Connected Communities

An analysis of the capacity of volunteer sports coaches as community assets in the Big Society: a scoping review

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Executive Summary
Although there is some existing research on volunteer sport coaches and their role in community engagement, it tends to be somewhat fragmented and limited, and is located primarily in the national contexts of the USA, Canada and Australia. This analysis of the existing body of empirical evidence suggests that volunteer coach research lacks robustness, rigor and a theoretical grounding from which to design future studies. The available literature is descriptive in format and design, perhaps reflecting the fact that the academic study of sport coaching is a relatively young field. Thus, while it is widely claimed that volunteer coaches can make a range of contributions to the social, physical and moral development of individuals, particularly young people, there is a lack of robust empirical evidence to support such claims. If, therefore, there are growing expectations about the individual and community benefits that volunteer sports coaches can deliver through sports activities, it is imperative that we understand more about the needs, motivations and priorities of this large volunteer workforce.

Key words
volunteer sports coaches, community sport, benefits of sport
Background

UK community-based sport is an extensive social enterprise that is run, almost in its entirety, by volunteer sports coaches. It is estimated that over 8 million people engage in sports activities in their communities each week, under the guidance of 1.1 million active sports coaches, three quarters of whom are volunteers (North, 2009). It has been recognised that participation in community sport and in volunteering activities such as sport coaching, has the potential to deliver a wide range of individual and social benefits (e.g. well-being, Eime, 2010; civic engagement, Putnam, 2000). It can be argued, therefore, that community sport and sport coaching could be viewed as valuable ‘community assets’. Yet despite theoretical claims about the role of sport, and sports coaches, there is a lack of robust empirical evidence that support these claims. In the contemporary context of ‘The Big Society’, the aim of this review was to locate and analyse existing evidence to support expectations about the role of volunteer coaches, and community sport, in community social action.

Current literature around communities has suggested that there is marked departure in the way that the UK’s Coalition Government conceives the role and purpose of community activities (McCabe, 2010). Moving away from language that has previously represented communities as sites of ‘participation’, ‘engagement’, and ‘involvement’ (e.g. community sports programmes that promoted increased sports participation), ‘The Big Society’ describes communities as potentially more dynamic, and as positive forms of social action. Although the term ‘Big Society’ continues to invite political and socio-cultural debate, the central theme of the concept is one of increased localism and community responsibility (Cabinet Office, 2010).

Review Objectives

1. what is the strength of the evidence, nationally and internationally, to support claims made for sport and sports coach volunteering to be major community assets; and
2. are there any changes that should be made to the organisation and delivery of community sport to maximise its potential to deliver individual and community benefits in two key areas: health and wellbeing, and social inclusion.

Methods

In reviewing ‘best-evidence’, we used a systematic methodology as advocated by the Evidence for Policy and Practice (EPPI) Centre. The first stage involved the use of key
word searches: health and well being, social inclusion, community sport, professional development, training - with volunteer coach always used as a linking term. Databases accessed included: Medline, ERIC, SportDiscus, Web of Science, Sociological Abstracts, PsychINFO, Google Scholar and Cochrane systematic review database. This was followed by more focused searches of the grey literature (e.g. professional journals, conference proceedings). The review took place from February 2011 to August 2011, and no restrictions were placed on publication or language. The searches produced 41 relevant texts which were used in this review. Overall, the quality of the evidence base was poor in terms of methodological quality and topic relevance.

Results

Although volunteer coaches are acknowledged as valuable resources (The Centre for Social Justice, 2011), very few empirically robust studies have addressed how volunteer coaches can deliver the claims made for sport. As a result, the results of this review are organised thematically and linked to the stated objectives:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Review Objectives</th>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. what is the strength of the evidence, nationally and internationally, to support claims made for sport and sports coach volunteering to be major community assets; and</td>
<td>•  community sport</td>
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<td>•  positive youth development</td>
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<td>•  volunteer coaches</td>
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<td>•  participant outcomes</td>
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Community Sport

Advocates of the efficacy of sport have long held that key social outcomes are deliverable through community sport. In 1999, Chris Smith (then Secretary of State for the Department for Culture Media and Sport) wrote: "... sport can not only make a valuable contribution to delivering key outcomes of lower long term unemployment, less crime, better health and better qualifications, but can also help to develop the individual pride, community spirit and capacity for responsibility that enable communities to run regeneration programmes themselves" (PAT, 1999). In an another example, the Scottish government (2009) in an overview of a social inclusion partnership programme wrote, "Sport can help foster a sense of belonging, build self-esteem and confidence, bring
people together, reduce crime, create routes into jobs and improve health and fitness.”

At a political level, much is claimed for sport; at an academic level, claims are more modest.

There is some evidence to support the claims made for the relationship between sport participation and the development of participants’ physical, mental and social health (Coalter, 2007). In the context of community sport, there is some research in the UK, and internationally, that acknowledges sports clubs as sites of social participation (Kirk & McPhail, 2003). For instance, Eime et al., (2010), in an Australian setting, concluded that individuals who participate in club-based sport are significantly more likely to achieve recommended physical activity levels when compared to those who do not. There is, however, less evidence to support claims made about the ability of volunteer sports coaches to deliver benefits that have been claimed. Indeed, very few of these claims emanate from sports professionals or academics; instead they seem to reflect political aspirations for sport.

The tradition of sports clubs in the UK is one with a strong sense of independence, autonomy and resilience (Taylor et al., 2003). Yet, sports clubs operate in a crowded organisational space where their function is impacted upon by a number of external organisations (National Governing Bodies of Sport, Health & Safety Executive, County Sports Partnerships, and Financial Institutions). Haugh & Kitson (2007) have argued that this has led to an increasing ‘marketisation’ of voluntary organisations (such as sports clubs) which are forced to adopt the language and practices of the market (e.g. attract financial resources). For Taylor and Garret (2010) there are tensions inherent in this development, because in the UK, sport has typically been conceived as a prized form of community and social practice. Importantly, these authors wonder whether the voluntary sector can deliver a service agreement (in the context of the Big Society) “without jeopardising the trust and support between coach and participant” (p.110). There are at present no studies that have addressed this important question.

Volunteer Coaches

Extensive community sport provision is a feature of the UK sporting landscape for both young people and adults. In the context of the London 2012 Olympics, it is anticipated that community sport will take the lead in delivering a mass sports participation legacy (e.g. recruitment of 40,000 ‘sports makers’, DCSM). This signals a belief that the potential of sport to make a positive impact in young people’s lives is contingent upon the quality of the engagement process, suggesting a pivotal role for volunteer coaches. At the same time, it is argued that volunteers themselves gain much from the process of engaging in the volunteering process; Gottlieb and Gillespie (2008) describe how adults who volunteer benefit from good health and longevity because of a sense of belonging and worth that volunteering engenders. In a review commissioned by VSO, it is suggested that volunteering enhances a participant’s communication skills, problem solving, leadership and team working skills (IVR, 2008). Similarly, in a review of volunteering literature, Paylor (2011) propose that volunteering facilitates increased feelings of self esteem and creates a network of support upon which volunteers can
draw. Although this literature identifies potential benefits of volunteering, no study has examined the accrued benefits of volunteering for volunteer sports coaches. At best, therefore, the claims made are speculative.

The parent-volunteer coach: There is consensus in the motivational literature about the important role of coaches, peers and parents in creating positive sporting experiences for participants (Duda & Lavalee, 2007). However, locating studies that focus on the role of community sport as a significant pedagogical space has been difficult, despite the often stated claim that volunteer coaches occupy a position of centrality and influence in the athletic setting (North, 2007). In one of the few studies that focuses specifically on volunteer sports coaches, albeit in a North American context, Busser & Carruthers (2010) concluded that the majority of volunteer coaches are co-producers; i.e. coaches engage in coaching because they have a child interested in that sport. These findings reflect similar UK coaching demographics where sports coaches tend to drop out of the role when their children withdraw from the sport (North, 2009). The impact of this transient workforce is significant. Although changing youth behaviours is the outcome of multiple influences (e.g. culture, organisational structures), evidence suggests that parents are significant in modelling and supporting change behaviour. For example, Gustafson and Rhodes (2006) demonstrated a strong, positive association between parental support and young people’s physical activity levels. In doing so, they argued that the three most important types of parental support were involvement, encouragement, and facilitation. To date, no study has analysed the role of parent sports coaches in facilitating positive youth development (such as physical activity behaviours) in a community setting.

Participant outcomes
a) Health and Well-Being: An analysis of the epidemiology literature provides clear evidence that physical activity engagement in childhood can lead to improved cardiovascular health, positive mental health, improved body composition, and reduced risk of obesity in adulthood (Aburto et al., 2011). Moreover, research suggests that good physical activity habits during childhood can lead to positive lifestyle choices in terms of life-long health (Department of Health, 2011). In the context of community sport, there are clear opportunities for increased physical activity, which have been shown to lead to individual health benefits (Eime, 2010). An example of this at policy level comes from the European White Paper on Sport (2007); “Sport organisations are encouraged to take into account their potential for health-enhancing physical activity and to undertake activities for this purpose” (p.4). Although few studies have considered how community sport and volunteer coaches can facilitate health outcomes, there is some evidence to suggest this will be a difficult challenge. In the domain of youth sport coaching, for example, Bergeron (2007) argues that inadequately trained volunteer coaches are simply not in a position to realise the health benefits of physical activity.
b) Promoting Social cohesion: There is a consensus in the literature about the role of sport in developing social and human capital for both coach and athlete. A study by Perks (2007) in Canada, used survey data to argue that there is a positive (though small) relationship between youth sport participation and a lifecycle of community participation. In a study examining volunteerism in two Canadian sport communities, Harvey et al. (2007) argue that community sport can offer volunteers social capital, though the study was unable to account for direction of the effect. In the UK, Kay & Bradbury (2009) analysed a formalised national youth volunteering sports programme (Step into Sport Volunteer Training Programme). They reported that volunteer youth coaches described ways in which their experiences of the programme contributed to the development of their human capital (e.g. self-esteem). There is also some evidence to suggest that sport can play a significant role in facilitating participants’ social connections with wider society (e.g. Crabbe, 2006). In reviewing such studies, North (2007) suggested that, “It is not stretching the logic too far to think that strong community focused coaches could play a similar role!” (p. 11). There are, however, few studies (apart from Vella et al., 2011 – discussed below) that have examined how volunteer coaches might facilitate such participant outcomes.

Positive Youth Development

Sport, as a mechanism for developing pro-social behaviours in young people has been conceptualised in the positive youth development literature. For example, in an Australian study, Macdonald et al. (2010) concluded that there is a positive relationship between trained sports coaches, and the accumulation of personal and social skills of athletes. In the UK, Sandford et al. (2006) described the significant role of leaders/coaches in re-engaging disaffected young people through physical activity programmes. Two studies, one from Australia (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005) and one from the US (Perkins & Noam, 2007), concluded that in order to optimise the potential of sport to foster positive youth development, the focus must be on the ‘critical role’ of coaches, parents, policy makers and sports organisations.

Reflecting the paucity of literature examining the pedagogical role of volunteer coaches’, only 2 studies were indentified in this review. First, Vella et al. (2011) interviewed 22 Australian volunteer coaches about their perceptions of their role. Coaches described their ability to facilitate the development of participants’ competence and life skills, although the study was not able to substantiate coaches’ interview responses with their practices. Second, Camire et al. (2011) concluded that effective youth coaches used a number of strategies to facilitate positive youth development: explicit coaching philosophy, building meaningful relationships, clear coaching goals, and an ability to ‘transfer’ life skills. Evidence from such studies would suggest that the construction of a positive learning environment for young people through sport is an outcome of programme design and adult influence.
Conclusion

This review found insufficient evidence to confirm or refute claims made for sport and sports coach volunteering to be major community assets in delivering individual and community benefits. This situation would appear to be a consequence of a lack of research focus, and interest, from the academic community. This is unfortunate, because as Kay & Bradbury (2009) have concluded, at the level of theory, there are enduring arguments for the role of sport in community engagement and cohesion.

Recommendations for Future Research

More research is needed that gives a voice to volunteer coaches if we are to better understand their work and the meanings they attach to the role.
There is a need to examine the pedagogical role of the volunteer sports coach in shaping and influencing health/social actions.

Research is needed to evaluate how a strategic approach to community health and well-being would include volunteer sports coaches/health agency collaboration.

A ‘fashion shift’ in academic interest (Tinning, 2010) is required to examine community sport as a significant pedagogical site of physical activity.

More research is needed that examines the culture of UK community sport in mediating community welfare.
References


34. The Centre for Social Justice (2011) "More than a Game: Harnessing the power of sport to transform the lives of disadvantaged young people". A policy report by the Sport Working Group


The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

“to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx