the interests of dominant (hegemonic) groups (Freire, 1996), practitioners on both programmes sought to implement methods of learning that served the community and individuals that they were working with (Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). Reflecting many of the testimonies provided by respondents, one member of staff from the South East England iteration of *Sporting Champions* explained:

> A lot of these young people will not conform because they've rebelled against the whole school system and how that works; so, if you replicate that, it's going to be the same outcome. So, you've got to be a lot more flexible … your style of delivery has got to be different and you've got to make them want to be there.

A foundational principle of the pedagogical methods used by a number of staff on both projects was the creation of an inclusive environment that acknowledged individual interests and preferences (Florian, 2015; Patey et al., 2021). This was particularly noticeable within the sport-based aspects of the programmes, where sessions were inclusive of all young people regardless of ability or background, even amongst those who had not participated in and/or had previously disliked sport. Young people were permitted to take part at their own pace in an encouraging and non-judgemental setting and those who did not feel ready to actively participate were included in other ways such as refereeing/umpiring or administrative support roles, i.e. completing the attendance register. Young people reflected on the variety of activities on offer and how the choices available had meant that sessions remained engaging (Florian & Beaton, 2018). As one project participant from *Sporting Champions* remarked:

> I didn't like it [sport] at all. I was the type of person to write a note for P.E. for myself, sit on the side, not really do anything. I think that, at the time, our [programme] co-ordinator kind of picked up on that … and he just asked me to come into [the sessions] … I just developed a liking for it. I just never stopped going … It was to do with the way they ran the sessions, like everybody could go, so it wasn't restricted at all and they were always fun and enthusiastic, so we were never bored.

Amidst this open and informal atmosphere, participants felt empowered to confront new challenges and develop new skills, which, in turn, enabled them to be recognised for new achievements and feel accepted by peers and staff alike (Morgan & Parker, 2017). A project partner of *Sporting Champions* reflected on the approach of staff:

> So, they [*Sporting Champions*] come in and do enrichment activities with the students and [they] also do trips … to play golf, we took them to tennis … to different events that they probably wouldn't get to go to if it was left to them … It's a very financially deprived area so … the opportunities that come to us we grab them with both hands … It instils that belief of just trying things … that it's not a scary thing to try new things.

The inclusive pedagogical approach of staff helped to ensure young people's levels of enjoyment. It also facilitated continued engagement with the more interventional and educational aspects of the sessions. As both programmes were founded on the principle of utilising sport as a vehicle to engage participants in accredited training and qualifications, and undertake volunteering and employability

opportunities, identifying suitable pedagogical methods to facilitate these activities was pivotal. Again, staff diverted from didactic forms of pedagogy in favour of more innovative approaches that were consistent with participants' lives (Freire, 1996) and promoted learning in ways that the majority of participants had not encountered previously. This approach was exemplified by a project partner of *Sporting Champions*:

> … it's generally very difficult to get them [the young people] to sit down and complete a piece of work … when [*Sporting Champions*] come in to deliver a course … they're very good at finding different ways of engaging young people so that they're completing a piece of work whilst not really realising they're doing it. So, you know, they might be engaged in a conversation and that should have been done by PowerPoint but actually they've gone [decided that] PowerPoint is not going to work, so we're going to try a different approach and do a graffiti wall or through a talking activity.

This example not only emphasises how staff were able to implement (often spontaneously) pedagogical methods that enabled participants to increase their sense of agency in working towards their individual goals (Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013), but also provides insight into how staff attempted to create an open and democratic atmosphere around programme delivery. Consequently, staff exhibited the third principle of a critical SDP education, to which we now turn.

Principle 3: creating an open and democratic atmosphere

One of the positive features reported by participants on both *Sporting Champions* and *Future Stars* was the overall environment that was incubated by staff. Significant effort went into making young people feel comfortable, supported and safe within sessions. This was partly achieved by intentionally encouraging young people to see themselves on an equal plane with staff. Moreover, it represented an attempt to generate open and constructive dialogue between the two groups and meaningfully engage young people in the process of programme co-creation/design (Freire, 1996; Nols et al., 2019). Within the context of the *Sporting Champions* project for example, participants were encouraged to share their opinion about: recruitment and evaluation processes, programme modifications and changes and the choice and scheduling of the activities on offer. Young people also reported that this open and democratic environment offered respite from their often challenging personal and domestic circumstances thereby providing an alternative (accepting and emotionally safe) space in which to articulate and express themselves (see Spaaij et al., 2016; Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014). Multiple young people from *Sporting Champions* expressed how the overall environment engendered by the project created opportunities to 'forget about things that are happening outside' and 'get your mind off stuff', while others spoke of how the programme enabled them to 'diffuse and let off steam' during times when they were 'having a bad day'. Others spoke of the environment allowing them to 'feel safe when they exploded [lost their temper]' or offering a space where 'nobody was sworn at or ridiculed'.

More specifically, both projects were seen by staff and wider stakeholders as a platform for young people to seek out advice and guidance in relation to their personal challenges and aspirations from a trusted adult, safe in the knowledge that staff would provide appropriate direction and support (Gowdy & Spencer, 2021). A representative of a project partner associated with *Sporting Champions* captured the essence of the relational environment:

> I think one of the benefits [is] … it [the programme] provides them that extra space to be away from home. Sometimes they have a lot of problems going on at home … It's that extra space to get out and engage with your friends in a freer, non-pressurised environment … and [where] they can easily speak out about any concerns. You know with teenagers and everything they're so closed in they don't want to talk about things … to older people … [So] the [sessions] provide that extra space for them to … have a chat with their peers … and … [the] mentors and feel more comfortable talking to them about any issues they're experiencing.

While young people frequently commented on the flexible and informal demeanour adopted by staff, they also reflected on the behavioural standards that were expected. As noted, staff were committed to creating an inclusive atmosphere where activities were fun, relaxed and intentionally

different from the educational environments that young people had previously experienced (Nols et al., 2019). However, this did not mean that staff adopted an entirely laissez faire approach. On the contrary, within both projects, maintaining behavioural boundaries was a priority, and this helped to reinforce notions of inclusivity and safety (Spaaij et al., 2016). A common expression amongst respondents was that the staff approach was 'firm but fair' and that they communicated with young people in a way that was calm and polite. As a project partner of *Sporting Champions* from South Wales observed:

> The sessions are more laid back than a classroom would be … That's not to say that the staff weren't strict because they were, but I think they did it in a way that the pupils [participants] took [accepted], rather than being defensive about it. They [staff] had a way about them to work with the pupils, still be strict and firm with their rules and their procedures, but in a friendly, less domineering way … I think the staff are quite on their level …

This 'balanced' approach by staff further facilitated young people's enjoyment and continued engagement with sessions. Moreover, their approach to communication meant that when staff did have to challenge participants about their behaviour, this had a significant impact. Such challenges were framed in a constructive and encouraging way and couched in a manner that was directive without being authoritarian (Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). This propensity to actively challenge and critically engage participants was a common feature of the pedagogic approach in play and provided an indication of how staff attempted to pose problems as a means to enable participants to become reflective, active, co-creators of knowledge (Freire, 1996). The benefits of these active attempts to generate critical dialogue between staff and participants were acknowledged by young people as one of the key aspects of the pedagogic approach. For example, when reflecting on her experience of working with the staff of *Future Stars*, one participant revealed:

> They're lovely … really nice people and also, they give a lot of their time. They've just been there for all of us … I think you grow more of a friendship … than a student-teacher type thing … You don't feel awkward when asking a question or anything.

However, it was a reflection from the project lead of *Future Stars* that perhaps best encapsulated how the pedagogic approach taken by staff on both projects initiated a process of young people becoming active agents in their own development and promoted transformative action (Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013). In short, this testimony demonstrates how the theoretical tenets of a critical SDP education might be realised in practice. She surmised:

> I think we were really approachable, so young people felt comfortable with us, felt confident … in terms of trying something new. So, when they're stepping outside of their comfort zone, they want to make sure that they're not going to get laughed at, that they're going to be encouraged to try something that they've never done before. The relationship between young people and the staff, I feel like we're all one big team … we're all on the same playing field … No one just sits on the side-lines, so our relationship is equal … no one feels watched, no one feels judged and that's how we work with our young people … we're always there to encourage individuals.

While this reflection does not necessarily provide evidence that the journey towards developing a critical consciousness and promoting transformative action was complete, it does indicate how aspects of Freirean philosophy, such as dialogue and the abandonment of the 'banking' concept of education, were in evidence. Furthermore, the above discussion highlights some of the challenges of mobilising transformative action through critical pedagogy, and the difficulties associated with its implementation within sport-based interventions, which themselves are often constrained by the social, political, cultural and economic influences of stakeholders and funders (Spaaij et al., 2016).

Conclusion

This paper adds to the growing body of research that has examined the implementation of a critical pedagogy philosophy within the context of SfD initiatives (Freire, 1996). More specifically, and in response to the dearth of scholarship scrutinising theoretical articulations of critical pedagogy

within sports settings, the paper has sought to provide insight into how the three general principles of SfD education proposed by Spaaij and Jeanes (2013) were exhibited within two sport-based programmes delivered in the UK. While findings reveal how the educational approach employed within both programmes evidenced a co-created, inclusive and directive approach (Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013), further studies are required to substantiate the suitability of this framework within SfD practice.

More specifically, the paper demonstrates that there are clear benefits to adopting an educational approach that is community conscious (Henderson & Thomas, 2013) and designed in concert with the themes and conditions of participant lives. Moreover, the advantages of programmes that adopt teaching methods that facilitate a sense of increased agency and responsibility among marginalised young people (Parker et al., 2019), and that create an open and dialogic atmosphere that enables participants to communicate in a respectful manner (Nols et al., 2019) have been highlighted. Notwithstanding the above, we acknowledge that previous research has noted the inherent difficulties associated with the abstract nature of Freirean philosophy and its application within SfD programmes. Indeed, as Nols et al. (2019) observe, while practitioners may possess the social and pedagogical sensitivity (not to mention motivation) to implement a critical pedagogy approach, they often lack the understanding to picture this philosophy in action and within concrete pedagogical situations.

Clearly, there is a necessity to develop, and empirically test, theoretical frameworks that are infused by the tenets of critical pedagogy, but are more specific to the realm of SfD, encompassing the contextual challenges and opportunities presented in this domain. The framework offered by Spaaij and Jeanes (2013) provides an important foundation for such work, not least by emphasising the importance of relationships between programme participants and facilitators in enabling positive outcomes. Evidence from this paper suggests that the application of informal mentoring to the SfD context may present a novel conceptual direction for future theorising (especially around the broader 'education' of marginalised young people), thereby further underlining the critical role of interpersonal relationships within sporting interventions.

Of course, the application of a critical pedagogy framework within the context of SfD brings with it a series of contestations and challenges. For example, one of the issues which emerges from policy and practice in sport for development is the prevalence of a 'deficit' approach to working with marginalised young people. The empirical findings on display here demonstrate attempts by project workers to mitigate this by way of an intentional investment in the potential of young people via a strengths- or assets-based methodology. However, the co-creation/design of SfD initiatives can be equally problematic. While staff from both projects actively encouraged co-creation, this was often facilitated in an informal (or *ad-hoc*) manner, rather than through intentional and explicitly formal activities (Nols et al., 2019). Therefore, from the evidence presented, it may be argued that project staff could have done more to embed aspects of co-design into their everyday work. That said, trauma and marginalisation often militate against a co-creative attitude by young people (Quarmby et al., 2021), hence the preference for project workers to prioritise the establishment of trust, safety and engagement (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014). Nevertheless, at an aspirational level, findings suggest that efforts were being made to include programme participants in such activity.

Clearly, more research on these contestations and challenges is required to shed light on how co-created sport-based projects may be established within an operating climate that is often more concerned with meeting funder demands than embracing the 'voices' of participants (Morgan & Baker, 2021). But what these kinds of challenges raise is the need to educate policy makers and funders around the specific needs of marginalised young people and the articulation of practitioner/stakeholder 'voice' is one way in which this can be achieved.

Notes

1. For example: Luguetti et al. (2016); Mwaanga and Prince (2016); Spaaij et al. (2016).
2. We recognise the problematic use of the term 'NEET' and its propensity to position this issue as an individual problem rather than one created by power imbalances within wider social structures. However, we have

chosen to include this term to align with the terminology used by the two programmes which provide the context for this paper.

3. In addition to focus groups, several one-to-one interviews were carried out with participants during fieldwork observations.
4. One project partner was interviewed twice.

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