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## **Sports coach as transformative leader: Arresting school disengagement through community sport based initiatives.**

Reducing social exclusion through interventions designed to sustain school engagement is a key aim of the education and social policy of any government. This paper is a response to the call for there to be more focused empirical sports coaching research through examining the transformative potential of community based sports coaches to support schools in arresting school disengagement. By embracing an understanding that challenges the definitional core of sports coaching as simply improving the sporting performance of an individual or team, and, drawing theoretically on the work of Carlisle *et al.* (2006) and Shields (2010), the role of ‘coach as transformative leader’ is articulated. Analysis of data collected by means of semi-structured interviews with a group of community based sports coaches (n=8), revealed three factors salient to our understanding of re-engaging young people with formal education through sport. These were the impact of the community sport programme, the relationship between schools and community sports groups and, the implementation of transformative leadership qualities by sport coaching practitioners. Importantly, this paper explicates the pivotal function that coaching practice which embraces transformative leadership principles can have on re-orienting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds towards more optimistic futures and educational objectives.

**Keywords:** school disengagement; coaching; transformative leadership; community; sport

### **Introduction**

With schools increasingly being judged on their output from examination performance and external inspection, attending to broader social objectives, such as school disengagement, frequently become secondary concerns (Riley and Rustique-Forrester, 2002). This paper seeks to build upon existing literature surrounding the topic of school disengagement and the

social disaffection which often accompanies such educational withdrawal, by investigating the potential of community based sports coaches to support schools in achieving broader social objectives. More specifically, the paper engages literature related to the principles of transformative leadership (Shields, 2010) to explore how the leaders—coaches—of sport-based community programmes embody these principles within their practices to re-orient their participants beyond the primary purposes of sport and towards broader social and educational aims. This empirical paper seeks to not only explicate specific examples of sports coaches largely untapped potential to operate in partnership with formal educational institutions to address school disengagement, but also present the barriers and impediments to these relationships which may restrict such efforts as merely token gestures. **Building such partnerships was a fundamental component of previous strategising within the provision of physical education and sport within schools under the auspices of the School Sport Partnership (SSP) programme (Morgan, 2013). The sudden removal of this policy, and the dismantling of the associated infrastructure that had been fashioned to foster relationships between school and community sports clubs, has required interested parties to develop their own solutions to continue activities which utilise sport instrumentally to arrest school disengagement.**

This paper is also a response to the calls for there to be more focused empirical sports coaching research (Taylor and Garratt, 2010; North, 2013). We embrace an understanding of sports coaching as a complex, social, dynamic and relational activity and that sports leaders or coaches should be considered primarily as educators—pedagogues—who facilitate participant learning in a wide range of pedagogic settings (Jones, 2006; Bush, 2007; Bush *et al.*, 2013). Importantly, we advocate a conceptualisation of coaching guided by a Physical Cultural Studies (PCS) sensibility (Andrews, 2002; Andrews, 2008; Bush and Silk, 2010; Bush *et al.*, 2013). This means that we accept coaching as a complex pedagogical process that

focuses on physical activity undertaken for a myriad of reasons that include, but is not limited to, competition, enjoyment, social activity, weight management, developing self-esteem, social disaffection, educational attainment, school disengagement and crime reduction. This positioning empowers us to engage the empirical in a coaching context where the primary motivation for the coach and subject is not about improving sporting performance; something which challenges the definitional core of sports coaching. In order for coaches to operate effectively in these challenging contexts, this has necessitated a theorising of the multiple roles of a coach that attempt to capture the reality of coaching—pseudo-parent, social worker, counsellor, actor, fundraiser, educator (Jones, 2006; Bush and Silk, 2010; Bush *et al.*, 2013)—moving beyond the roles articulated through scholarly activity that reduces coaching to simply improving the sporting performance of an individual or a team.

Thus, this paper is an attempt to empiricise the role and unlock the potential of ‘coach as transformative leader’. **In doing so, we draw upon interview data gathered from eight community sports coaches from a variety of sports who have been involved in providing sporting opportunities for young people in locations designated as deprived. Whilst each coach (and community sport club) intervened differently, and had the individual autonomy to intervene in a manner which they saw fit, the express intention in each case was to transform the lives of the young people they coached and thus, re-orient them towards more optimistic futures through the deployment of resources provided by a sports based charity.**

### **Social Disaffection and School Disengagement**

A burgeoning corpus of academic literature has focussed attention on social disaffection and social exclusion among young people (Riley and Rustique-Forrester, 2002; Sandford *et al.*, 2006) with the role of formal education identified as a primary mechanism to address this issue.

Paramount within the literature is the positive correspondence between school attendance, academic achievement and increased life opportunities post-education (e.g. Finn, 1989; Wang *et al.*, 1990; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2003) causing Epstein and Sheldon (2002) to observe that increased educational resources are being directed towards arresting school disengagement and, consequently, social disaffection.

Critically, the connection between school engagement and various measures of educational performance outlines how young people who fail to receive “a challenging and fulfilling education are in effect disenfranchised from society, [both] socially and economically” (Riley and Rustique-Forrester, 2002, p.4). When combined with evidence which suggests that school disengagement is more prevalent in minority and low socio-economic communities (Finn, 1989; Reid, 2002; Clifton and Cook, 2012) the effects of school drop-out reinforce the growing social exclusion of those who already experience social disadvantage. Consequently, as Finn (1989) reminds us, interventions that are designed to prevent school drop-out or re-connect those who have disengaged with the formal education system are necessary, in an attempt to broaden educational and social opportunities among marginalised groups (Riley and Rustique-Forrester, 2002).

As an embarkation point for examining educational withdrawal, Finn’s (1989) Participation-Identification Model provides conceptual salience. In short, the model proposes that a student who *identifies* more with the school environment—by feeling discernibly part of this context and ascribing worth to school-related goals—will *participate* more in school activities, creating a more engaged student who will self-reinforce the requisites of a successful school career (Finn, 1989). In contrast, the model also predicts that young people who disengage with school will identify less with their academic pursuits, heightening the risk of poor academic outcomes and the subsequent social disaffection that often accompanies school disengagement (Finn, 1989). Based on this theoretical assumption, the development of

interventions that are intended to address identification and participation within the school environment appear to be of merit.

Whilst the literature supplies a plethora of initiatives and approaches surrounding school management practices that are fashioned to tackle student disaffection, a growing number of academic studies—in particular those which have focussed on the nexus of school disengagement within marginalised or socially disadvantaged populations—have advanced the notion of a *social justice education* as the foundation for interventions to address this issue and eliminate marginalisation in schools (e.g. Carlisle *et al.*, 2006; Theoharis, 2007; Shields, 2010). However, within the maelstrom of policy objectives that school leaders are required to attend, current educational leadership practices may not capture sufficiently the complexities of a socially just education and fail to fully engage those on the margins of mainstream society toward the educational system (Shields, 2010). Such perspectives have invited enquiry into the role that community-based groups could assume in providing the key tenets of a socially just education and, subsequently, re-engage disaffected young people from marginalised groups with school (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002; Carlisle *et al.*, 2006; Shields, 2010).

Building upon this perspective, Leithwood and Jantzi's (2005) review of school leadership approaches which address educational disengagement suggests that family educational culture—or the assumptions, values and beliefs of family members towards school activities—is a stronger influence on student engagement than interventions implemented within the school environment. Such findings would indicate that leadership practices which focus more intently on fostering partnerships with families and the environment beyond the school boundary may serve to engage students at the higher levels of participation (Finn, 1989; Epstein and Sheldon, 2002; Marks and Printy, 2003; Carlisle *et al.*, 2006; Theeboom *et al.*, 2008; Walseth, 2008; Monaghan, 2012; Spaaij, 2012; Vandermeerschen *et al.*, 2013). In support of this view, pertinent literature has identified community sport organisations as one

such actor with the potential to re-engage the socially and educationally disaffected (Bailey, 2005; Sandford *et al.*, 2006; Coalter, 2007; Waring and Mason, 2010; Holt *et al.*, 2013). However, as mentioned, the impact of community involvement in addressing school engagement is mediated by the consistency of message and value ascribed to education within the external context. On this foundation, the leadership of community-based sports activities is pivotal to reinforcing the endeavours of school leaders in confronting school withdrawal. More specifically, community sport leaders need to possess awareness of the transformative aspects of a social justice education and offer an “inclusive, equitable and deeply democratic conception of education” (Shields, 2010, p. 559). As a departure point for conceptualising a social justice education, the work of Carlisle *et al.* (2006) offers a guiding framework to educators, both within schools and the community, to oppose the challenge of school disengagement.

### ***Conceptualising a social justice education and transformative leadership***

For Carlisle *et al.* (2006) the provision of a social justice education requires attention on three inter-related fronts—the enhancement of equity across multiple identity groups, developing critical perspectives among young people, and promoting social action. In order to achieve these intentions, five principles are proposed to steer educational leaders towards the implementation of a social justice education. Whilst the two initial principles—full commitment of school staff and community partners to a social justice agenda; and a system-wide approach to social justice education—speak mainly to the formal leadership of a school, the additional three principles proposed by Carlisle *et al.* (2006) embrace the role of community coaches within their implementation.

Consequently, the third principle—inclusion and equity—posits that an environment needs to be crafted that challenges social oppression, and values multiple and diverse perspectives. At its core, this principle tasks coaches to consider how “students’ social identities affect their in- and out-of-school interactions” (Carlisle *et al.*, 2006, p.58) echoing the thoughts of others who believe that school engagement can be enhanced by coupling formal education experiences with extracurricular life experiences (LeCompte and Dworkin, 1991; Riley and Rustique-Forrester, 2002). Similar theorising supports the next principle of a social justice education—crafting reciprocal community relationships—which explicitly encourages schools to connect with their wider communities (Carlisle *et al.*, 2006). Consequently, engineering such relationships may enable school leaders to optimise student engagement and achievement by, first, demonstrating how schools can be both a resource to, and beneficiary of, the community, and, second, by positioning the school more responsively to its immediate environment (Carlisle *et al.*, 2006). The final principle—high expectations—highlights most pertinently how coaches can impact directly on student engagement with school. Here, Carlisle *et al.*, (2006) indicate how students can be empowered to achieve, irrespective of their cultural background, if educators understand the social backgrounds of their students. Clearly, potential exists for teachers to connect with and consult community leaders to gain greater awareness of their students’ experiences beyond the school boundary and in doing so bring “conceptual coherence to the curriculum” (Carlisle *et al.*, 2006, p.59).

However, despite these apparent benefits, many of the empirical findings from research conducted in this area highlight tensions and impediments to implementing a social justice education (Epstein, 1995; Epstein and Sheldon, 2002; Carlisle *et al.*, 2006; Cooper, 2009). Paramount within these tensions, as mentioned, is the ubiquitous presence of competing agendas which force education leaders towards ‘quick fixes’ (Carlisle *et al.*, 2006) and prioritise achievement over social justice aims (Cooper, 2009). Consequently, as Epstein



(1995) cautions, attempts to integrate social justice education may be deemed no more than artificial, peripheral public relations obligations which result in educational leaders descending into a “rhetoric rut” (p. 703) whereby school leaders express a desire to integrate social justice education, but action towards this end is limited. Therefore, to overcome such tensions, community based organisations should recognise their role in aiding schools to understand their students better, provide consistent messages about education, (re-)engage disaffected young people with school, and, ultimately, lead their programmes through the application of social justice principles.

A growing number of scholars (e.g. Quantz *et al.*, 1991; Astin and Astin, 2000; Shields, 2004; 2010; Furman and Shields, 2005; Cooper, 2009) have identified *transformative leadership* as a means to advance a more equitable, socially just education. In short, the central tenets of transformative leadership embrace a leadership approach concerned with social betterment, enhanced equity, and a reshaping of dominant knowledge and belief structures (Shields, 2010). More specifically, transformative leaders engage in a process of “critique and possibility” (Quantz *et al.*, 1991, p. 105) whereby existing practices are subjected to reflection and analysis, and alternative strategies are created with the intention to challenge inequity (Goldfarb and Grinberg, 2002; Cooper, 2009; Shields, 2010). This significant task, which starkly opposes the prevailing paradigm of attaining academic standards, challenges educational leaders to rethink the values of their leadership and reconsider the essence and purpose of education (Astin and Astin, 2000; Shields, 2010).

With regard to engaging disaffected young people with the school environment, proponents of transformative educational leadership identify how this leadership approach has potential to generate deeper identification with school and enhance student participation, the two factors cited by Finn (1989) that have most impact on school engagement. For example, Shields (2004), outlines how transformative approaches create spaces for democratic

participation and meaningful relationships in the school environment, underlining much of the literature on the value of leadership on school engagement (e.g. Reid, 2002).

Critics of transformative leadership position their case around three related arguments. First, is the belief that this approach is excessively idealistic (Shields, 2010) and is overly concerned with an ideological orientation that describes its goals and intentions, rather than offer practical suggestions about how to implement transformative leadership (Cooper, 2009). Second, opponents of transformative educational leadership confer that redressing societal issues is a responsibility too demanding for educational leaders to counter alone (Furman and Shields, 2005; Shields, 2010), while the final criticism levelled at proponents of transformative educational leadership is the paucity of empirical studies that exist to exemplify its utility (Shields, 2010).

As a foundation to address the first of these concerns, Shields (2004), invoking the work of Kincheloe and Steinberg (1995), provides a guiding framework that may assist educational leaders to intervene deliberately and agentially in promoting a socially just educational environment. More specifically, Shields (2004) invites educational leaders to create and provide an education that is “just, democratic, empathetic and optimistic” (p. 124).

First, in connection with literature that outlines the need for education to be meaningful to the student to enhance engagement (e.g. Riley and Rustique-Forrester, 2002), a *just* education is one where students have equality of access to a curriculum that relates to their lived experience (Shields, 2004). Consequently, a just education will enable every pupil to leave school equipped and “fully prepared to lead productive, successful, [and] fulfilling lives” (Shields, 2004, p. 124). Second, the tenets of a *democratic* education involve educational leaders teaching children how to participate in a democratic manner and empowering them to feel competent and capable to present their perspective (Shields, 2004). Further connections

between Shields' (2004) notion of an education for social justice and research on student engagement can be identified within the third aspect—an *empathetic* education. Within this facet, educational leaders are encouraged to establish “positive interpersonal and pedagogical relationships” (Shields, 2004, p. 124) with students to foster dialogue and, subsequently, meaningful learning. Finally, an *optimistic* education will enable young people, in particular the most marginalised, to feel more positive and hopeful about their future (Shields, 2004). Moreover, this principle proposes that by increasing student exposure to varied opportunities and alternative visions of their future lives (Coakley, 2002), educational leaders can contour an educational environment that values both social justice and academic attainment (Shields, 2004).

Additional research that aims to capture the essence of transformative leadership in practice can be found within Astin and Astin's (2000) articulation of the qualities of effective transformative leadership. Accordingly, Astin and Astin (2000) posit that effective leadership requires the demonstration and integration of a number of interactive qualities related to group function and individual performance. From a collective standpoint, effective leadership involves the promotion of the following five group principles—collaboration; agreement on a common purpose; embracing differing perspectives in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect; a significant contribution from all members of the group; and the promotion of a learning environment (Astin and Astin, 2000). Alongside these group qualities, Astin and Astin (2000) advocate that leaders need to display five mutually reinforcing individual qualities—competence; self-knowledge; integrity through consistency of action; commitment via persistence and intensity of effort; and empathy towards others. Such an attempt to categorise these qualities may provide insight to frame empirical investigation into effective transformative leadership.

To confront the criticism that attending to social ills is too demanding for schools to address alone, Cooper (2009) proposes that educational leaders could work collaboratively with external/community partners. Clearly, this approach speaks directly to proponents of non-formal educational activities (such as sport) as a means to re-engage disaffected or marginalised young people. Therefore, and in response to the appeals highlighted above for more empirical work in this field, it appears apposite to investigate non-formal educational settings to examine how the implementation of a social justice education through transformative leadership practices impact on school engagement. Consequently, this study investigated the leaders/coaches of community, sport-based interventions (SBIs) to ascertain the impact of their leadership on Finn's (1989) elements of school engagement—identification with school and participation in school activities. More specifically, the study attempted to identify how the elements of transformative leadership manifest themselves within coaching practice, to ascertain if a social justice education can be achieved within non-formal educational settings.

## **Methodology**

The findings in this paper derive from semi-structured, individual interviews conducted by the lead author with 8 coaches. The semi-structured interview protocols took an average of 44 minutes to conduct (Range = 36 – 62 minutes) and were conducted in a location chosen by the interviewee. The coaches were purposively sampled as they had revealed themselves in conversations with the lead author as exponents of implementing SBIs in non-formal educational settings. The coaches had been delivering SBIs on average for 10 years (Range = 2 – 33) and they utilised a range of sporting activities to accomplish their programme aims (see Table 1). Five out of the eight coaches have been recipients of either national and/or local awards in recognition of the positive impact on the community and affirming influence on the

lives of these young people that they have had over an extended period of time. All SBIs were situated in large inner-city urban areas in the United Kingdom, and thus challenges relating to researching in the ‘typical’ context for intervention programmes necessitated reflexive awareness on the researcher’s behalf (Ryen, 2003). All the coaches operated in wards in which approximately 40% of children are income deprived and crime rates were among the top 10% in the United Kingdom (DCLG, 2011). Interviews were conducted mindful of the sensibilities of ‘active interviewing’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003), with interviewees encouraged to deviate from the interview schedule in order to speak about subject areas and issues important to them that had not originally be envisaged by the research team.

The interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. An initial descriptive coding of the data was undertaken by the authors, being mindful as to not to become prematurely locked into codes that were “carved in stone” (Henderson, 1991). The descriptive coding was used as the springboard for further interpretive coding and more focus, whilst ensuring that the richness of the data were not lost. Finally, in accordance with Glaser and Strauss (1967) the coded data were further reduced and delimited to identify themes related to the impact of the SBI on the identification with, and participation in, school activities by the young people who were recipients of the intervention; the identification of transformative leadership qualities in the coaches; and, the nature of the relationships between schools and community sport organisations.

It was important to ensure that high levels of trust remained between the participants and the research team and therefore one of the main challenges of this study was to preserve the anonymity of the participants as had been promised at the onset of the study. As a consequence, pseudonyms have been used throughout and no data are presented that can geographically locate the SBI.

*Insert table 1 here*

## **Results and discussion**

Analysis revealed that there are a number of factors that were identified as salient to our understanding of the impact of SBIs as a means to re-engage young people with formal education. Consequently, this section will initially present the aspects of the community sports coaches' work that are consistent with theoretical articulations of transformative leadership, and second, attempt to capture how these coaches endeavour to re-engage young people with formal education via the SBIs that they lead. Finally in this section, we will expose some of the challenges that are presented in creating and sustaining effective partnerships between community sport groups and schools, and which may encroach on the efficacy of the actions undertaken by these sports coaches in re-engaging young people with formal education through sport.

### ***Impact of the community sport programme on identification with and participation in school***

According to Finn (1989) generating a deeper *identification* with school and enhancing student *participation* in school-based activities is likely to improve engagement with the formal educational system and lead to stronger academic performance. Evidence from the current study to support claims that community sport participation enhances school engagement was limited and, at best, paralleled Finn's (1989) description of the lowest forms of participation, whereby the student's contribution at school encompassed basic attendance and responding to teacher-initiated directions. For example, Rio indicated how some of the young BMX riders he coaches who "were the worst behaved kids in [their school]", had improved behaviour after a year in the sport with the school utilising exclusion from the BMX sessions a deterrent to poor behaviour at school. Similarly, Ray outlined how, of his footballers:

A lot of them have improved at school. I won't say they've improved in terms of their learning capacity, but their attitude towards school has changed a lot.

More specifically, Frank spoke of a young boxer who arrived at his club with a school-life that "was totally downhill" yet, since he commenced boxing had demonstrated a healthier attitude to school, improved punctuality, and enhanced his grades, leading him to continue his educational involvement beyond the statutory requirement by enrolling at a further education college.

However, the findings presented evidence of additional, more indirect, factors that resulted from the leadership of these sporting programmes, which possess clear potential to re-orient disengaged students towards school-based objectives. Moreover, this evidence further corroborates and corresponds with theoretical conceptions of a social justice education (Shields, 2004).

As example, drawing upon Shields's (2004) conception of a *just* education, Gary noted how certain values that were acquired and developed within the sporting environment may have equipped the young people he coached for more "productive, successful, fulfilling lives" (p. 124). Whilst he conceded that attributing the impact of sport on enabling the preparation of young people for life within and beyond school was difficult to determine, he did indicate that:

The original bunch were hard-workers, I mean we used to run for hours...three, four hour training sessions and they would work hard and now they've all got jobs and they all work long shifts. So whether that mind-set led to that, I don't know but they never shied away from anything.

Similarly, in contributing to a *democratic* education (Shields, 2004), there was evidence of how the leadership of the sports programme empowered young people to "feel competent and capable...and take responsibility for their own learning" (p.124). To illustrate, Raheem mentioned how he encourages the young people he coaches "to think deeper and deeper to

make good [life] decisions”, while Ray outlined specifically how he empowers his young players to take responsibility and contribute towards democratic participation in sport-related decisions, in the hope that developing such skills will enable these young people to feel competent to contribute their perspective in other forums:

I actually say in front of all the boys ‘I’m going to make DJ lead boy’ or whoever. If you’ve got any issues see DJ, don’t come directly to me. So DJ can come and speak to me and I speak to him sometimes three or four times a week...Then I will say ‘how do you think it’s best for us to tackle the problem’...sometimes it’s constructive, sometimes it’s not, but I do give them a chance to explain their view.

With regard to education needing to be *empathetic* and “grounded on positive interpersonal and pedagogical relationships” (Shields, 2004, p.124), evidence was plentiful of how the leaders of the community sport programmes **acted as a trusted source in whom the young people could confide**. Whilst this element of a social justice education will be addressed more thoroughly below, **Lisa highlighted the utility of sport as a “tool that actually gets kids talking” about issues, challenges, and tensions in their lives, while Alan indicated how he is able to recognise when the young people he coaches “are not their normal self” and that they confide in him “their worries, their expectations, and how it’s going”.**

Finally, according to Shields (2004) providing *optimism* is the most crucial task of any educational experience—formal or non-formal—as it attends to the most marginalised and disadvantaged young people in society. To exemplify how the leadership of community sport programmes manifested optimism, Alan spoke of his efforts to challenge the young players to assess their current opportunities and future aspirations:

We want them to see what life is really like. A lot of them lead sheltered lives...most children today don’t see the real world and we like them to see the real world so we help where we can.

Similarly, Ray implores the young people he coaches to re-assess the perceptions of their lives and inspire them to be optimistic for the future.



I explain to them, I say ‘there are people coming to this country, running away from another country, and when they come here they think they’re in heaven’, really, compared to what they’re coming from. I say ‘you guys are born in heaven...so you want to make sure you use what you get here and the opportunities you get, you know, with schooling...and you might achieve something. I ask the boys what they want to do when they are 17, 18. One lad said he wanted to be a policeman so we arranged a visit and talk with the local beat policeman...it gives them direction.

Clearly, involvement in community sport programmes hold potential, with the appropriate leadership, to provide the “institutional encouragement” demanded by Finn (1989, p.131) to enable stronger identification and participation with school, or at the very least, provide a vision of an alternative, more optimistic future, where school engagement enacts a pivotal role.

### ***Implementing transformative leadership qualities***

Whilst various authors have positioned the key qualities and practices of transformative leadership (e.g. Shields, 2010; Cooper, 2009), the work of Astin and Astin (2000) has acquired prominence as the foundation for inquiry into capturing the essence of this leadership approach. Whilst *collaboration* has been noted as the origin for effective transformative leadership (Astin and Astin, 2000), five additional qualities have been identified as central to fostering change—competence; self-knowledge; integrity through consistency; commitment; and empathy towards the members of the group. **The analysis of the data revealed correspondences between the characteristics of the coaches involved in the study and elements of these transformative qualities.**

**A primary theme that emerged related to how each coach appeared to be sensitive towards and appreciative of the essence, tensions and challenges of the communities in which these coaches worked—a quality termed *community consciousness* (Henderson and Thomas, 2013). In some cases, as the coaches had resided for several years in the community where they conducted the SBI, they experienced few difficulties in demonstrating community consciousness and connecting with young people. As illustration, Raheem’s narrative of his**

own experiences as a young person in his community provided the catalyst for his coaching work:

There was a lot of kids hanging around...that's what I used to do, cos I didn't have anything to do...so I started coaching and playing sport with them [the young people on his estate] and caught their attention, like 'yeah, sports can help change their lives'. They can see that we went through it, so when we explain this to them, that's when they thinking 'yeah, we can be like [Raheem]'.

For those coaches who were external to the location for the SBI, the data suggested that community consciousness was a vital pre-requisite skill in being able to engage young people. For example, Lisa commented that when recruiting and identifying potential leaders of community sport programmes:

Community minded is 100 per cent what we need. We would say that you can train a 'community person' up in sports skills – it's very hard to train a sports person to have community skills if they don't have them already.

Continuing this theme, Rio outlined that there were “two different kinds of coach—one for the sport and one for the people—so if the coach has a passion to help [young people] and make them better people, that's important”. Similarly, Gary outlined how a sense of community consciousness was fundamental to his coaching practices to enact transformative change.

We'd always said that [this city] was always very, very territorial, and until you get to know the kids in the area, you won't realise how important their postcode is and [that] they don't cross roads and they don't go to various different places.

For Astin and Astin (2000), the manifestations of community consciousness evident from the data are indicative of the primary quality of transformative leadership—competence—where the leader possesses “the knowledge, skill and technical expertise” (p.13) that is necessary for transformative effort to prosper.

Similarly, an awareness of how personal beliefs, values, attitudes and philosophies towards change is emphasised as fundamental to transformative leadership practice (Astin and Astin, 2000). Notably, the analysis revealed how such philosophical awareness was evident

among the respondents. For instance, Ray mentioned how his “high personal values” and “strict regime” instilled a sense of belief and aspiration for the young people he worked with. Similarly, Nigel explained how his belief that the young people he coaches need “to learn how to operate together” and “learn to care, learn to respect, learn to love, [and] learn to like” informed the practices he utilised when coaching boxing.

Interestingly, Gary found difficulty in articulating how his beliefs and values impacted on his leadership, and drew more specifically on his actions to explain his philosophy towards working with young people at risk of school disaffection. Nevertheless, evidence of self-knowledge was apparent. Gary stated:

I honestly don't know how it works, it might just be because of the way we are, you know, relaxed, laid back and we're quite open...but they know where the line is.

Nevertheless, in keeping with the literature, all respondents acknowledged their personal strengths and limitations and how these needed to be managed in order to engage young people and change attitudes towards education. Drawing parallels with Murrell's (2000) conception of the community teacher, most respondents demonstrated an ability to improvise their practices in response to the circumstances that they were presented with. For instance, Alan noted that “you have to implement it [the coaching] how best you see. How they [the Governing Body for the sport] say in the book is not always how it quite works out”. Similarly, Gary continually referred to his inclination to “roll the ball out, see what happens and then work it from there”, evidence of his ability to employ improvised practices to engage young people. Such findings align appositely with Astin and Astin's (2000) concept of self-knowledge, the second quality of the transformative leader.

A third theme that emerged when analysing the qualities of each coach was the reciprocal sense of trust that existed between the coach and the young people involved in the SBI. In semblance to the quality of self-knowledge, both Ray and Gary indicated how their values and beliefs supported efforts to develop relationships built on mutual trust. Gary specified on several occasions how trust was implicit through “unwritten rules” and “understanding what I expect”. Furthermore, Ray explained how trust was reciprocal:

They trust me 100% and I can say ‘nip over the shop and get some drinks for the boys’...I give them the money, they get a receipt and come back with the right money and they won’t go off somewhere else and I can trust the boys.

When displaying the qualities of transformative leadership, Astin and Astin (2000) pinpoint integrity through consistency as the most critical factor in nurturing trusting relationships within the recipients of the leadership. This perspective concurs strongly with the commentary of the respondents. For example, Lisa highlighted how community sports leaders provided a “constant” in the lives of the young people they worked with, enabling them to become a trusted voice of reason and authenticity for young people to adhere to. She explained further:

A lot of the young people we work with don’t have continuity. You know, maybe a different ‘dad’ comes in constantly, parents’ mood swings, drug-abuse, a variety of things – whereas actually if there’s one person who’s stable in their life it’s in their sports club...that’s their constant...[Therefore] for us, it’s more successful and more beneficial to build something around a local person who’s trusted and respected.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a fourth feature of the data analysis was that all respondents spoke of their unswerving dedication towards supporting young people, not only in sport, but also other aspects of their lives. As illustration, Gary conveyed:

You could argue we’re no longer a sports club – we’re a youth club that does sport – you could argue it’s gone that far round. I have no issue with that...we engage with the kids, we positively empower them and positively reinforce everything, [and] they take

responsibility for stuff. We help with CVs if we can help, we write references for the kids, we encourage them to coach the younger age groups.

Corresponding closely with the transformative leadership practice of commitment (Astin and Astin, 2000), Ray indicated how his persistence of effort was pivotal in convincing “the authorities” that he possessed the necessary qualities to engage and transform the attitudes of the young people he coached. Ray stated:

What I did explain at the start was that I’m not in it for a week or two...if I’m going to do something I like to stick with it, so they were happy with that. And then, later on, I explained that I would prefer if they backed off a little bit and let me take control.

Finally, as mentioned previously, on the basis that collaboration is the cornerstone of transformative leadership (Astin and Astin, 2000), it reasons that the ability to understand the perspective of others and locate oneself in the position of other people is of paramount significance. In many cases, the fact that the respondents lived within the community and were prominent figures within that locale eased the sense of empathy to the young people that they engaged. However, for the coaches who resided ‘outside’ of the locale of the SBI, the development of empathy required more conscious deliberation and presented several challenges. As Lisa explained:

Often when people are living within that community or immersed in that community they understand a lot of the [issues]...I went on a Somalian awareness course [recently]which was really interesting but I still don’t feel like I know about it. So I feel it’s one of those things where you have to actually live there, you have to be a part of. I’ve been within [that suburb of the city] for four years and I’m still getting there...people are still a bit wary. I’m not from [that suburb]; I don’t sound or look like I’m from [that suburb].

Similarly, when commenting on his approach to being empathetic towards the young people he coached, Gary highlighted the necessity to understand their perspective as pivotal:

I know most of kids, what they’re doing education wise, what their family lives are like...we understand. Again, I don’t think it’s been intentional it just when you’re on the sideline and chatting to one of the kids you say ‘how school’s going’ and you just engage. That’s what we do...we engage.

Such evidence corresponds with Murrell's (2000) invitation for educational leaders to enhance their sociocultural consciousness and learn more about the lives of the young people they encounter; Gary neatly encapsulated the sentiments of all respondents.

You've got to be flexible coz you're on their territory, you know. It's their patch, you've got to be part of that; not 'you're in my patch so do what I say'... So, that might be the approach... we recognise we're going into *their house*, so we'd be better to work around them [emphasis added].

### ***Relationships between schools and community sport groups***

An important finding from the research that clearly impacted on efforts to re-engage young people with school through sport was the formality of the relationships that existed between schools and the community (Epstein, 1995; Carlisle *et al.*, 2006). Most participants noted how they had forged mutual relationships with local schools, with the schools undertaking a role whereby they were both a resource to, as well as a beneficiary of, these relationships (Carlisle *et al.*, 2006). Nevertheless, the formality of these relationships differed markedly, with some commenting that the relationships between their organisations and schools was along relatively formal lines, while others adopted a more casual approach to connecting with a school, based upon an acquaintance with a member of the school staff. Critically, in semblance to Epstein (1995), the nature of these relationships highlighted the need for school and community partnerships to emphasise a common message to the young people at risk of school disengagement. For example, Ray stated:

One of the main school mentors is a friend of mine, so he feeds me with information [about the behaviour of players at school]. So I know who's been misbehaving, so when I get there [to the coaching session] I will say "OK I need to speak to you, you, you and you, and that's all I say...they know what I mean.

However, despite the obvious presence of these relationships and a perceived intent on behalf of both the community sport groups and schools to cement these partnerships, the respondents reported consistencies with the literature (Epstein, 1995; Carlisle *et al.*, 2006), in that a number of potential barriers existed which limited efforts to collaborate.

Among the plethora of barriers to school-community relationships that were elicited during the interviews, most were reported as structural in nature. More specifically, these structural barriers comprised of human and financial resource constraints that were created as a consequence of the dismantling of the SSP programme which integrated the development of school-community links at its core (Morgan, 2013). As illustration, Lisa encapsulated how the SSP programme was the cornerstone of endeavours to connect schools and clubs, and that its sudden disappearance, due to the change in government education policy, damaged this work.

Lisa explained:

The challenge we had was that we were going through the school sports structure. We did the work, and it was going brilliantly, we engaged in different places...and then it [SSP] went, literally overnight, without any indication... That was huge for us and it has changed everything for us. We don't have those contacts [now] that you can go to. Whereas before it was really easy to facilitate and you knew that though the input wasn't too much the output would be actually quite significant, at the moment you're putting in a lot of input for...who knows. Whereas the [previous] school sport structure was so absolutely fantastic about engaging and providing opportunities for everybody, [now] the competition managers have gone, the primary school link teachers have gone, the [School Sport Co-ordinators] have gone, it's just the workforce has gone.

Clearly, an enthusiasm exists to generate relationships between schools and community sports clubs to work in partnership and encourage young people at risk of school withdrawal to endure in the formal education system. However, as Alan noted, crafting such relationships is “time-consuming” and “fraught with conflicts of interest” with many of the factors which impinge on school-community relationships being beyond the control of both partners. As such, attempts to use community sport groups to engage disaffected young people with school may be seen at

best to be token gestures, characteristic of a “rhetoric rut” (Epstein, 1995, p. 703) whereby clear intention is not supported by decisive action.

## **Conclusion**

As an emerging area of academic interest, inquiry into school (dis)engagement needs to magnify the factors that could impact on the decisions made by young people about the significance of school attendance in contributing to the achievement of educational objectives (Riley and Rustique-Forrester, 2002). As guidance, the extant literature explicates how the advancement of partnerships between school and community leaders has potential to engage young people with, and remain committed to, school objectives (Epstein, 1995; Epstein and Sheldon, 2002). In addition, the literature specifies how the promotion of a social justice education (Carlisle *et al.*, 2006; Shields, 2004; 2010) can contribute to these same outcomes, in particular within ethnically diverse and socially heterogeneous localities (Shields, 2004; Furman and Shields, 2005). This paper has offered insight into how these two conceptual elements can combine to (re)connect young people with formal education by examining the leadership of eight community sport coaches who accentuate the principles of a socially just education within their coaching work.

First, the findings of this research would indicate that involvement in community SBIs by young people has potential to re-orient them with formal education, or, more specifically, offer direction or optimism about future life aspirations in which school engagement is a necessary mechanism towards the achievement of these aims. Such findings corroborate existing literature that advocates approaches which couple positive experiences gained beyond the school boundaries with a more flexible curriculum that supports these outside interests within them (LeCompte and Dworkin, 1991; Epstein and Sheldon, 2002; Carlisle *et al.*, 2006; Clifton and Cook, 2012).



Second, and in correspondence with the literature, the study has indicated the central importance of partnerships between schools and community organisations in addressing student engagement issues (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005; Epstein and Sheldon, 2002). More pertinently, where the consistency of message about the role of education is valued by the community sports coach and is cogent with those of school leaders (Epstein, 1995), the potential for community SBIs to re-engage young people with school possesses significant capacity. On a related theme, the study also concludes that the establishment and continuity of partnerships between schools and community organisations requires institutional and resource support in order to make them effective (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002; Carlisle *et al.*, 2006). This is particularly pertinent in economically distressed communities, such as the contexts for this paper, where there is often limited involvement from families in supporting the educational objectives of young people (Epstein, 1995). The findings of this paper specify how a formal partnership network between schools and community sport groups can provide the apparatus to utilise sport as a positive means to facilitate partnerships between schools and the community. However, the fragility of this network has significantly impacted on efforts to (re)connect young people with school via community SBIs.

Consequently, it would appear that examples of community SBIs being employed productively to (re)engage young people with educational pursuits are founded on informal and casual relationships between schools and community sport providers, which infer that any potential benefit is more coincidental than intentional in nature. As such, echoing Shields (2010), current approaches to utilising community sports coaches in partnership with educational providers to address student disengagement may merely “tinker around the edges of deep and meaningful reform” (p. 584). Furthermore, within a context where the prevailing discourse of school leadership prioritises measures of success based upon examination performance and government inspection over broader social concerns (Riley and Rustique-

Forrester, 2002; Shields, 2004), the engagement of disaffected students may continue to receive limited attention and rely upon such coincidental intervention. However, this paper demonstrates the apparent, and largely untapped, potential to utilise community sports coaches to re-orient young people towards more optimistic futures and educational objectives. More precisely, and reprising Shields (2010), when the coaching practice embraces transformative leadership principles and embeds the values of a socially just education, fewer young people may be 'lost' within a society that privileges those most removed from socio-economic deprivation.

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