Original Research

"It's borderline hypocrisy": Recruitment practices in youth sport-based interventions

Haydn Morgan[1], Ioannis Costas Batlle[2]

[1] University of Gloucestershire, UK
[2] University of Bath, UK

Corresponding author email: hmorgan5@glos.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Sport is often promoted as a vehicle through which a variety of social policy outcomes can be achieved. One of the most common outcomes is the enhancement of social inclusion opportunities for marginalized youth populations. While a growing number of studies have examined the potential of sport-based interventions to address broader social concerns, few have focused on the recruitment activities used within such programs to engage youth populations. Drawing on interview data collected within two sport-based interventions delivered in London (UK), which both aimed to engage marginalized young people through sport, this article intends to examine three main issue: first, to explore the practices undertaken by the two organizations to recruit and retain participants in their sport-based interventions, and second, to examine the implications of these practices on participant recruitment strategies. Third, the article contends that within a context shaped by a neoliberal agenda, the necessity to meet predetermined participation targets encourages organizations to use the most efficient means possible to maximize numbers of program participants. However, such recruitment strategies often overlook young people whose social exclusion is more complex or acute, and who, arguably, are in greater need of intervention support.

INTRODUCTION

The instrumental use of sport is often touted as a means through which a number of wider social policy objectives can be realized—an assumption which has positioned sport as a panacea for addressing social concerns (Coalter, 2007, 2012). Within the United Kingdom (UK), government sport policy has actively embraced this discourse, establishing intentions and objectives that reinforce the potential of sport to address social ills (Collins, 2010). However, more critical scholars (Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2007, 2012; Dacombe, 2013; Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Skille, 2014; Schulenkorf, Sherry, & Rowe, 2016) have invited research that offers specific insights into the mechanisms that underpin the use of sport-based programs for social change. In response to such invitations, this article examines one aspect of sport-based programs that has received very limited attention within the sport-for-development literature—namely, how participants are recruited to such programs. According to Hartmann and Kwauk (2011), the strategies utilized to recruit and engage participants with sport-based programs are significant for both the retention of participants and the attainment of program outcomes. However, recruitment assumes an even greater importance within sport-based programs that accentuate social inclusion and are "aimed at development among otherwise marginalized, disaffected youth who can be difficult to locate much less engage" (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011, p. 290). As such, it can be assumed that if participation in a sport-based program can be used as a "hook" to address social concerns (Coalter, 2007; Green, 2007), then the recruitment practices used to engage young people in the program become of central importance.

By drawing on research conducted within two charitable organizations in London (UK) that use sport as a means to engage socioeconomically disadvantaged young people, this

article explores three main issues. First, the article discusses the approaches undertaken by the two organizations to recruit participants to their sport-based interventions and second, illustrates the influence of predetermined participation targets on recruitment strategy. Third, the article examines how these recruitment practices could be accused of focusing attention and resources on those young people who are more likely to achieve program outcomes, while disregarding individuals whose social exclusion is more complex or acute and in greater need of intervention support (Finlay, Sheridan, & McKay, 2010; Spaaij, Magee, & Jeanes, 2013).

The Paradox of Sport-for-Development Programs

A recurrent theme within recent sport policy is the amplification of sport's capacity to educate young people, provide vital life skills, and embrace those on the margins of mainstream society (Cope, Bailey, Parnell, & Nicholls, 2017). Academic literature has also noted the attraction of sport to provide positive benefits to marginalized individuals, ranging from informal educational opportunities and increased engagement with the local community to the enhancement of personal relationships and networks (Bean & Forneris, 2016; Whitley, Massey, & Farrell, 2017). More specifically, previous studies have highlighted the potential of sport to contribute to social inclusion[1] —most notably in terms of social assimilation—at two levels. At an individual level, participation in sport has been found to enable the construction of positive relationships between diverse groups (Forde, Lee, Mills, & Frisby, 2015; Hills, Velásquez, & Walker, 2018; Kelly, 2011). Meanwhile, at a community level, social inclusion may occur through urban regeneration programs, which typically involve the construction of sport and leisure facilities that become focal points for community events and constructive neighborhood activity (Hoye, Nicholson, & Houlihan, 2010). In addition, Kelly (2011) observes how sport can further contribute to social inclusion at the individual level as either a means of empowering marginalized young people or providing a pathway to employment. Consequently, such findings often legitimize the role of sport in addressing broader social concerns.

However, more critically, Kelly (2011) acknowledges that sport-based programs of this nature often understate (or indeed, ignore) structural inequalities and attribute nonparticipation as indicative of individual deficit or self-induced exclusion. Consequently, while many critical scholars have argued that sport-based programs aiming to foster social inclusion may appear well intentioned, deeper analysis of such programs reveals, paradoxically, that the

programs often perpetuate, embed, and reinforce social injustice and structural inequality as "natural" (Kelly, 2011; Winlow & Hall, 2013). Moreover, these programs often operate as a form of benign policing (Green, 2007) in accordance with the pervasive, omnipresent ascendency of neoliberalism as the dominant form of governance (Dean, 2010; Paton, Mooney, & Mckee, 2012; Rose, 2000a; Winlow & Hall, 2013). For some authors, the organizing "logic" of global neoliberalism has acted to exacerbate the marginalization from society of particular populations (see Paton et al., 2012; Winlow & Hall, 2013). Indeed, as Nikolas Rose (2000b) suggests, the regulating practices of neoliberal governance are best observed within the realm of inclusion and exclusion.

Building on this argument, Rose (2000a) observes how, under neoliberal thinking, contemporary political government has retreated from its obligation to plan, steer, and answer the problems generated by and within society, toward a governance whereby individuals assume personal responsibility to become more active and enterprising in resolving these problems. This "double movement of autonomization and responsibilization" (Rose, 2000a, p. 1400) outlines how the role of government (and its policies) has shifted to one of facilitation, enabling individuals with freedom to establish and realize their own destiny. For Paton et al. (2012) this "double movement" is indicative of how recent social policy in the UK has encouraged social inclusion to be reimagined under the auspices of neoliberal governance, whereby policy operates to create simplistic binaries that categorize citizens on their ability to contribute to society economically, politically, and morally. Consequently, the problematization of certain people and certain places serves as a convenient and orderly framework through which inequality can be expressed as naturalistic, whereby it is incumbent upon excluded or marginalized populaces to accumulate skills, enhance capabilities, and reduce welfare dependency—the hallmarks of a reimagined, responsibilized citizenship (Banks, 2013; Paton et al., 2012; Winlow & Hall, 2013).

Further evidence to highlight the influence of neoliberalism on sport-based programs can be found in the manner in which public bodies (including those within sport) have regulated their practices to meet the demands of an expanded free market and the significant reduction of government responsibility for social needs (Apple, 2001). As Green (2007) notes, at the heart of the neoliberal movement is an agenda to deliver public services in a high quality and efficient manner, through an accent on accountability, inspection, and audit, among other factors (Houlihan & Green, 2009; Phillpots, Grix, & Quarmby,

2011). For Dean (2010, p. 197), the setting of performance indicators to benchmark and regulate practice act as "technologies of performance" that transform professionals into "calculating individuals" seeking the most efficient means possible to achieve these predetermined targets. Consequently, the nature of the relationships between funders and organizations concerned with using sport for social inclusion has (a) restricted what strategies these organizations use, and (b) promoted the interests of funders ahead of initiating social change (Costas Batlle, Carr, & Brown, 2017; Harris, Mori, & Collins, 2009; Thorpe & Rinehart, 2013).

Engaging Marginalized Populations Through Sport— Approaches to Recruitment

One area that has received limited academic attention but holds potential to explore how neoliberal principles influence sport-for-development practice is the manner in which young people are recruited to sport-based programs. While the ability to reach or engage a target population has been noted as a central concern for health intervention programs (Glasgow, Vogt, & Boles, 1999), within a sport-for-development context, recent literature has begun to emphasize the importance of exploring participants' motivations to engage in sport-for development activities (Peachey, Cunningham, Lyras, Cohen, & Bruening, 2014; Rowe, Shilbury, Ferkins, & Hinckson, 2016). However, there is a paucity of research or frameworks that focus on recruitment specifically. Coalter (2012), whose work we draw on to conceptualize our study, offers three broad recruitment categories: (a) "open access"; (b) "relatively open access"; and (c) "targeted," which are commonly employed in practice.

According to Coalter (2012), the first category contains sport-based programs available to all young people but are offered within designated locales that display characteristics of deprivation. Consequently, open access programs recruit participants through self-selection with the expectation that individuals from the targeted population will be engaged (Coalter, 2012). Despite the clear attraction and widespread deployment of open access recruitment, Coalter (2012) suggests that such programs operate on "an implicit deficit model based on an environmental fallacy" (p. 600), whereby it is falsely assumed all young people residing in targeted locales exhibit or possess the characteristics of deprivation. However, open access strategies can often encourage recruiting staff to focus attention and resources on those who are more likely to achieve program outcomes, while disregarding individuals whose problems are more complex or acute (Finlay et al., 2010; Spaaij et al., 2013). This is

indicative of what has been coined the "Pistachio Effect," whereby the easiest "nuts" to "open" are prioritized (and engaged), while the more difficult are avoided or abandoned (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Coalter, 2012a; Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Nols, 2012b).

In contrast, the second recruitment category, termed by Coalter (2012) as "relatively open access," operates as an extension of the previously discussed recruitment method by combining the outreach activities of the open access approach with targeted procedures used "to attract young people who [are] clearly at-risk" (Coalter, 2012, p. 600). However, in doing so, the intention is not to stigmatize those at-risk but to integrate them socially into activities that are available to the wider population (Coalter, 2012). Therefore, the intention of this semitargeted approach is to recruit participants to a mainstream program without drawing attention to any specific personal deficits that the targeted population may possess to normalize the experience for this focus group (Coalter, 2012).

The final recruitment category extends further to a "fully targeted" approach, which aims to engage an identified population by utilizing the sport setting as the social context to provide further services that may address issues of social exclusion or integrate the targeted population into mainstream activity (Coalter, 2012). Akin to the principles of sport-plus programs (Coalter, 2008), in this approach, the targeted population is isolated and introduced to a tailored program that is aligned with the interests of this population, as well as the overarching objectives of the program. In theory, such an approach presents potential benefits to the attainment of program outcomes and addresses the issues and limitations that permeate open access recruitment. Indeed, support for these externally driven, deterministic approaches prevail in much social policy (Hylton & Totten, 2013) and receive substantial endorsement at an institutional level, particularly given the strong emphasis of such programs on behavior modification, the construction of trusting relationships with figures of authority (Morgan & Parker, 2017), and the development of qualities associated with good character (Coalter, 2012).

However, critical scrutiny of recruitment practices within the sport-for-development context is limited, as is an understanding of the efficacy and implications of such practices in engaging specific populations. This article will attend to and offer insight into features of these deficiencies. Therefore, within a context shaped by a neoliberal agenda, where the necessity to meet predetermined participation targets may overshadow attempts to engage young people whose marginalization is more complex or acute, there is a

need to explore the practices undertaken by organizations to recruit and retain participants in sport-based programs.

METHOD

Critical Realism and Researcher Positionality

Critical realists (Bhaskar, 1978) argue that despite the existence of "a world out there that is observable and independent of human consciousness," the "knowledge about this world is socially constructed" (Danermark et al., cited in Denzin, 2004, pp. 249-250). Envisaging a "paradigm spectrum" whereby positivism and interpretivism constitute both poles, critical realism sits in the middle (Byers, 2013). This position results in an understanding of reality (ontology) that is stratified into three levels: the empirical, the actual, and the real (Bhaskar, 1978). The *empirical level* (events experienced through human interpretation) are shaped by the *actual level* (events that occur, whether we can observe them or not), which, in turn, are influenced by the *real level* (causal mechanisms within social structures). Consequently, critical realists "seek to explain and critique social conditions" (Fletcher, 2017, p. 11).

Our positionality is underpinned by the thrust to explain and critique social conditions. This entails moving beyond providing "thick descriptions" and instead offering *causal mechanisms* that can explicate social phenomena. As critical sport scholars, our work is driven by exploring how the causal mechanism of neoliberalism *causes* events at the empirical level. However, we are aware of the central limitation of both our positionality and philosophical stance: we must be cautious not to undermine our participants' accounts by suggesting that a causal mechanism (which we are familiar with as researchers while participants may not be) is shaping their lives (Fletcher, 2017).

Research Context

To answer our research questions, we opted for a qualitative case study of two youth sport programs. Our case study—an approach well suited to a critical realist framework (Easton, 2010)—was both instrumental (we aimed to understand the issue of participant recruitment) and collective (we combined data from two individual cases) (Stake, 2005). The data from these individual cases pertained to two wider research projects that sought to investigate the impact of a sporting program on social inclusion within youth populations. Both programs were selected as "typical" cases (Yin, 2014) of programs that embrace the logic attached to policy and rhetoric surrounding the potential of sport to address broader social

concerns.

The first program—*Sport4Youth*[2]— aimed to create opportunities for young people on the margins of society, primarily to promote social inclusion and incubate elements of citizenship, such as community cohesion and employability. The program was delivered in seven sites within East London. The research investigated the initial phase of the program by engaging with seven existing and new sports clubs across five boroughs which received support, resources, and expertise from a sport-based charity delivering the program.

The second program was delivered by *SportHelp*, a London-based youth sports charity. *SportHelp* aims to improve socioeconomically disadvantaged young people's (8-17 year olds) lives through sport by instilling positive life skills. *SportHelp* coaches operate within 30 schools, delivering sport sessions before, during, and after school hours to over 7,000 young people. The participants in this study spanned across two boroughs in West London, and consisted of two after-school basketball programs and two in-school table tennis programs.

Sampling Strategy

We recruited 18 participants (nine from each program) using purposive sampling (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2017). This entailed selecting staff from both cases who were either associated with program strategy or design (n = 6) or program delivery, such as coaches/club leaders (n = 12). While such a sample may incite criticism from academics who contend that evaluative research of youth sport programs often amplifies only the voices of the "local elite" (Carvalho & White, 2004, p. 13), the self-reflexive decision to interview program staff at the frontline of program delivery enabled the essence of their dynamic yet direct interaction with young, marginalized people to be captured.

Data Collection Methods and Procedures

To collect data through semistructured interviews with all 18 participants, we adhered to the following procedures. After obtaining university ethical approval, we contacted *Sport4Youth* and *SportHelp* and were granted access to both organizations by their respective gatekeepers. We subsequently recruited our 18 participants (nine from each program) in person by (a) explaining the purpose of the research and (b) asking them to sign an informed consent sheet. Once the sheets were signed, we conducted the interviews in locations suitable for our participants. In total, the 18 interviews lasted between 32 and 75 minutes with a

mean length of 54 minutes. The interviews were recorded via an iPad application and audio recorder and transcribed verbatim in preparation for detailed analytical treatment.

The interview guide was generated from a prior literature review conducted by the authors and focused on issues around recruitment, social inclusion, and sport as a tool for development (e.g., Coalter, 2012; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). We chose to conduct semistructured interviews for two reasons. First, while the outlined issues were broadly sketched out as the core topics to discuss, we were attentive to the flexibility of the interviews and let ourselves be guided by our participants' expertise. Second, these interviews offered a retrospective vantage point from which program stakeholders could offer firsthand accounts pertaining to their experiences of the program. While the potential limitations of a retrospective approach (e.g., exaggeration/under-reporting and accuracy of recall) are well documented (see Veal & Darcy, 2014), the approach did enable interview participants to reflect on positive and negative "critical" moments that defined their experiences.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), an approach that aligns with a critical realist ontology and epistemology (Bonnington & Rose, 2014; Fletcher, 2017). To search for themes, we adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase model. The first three phases (familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, and the early search for themes) were undertaken while keeping the *SportHelp* and *Sport4Youth* data separate. This entailed each of the two authors focusing on a single data set by reading the transcripts in full to gain an overview of the data before coding the transcripts to capture subjective aspects of participant experience. The third phase consisted of an initial search for latent themes relating to recruitment for sport-based programs.

Having completed the first three phases individually, both authors combined the initial themes they had identified to begin phase four: reviewing themes. This phase (and the subsequent ones) were undertaken jointly. After sifting through the combined initial themes, we proceeded to phase five (defining and naming themes) by refining the themes that reflected the data (key issues around sport-based recruitment) from the *SportHelp* and *Sport4Youth* settings. Finally, phase six entailed drawing on extracts from our data set to exemplify the themes we identified, followed by framing these themes within the context of existing conceptual debates (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

The three themes that emerged from our theoretical thematic

analysis were influenced by Coalter's (2012) recruitment typologies. The first theme, "Open Access Strategies: Outreach and Word-of-Mouth," illustrated both *Sport4Youth's* and *SportHelp's* utilization of outreach and word-of-mouth approaches to recruit young people. The second theme, "Targeted Strategies: Integrating Identified Young People," outlined how both organizations implemented approaches to target specific subpopulations of young people. The third and final theme, "Prioritizing and Maximizing Participant Numbers," connected to the previous themes by highlighting how, for both sport-for-development organizations, there was an inclination to "play the numbers game" and maximize the number of young people who joined the sport programs.

Methodological Rigor

Drawing on Smith, Sparkes, and Caddick (2014), we judged the quality of our work against the criteria of width, coherence, credibility, and having a worthy topic. The width of our study is evidenced by the comprehensive use of quotes from our participants, while the coherence is reflected both internally (how the different components of the paper build on each other) and externally (how this research is situated in relation to extant literature and theory). Credibility is manifested by the amount of time both researchers spent during the interview process with *Sport4Youth's* and *SportHelp's* participants,[3] making an effort to represent their views. Finally, the topic of youth sport recruitment is both worthy and timely given it is a fundamental aspect of youth sport programs that is largely under-researched.

A further issue regarding methodological rigor is our analysis. Heeding the warnings of Smith and McGannon (2018) and Braun and Clarke (2013), we avoided "member checking" or any form of "intercode agreement" (even those considered "subjective intercoder agreement" [Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012]) as an indication of rigor. Instead, in alignment with our positionality as critical realists, we jointly reflected on our data set during phases four and five of Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for thematic analysis. This reflection consisted of conversations, rooted in the theory we had identified in our literature review, as a way of refining and confirming our themes.

FINDINGS

Theme 1. Open Access Strategies: Outreach and Word-of-Mouth

The two open access recruitment strategies *Sport4Youth* and *SportHelp* used were outreach (or "taster") programs

word-of-mouth. Outreach programs involved the provision of activities that were accessible to all young people but were offered within identified locations that exhibited characteristics of deprivation (Coalter, 2012). *Sport4Youth*'s outreach work took place at a specific club, school, or recognizable community facility (such as a local park), an approach reported as a typical method for recruitment (Glasgow et al., 1999; Pringle, Hargreaves, Lozano, McKenna, & Zwolinsky, 2014). Reinforcing this approach, AJ, a BMX coach, indicated that "a lot of what I do is taster sessions and one offs." AJ continued,

A lot of councils are pushing outreach and turning up to random places and doing random things like little competitions, so that the kids go away happy and think "oh I wanna go and do that again" and go and find a BMX club somewhere else.

Similarly Luca, also a BMX coach, highlighted how taster-sessions comprised a significant aspect of the recruitment undertaken at his club, which were integrated alongside a range of other promotional activities that utilized both social media and more traditional forms of marketing. He noted,

We do taster sessions run by TFL [Transport for London], we do Facebook, web page, online stuff, all done by volunteers, we do flyers. We sometimes do BMX displays . . . we got 20 bikes in the local park and did a little track on the grass and 300 kids passed by in one day . . . [so] all the school kids in the borough got to know BMX.

The outreach or taster-session approach was also significant for *SportHelp*'s recruitment. Once *SportHelp* had established a program within a school, coaches were tasked with integrating young people into the charity's programs. This was both fundamental and cyclical: the sustainability of the program was directly linked to the number of participants in it. Jake, a table tennis coach, described the significance of the "numbers game" for *SportHelp*:

Some lunch sessions have 50 kids. But there is no quality there. It's just kids playing table tennis, without any form of regularity. Yet, sessions with 50 kids are praised.

Alfred, another table tennis coach, echoed the importance of having well-attended programs by recounting how, on arriving at his current school, he salvaged the *SportHelp* table tennis program, which was on the verge of being discontinued due to the limited number of participants. Consequently, *SportHelp* coaches' outreach work took two forms. The first occurred in school assemblies. Coaches would be given a timeslot to talk about the value of the

program to either a year group or a range of year groups. The second involved identifying young people through physical education (PE) sessions. Since the coaches were generally integrated into the PE departments of each school, they contributed to PE sessions with their expertise of the sport they coached. For instance, Karl, a basketball coach, spoke about how the bulk of his recruitment came through running taster sessions that were integrated into formal physical education lessons:

The PE lessons is how I get to recruit for my club. I asked a PE teacher to get me in all the PE sessions, when they are doing basketball games, and I'll lead a session. I'll introduce myself to them, so they know who I am, I get to find out what the kids are like . . . so, that way I can start handing my letters [out].

The second open access strategy identified was word-of-mouth advertising, an approach that entails exploiting existing informal social networks to recruit new participants (Scheffler & Ross, 2013). Like outreach programs, word of mouth was central to both *Sport4Youth* and *SportHelp*. BMX Coach Luca revealed that most new members "find out about the [BMX] club by themselves." Likewise, Alan indicated how word-of-mouth advertising was predominant at his judo club, where young people who were already subscribed members of the club utilized their personal networks to encourage further participation and membership. He expanded,

You get a little cluster of young people who all might go to the same school, for example, and they're enjoying it [judo], word of mouth gets out and we've found we've had more people come to us through word of mouth than [traditional] advertising.

Echoing both Luca and Alan, *SportHelp*'s coaches described the importance of existing informal networks as a recruitment strategy. For example, Vincent (basketball coach) explained,

How do I get kids on board? Some kids, they just want to come. They might have played basketball before, and they come to high school and want to give it a go. Their friends entice them to come along.

Further benefits of word-of-mouth advertising were provided by Raju, the club leader of a *Sport4Youth* sports hub, who indicated that the use of existing social networks helped to generate a sense of trust for new members as well as provide information about their club to young people who lived on other estates or in neighboring boroughs. Raju

explained,

It's all about word of mouth. So, when the kids go to school they'll tell their other year groups "there's this-that happening, feel free to join"—that's how it works. For example, if you stay in one estate—like the kids in our estate they were like that—they didn't know what was going on in other estates. So for example in Poplar estate there was a football tournament, they wouldn't know about it; if there was a BMX competition down Mile End, they wouldn't have a clue. As we started to speak to other people around other estates it just naturally started picking up, it wasn't hard work, we just had to get the word out.

Theme 2. Targeted Strategies: Integrating Identified Young People

The second theme to emerge from the data referred to a more targeted approach to recruitment. This entailed either integrating an identified population of young people within a program that was offered for mainstream, fully accessible participation, or by providing a bespoke offering that was tailored to meet the needs and preferences of a specific group (Coalter, 2012; Kelly, 2011). While the responsibility for this form of recruitment was placed on the program leads in *Sport4Youth*, in *SportHelp*'s case it was the school who would predominantly identify and refer young people to a sports program.

Amber, a program lead for *Sport4Youth*, offered insight into how a more targeted approach was pivotal to the establishment of one specific club involved in *Sport4Youth*. She explained,

The [multisports hub] program is quite a good example. . . . We know those kids hadn't been targeted before . . . I went down and spoke to them. . . . They're doing bugger all and they're just smoking weed all day and sitting in their council estate . . . so that's one of the best ways of getting to a new group of at-risk young people . . . but it's not always easy, you have to be talking to a lot of people to get there in the end, but that's a good way of getting to a new targeted group.

Frequently, targeted recruitment to *Sport4Youth* involved a two-phase process involving additional strategic partners who could offer to young people access, expertise, or resources (Baker, El Ansari, & Crone, 2017) to underpin the tailored offering. As Amber explained, the initial phase of the process typically comprised the creation of a "map of partners," which listed local institutions and agencies whose remit was to engage young people who had become socially excluded. She continued,

We identified organizations that were already working with young people that we know are at risk of crime, antisocial behavior or education failure. We then go and have a conversation with them and talk about what kind of provision we can offer, what we think might work for that group. . . . Normally, the really targeted stuff tended to be a block of six to 10 sessions with a group that we had identified.

Having identified suitable partners, the second phase of this targeted approach was to tailor the sport-based program to the preferences of the identified population, utilizing sport as a hook for further personal and social development (Green, 2007; Nichols, 2007). As Amber continued,

It's literally a case of making it as easy and accessible as possible. . . . Is it taking sport to them [the target population] or is it them coming to the club, what works better? Do we need a guardian with them, do we need this that and the other? The more [targeted recruitment] we do, even though it's a lot more time consuming—if we could do a lot of this we would have more impact on these [social outcomes].

Beatrice, the chief operations officer for *SportHelp*, largely mirrored Amber's approach by emphasizing the importance of creating a sports program bespoke to each school:

The first thing [we would ask a school head teacher] would be what sport do you think is most relevant for your school, and why? . . . Do you have the right facilities to enable the coach to work effectively? As you can imagine, for something like tennis, it is pretty crucial that they have courts. And then, it is what you want from SportHelp. . . . Do you want us to work with pupils being referred to us who might be struggling? Do you want us to go out and find the kids? It tends to be a mixture, the schools want a mixture of delivery models.

The "struggling" young people *SportHelp* usually worked with typically demonstrated academic or behavioral difficulties. Such young people would in turn receive referrals to the sports programs under the assumption that joining a sport club could aid in their development (Kelly, 2011). Lisa (a program manager) spoke about this process and clarified how a young person who had been referred to the program was made to understand that participation in the charity's programs was dependent on them improving their behavior or attitude. She noted,

If, for example, we know a young person has come onto our program, maybe they've been referred by the school, because they have various different issues, let's say anger

management, they are truanting, they have passion for table tennis, or basketball, or whatever the sport may be. . . . We will try to use that to hook them into the program, but we would have to make them know that if they aren't complying, then they can't represent us.

Vincent, a basketball coach, provided a further example of how the charity's recruitment practices benefited the social integration of targeted individuals or groups (young people with behavioral difficulties) by enabling them to join an activity that was accessible for all (sport). Talking about one case in particular, Vincent stated,

There's a young lad in year seven this year. He started school quite poorly, a lot of referrals, a lot of behavior issues, getting into a lot of trouble, most days in fact. His pastoral support manager, his house leader, or whoever it was, suggested coming along to basketball so that he could learn a bit of discipline, and be part of a team. He can't get enough of it now. He comes in pretty much every morning, even when he doesn't have a session, he likes to come watch the older boys train. It's really given him something to grab hold of, that he enjoys, and values, and that has helped him become a lot better within the school environment.

Despite the significant benefits *SportHelp* and *Sport4Youth* staff identified when discussing targeted recruitment strategies, they highlighted some challenges implementing the approach presented, in particular in engaging the young people with the activity. As Amber remarked,

It would lying if I said this sort of stuff was easy because a lot of the time . . . the [young people] would just sit out or not partake if they didn't like it . . . or they'd complain and they'd said "I don't wanna go back there" . . . obviously it wasn't like that for all of them but working with these groups it does take time and you have to build up trust with the coach . . . it's a long process.

Theme 3. Prioritizing and Maximizing Participant Numbers

The third theme, which encapsulates aspects of the previous two themes, highlighted how both *Sport4Youth* and *SportHelp* were inclined toward a strategy where maximizing the number of participants recruited to the program was the primary objective. Furthermore, there was an indication that the need to increase participant numbers outweighed attempts to engage young people most in need of intervention or who exhibited significant risk factors associated with social exclusion (Farrington & Welsh, 2007).

Amber (a *Sport4Youth* program leader) noted how the preference for recruitment through generally available outreach activities enabled program participation to be maximized while also (partially) attending to engaging the most marginalized young people. She explained,

It is difficult for us to know for sure . . . but if you're in the middle of an estate the chances are, even if they're not totally deprived, they would still be considered to be in a disadvantaged area and be fairly deprived on the scale of things. I'd like to think that we are still getting to some of those [deprived] people with the [outreach] stuff . . . obviously it's more obvious with the targeted stuff, but it is a numbers game with the outreach stuff, and the more that we can do [the more likely we will reach our targeted population].

By the same token, AJ, a *Sport4Youth* BMX coach, referred to the convenience that outreach activities offer as a recruitment tool but questioned the impact such approaches have on instigating and sustaining participation in sport as a precursor to enacting social change (Morgan & Parker, 2017). He observed,

The disparity is huge . . . some boroughs are much more "we need everything going on, we've got funding coming out of our ears for this sort of thing," they just want to hit as many boxes as they can and they'll get anybody in. So doing it just drums up a lot of interest and then the council, or whoever, just hopes people jump in [emphasis added].

Both Amber and AJ's concerns about maximizing participant engagement as a core recruitment concern were also apparent for *SportHelp*. These issues were captured by Dane, the impact manager at *SportHelp*:

What our main challenge is, is to balance the needs of the people who pay for the programs to be there in the first place with the needs of the people who access the programs. I think there are a lot of underlying, slightly naïve assumptions about the nature of the issues and the issues the young people encounter, and that's naivety from us, but also from funders, so they will pay on outcomes that are completely impossible to deliver, or don't make a great deal of relevance. The whole sort of, they call it the bums on seats approach, whereby lots of funders, big funders, will fund just through people come through the door. How many people have you had come through the door in the last six months? Oh, 100? Well, get it up to 120 in three months' time, brilliant. 120? Done. Have your money. But that doesn't make a great deal of sense when we are talking about sport-for-development. . . . These are the kinds of

DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR SPORT-FOR-DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS IN THE NEOLIBERAL CONTEXT

The testimonies presented indicate how the recruitment strategies of both organizations were inclined toward maximizing participants, which placed the onus on the individuals themselves to instigate engagement with the program. Consequently, by characterizing recruitment approaches as a numbers game, the testimonies capture concisely the concerns that critical commentators (Coalter, 2012; Nudzor, 2010; Spaaij et al., 2013) have raised about the value of implementing outreach recruitment strategies to engage marginalized youth. While a numbers game suggests that there is more potential to attract disadvantaged young people from all backgrounds, the above authors have highlighted how such approaches endorse a heavy emphasis on self-selection. Furthermore, since self-selection is predominantly rooted in having some ties to the community, it would appear that marginalized youth with stronger existing social networks had a higher chance of being attracted to the programs than those lacking in such relationships.

Such observations cohere strongly with contemporary (neoliberal) notions of personal responsibility being the starting point for social inclusion (Paton et al., 2012; Rose, 2000a). Therefore, while the benefits of the outreach recruitment were clearly articulated, the data also revealed some limitations with this approach, most notably the necessity for an existing social network to instigate engagement. Indeed, both Amber and AJ (*Sport4Youth*) conceded that open access recruitment favored young people with strong parental support in particular, a feature that has been reported as lacking within socially excluded youth populations (Nudzor, 2010). As an example, Amber, the program lead at *Sport4Youth* observed,

It's more likely for a young person who has very encouraging parents or someone who is prepared to drop them off that's going to turn up [to a sport-based program].

Therefore, the limitations and concerns of this skewed numbers game emerged from the data of this study in two ways: first, in relation to the effectiveness of open access approaches to recruiting populations of young people who are notoriously difficult to locate and engage (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011); and second, through an acknowledgement that such approaches were often employed for the mere fact that they provided a convenient and resource efficient means by which to attain a breadth of organizational outcomes while still (partially) addressing the objectives of

a social inclusion initiative. Such findings reveal how the ubiquitous presence of neoliberal governance and the necessity for providers to exceed agreed, quantifiable targets, acted as an over-riding constraint to the recruitment methods employed by the two charities and regulated their practices through "technologies of performance" (Costas Batlle et al., 2017; Dean, 2010). Indeed, as Thorpe and Rinehart (2013) observe, survival within competitive markets with shrinking levels of funding require organizations to employ corporate-inspired strategies "that resonate strongly with the neoliberal focus on market solutions" (p. 134). Consequently, the financial sustainability of such organizations often hinge on the extent to which they can attain predetermined performance indicators (Green, 2007; Houlihan & Green, 2009), rather than by the extent to which they can provide opportunities for social assimilation and inclusion. As noted, this paradox was best articulated by Dane, an impact manager at *SportHelp*, when he highlighted the "bums on seats approach" that was so evident in his recruitment practices.

Such findings highlight how the two sporting organizations examined in this article were inclined toward open access or outreach recruitment approaches (Coalter, 2012), because of their potential to provide the most efficient means to meet participation targets. However, further support as to how the market-oriented approach of neoliberalism and the preference for competition over collectivism (Peck & Theodore, 2012) influenced recruitment was provided by Amber, the program lead at *Sport4Youth*, when reflecting on some of the more targeted approaches to program recruitment. When discussing her recruitment practices when working with key partner agencies, she noted,

If you work with a [PRU (pupil referral unit)], that PRU probably gets contacted by people like us all the time saying "we really want to get access to your kids." So these kids are dealt all these different opportunities and they don't necessarily see them as valuable, they are probably like, "I did paintballing last week and now I'm doing this this week." . . . Almost because these at-risk kids are the ones that everybody wants to be working with, you face these things where people are fighting over them for their stats and their numbers.

Consequently, it would appear that the incentive for sport-based programs to engage marginalized young people in order to meet numerical performance indicators and demonstrate their worth for further investment presents two additional yet interrelated problems. First, where open access recruitment is implemented, the preoccupation with attaining predetermined targets stimulates recruitment

practices that reflect the aforementioned Pistachio Effect (Haudenhuyse et al, 2012a; Haudenhuyse et al., 2012b), where attention and resources are often focused on segments of the targeted population that are most easily identified and more likely to achieve program outcomes, rather than those whose needs may be more complex (Collins & Haudenhuyse, 2015; Spaaij et al., 2013).

Second, and as mentioned, the recruitment practices of the two organizations often position the individual as the primary initiator for their own destiny, to further reflect the double movement of autonomization and responsibilization (Rose, 2000a) apparent within previous critiques of programs designed to enhance social inclusion. As such, these recruitment practices illustrate a "politics of conduct," whereby inclusion is conditional upon potential participants assuming individual responsibility for social inclusion and socioeconomic mobility (Paton et al., 2012). This was underlined by the testimony of Karl, a basketball coach with *SportHelp*, who spoke of one young man who he had tried to engage in his program:

> *I was calling his parents, I was talking to his brother, I was trying everything, contacting his friends . . . but, he just didn't want to help himself. And if he doesn't want to help himself, I can't help him at all. It's tough. I tried other stuff to get through, but I just couldn't. He shut down every door [emphasis added].*

Consequently, in recruiting young people to sport-based programs, an inherent tension exists whereby the pressure to exceed predetermined performance indicators (and the dire consequences of failure) far outweigh the surface-level intentions of such programs, which are often associated with enabling social mobility for its participants (Collins, 2010; Kelly, 2011). This tension was captured poignantly and passionately by Dane, the impact manager at *SportHelp*:

> *To be honest, if I was being crude, it would be borderline hypocrisy [emphasis added]. . . . It is actually more difficult to develop people the more people you have on your program.*

Clearly, the testimonies of staff from both programs highlight the overarching necessity for charitable organizations to meet preagreed participation targets to unlock additional or future funding streams (and optimize organizational survival) as a primary objective. Furthermore, the findings indicate how this primary objective influenced decisions regarding recruitment strategy to promote an efficient and short-term focus, as opposed to a more developmental strategy that was

cognizant of the significant time and investment needed to assimilate the most marginalized young people into mainstream activity (Kelly, 2011).

CONCLUSION

This research adds to the growing literature concerned with correspondences between participation in sport and the enhancement of social inclusion. However, in order to consider the mere potential of sport participation to enact social change, it is imperative that the target population is engaged with relevant programs, which places center stage the recruitment strategies that are adopted within the program. Within this article, insights into the recruitment practices from two charitable organizations engaged with sport-for-development programs have been presented. The findings suggest that while a breadth of approaches were employed, the primary purpose of recruitment strategies was inclined toward the maximization of program participants to increase the potential to receive additional funding support.

While these findings present scope for policy makers and program designers to glean insights that may assist in contributing to program outcomes, two principal observations emerge. First, the reliance on community sports clubs and a volunteer workforce to be the transformative agents of change and deliver the outcomes of critical social policy programs is problematic (Morgan & Bush, 2016; Nicholson, Hoye, & Houlihan, 2011), most pertinently given the propensity for many community sports clubs to concentrate their recruitment activities around open access approaches, involving word-of-mouth strategies. Consequently, for young people to accrue the social benefits of sport-for-development programs, there is a heavy reliance on the statistical probability (i.e., a numbers game) of possessing an existing personal contact from within the sporting community. Furthermore, there is a need for the young person to connect with a sports club that prioritizes youth development over sport-based outcomes.

The second insight relates to the need to deviate away from the short-term, outcome-oriented approaches that permeate the design and evaluation of these programs. While short-term, numerically focused approaches to sport policy have received significant criticism elsewhere in the literature (Collins & Kay, 2014; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011), the current study has revealed that the focus on maximizing participants, alongside the apparent difficulties and failings attached to targeted recruitment strategies, has, to some extent, encouraged the recruitment of those young people most likely to achieve program outcomes (Collins & Haudenhuyse, 2015; Spaaij et al., 2013).

However, within a neoliberal-informed context, where organizational survival is at the behest of market solutions, the freedom of choice to employ strategies that may enable deep-rooted social change could be compromised (Thorpe & Rinehart, 2013). Clearly, the strategies adopted to recruit young people to sport-based programs become pivotal as an initial step toward achieving program outcomes and demonstrating the potential for sport participation to contribute to enhanced social inclusion. Therefore, if sport is to assume a role as a hook for the development of social inclusion (Schulenkorf et al., 2016), then it is at the juncture of initial engagement where the influences of neoliberal principles require the most consideration to ensure that those in most need of intervention are engaged by and benefit from sport-based programs.

To address the central limitation of our study—the lack of extant work on recruitment practices—we propose that future directions for the sport-for-development literature further focus on recruitment practices and strategies. It would be useful to emulate recent work that has explored participants' motivations to engage in sport-for-development activities (e.g., Rowe et al., 2016) to identify barriers that associated organizations face when recruiting participants and understand how these barriers can be circumvented. Equally, it is important to broaden our understanding of recruitment strategies across different sport-for-development contexts. Our work focused on sports programs in an urban setting of the global north. Having insights into recruitment approaches and tensions in both rural settings and the global south would further contribute to the literature.

NOTES

[1]For the purposes of this paper, we understand social inclusion to be concerned with enabling access to mainstream activity and the generation of opportunities within society (see Haudenhuyse & Theeboom, 2015; Morgan, Parker, & Roberts, 2019).

[2]In the interests of anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout.

[3]In addition to the time spent with participants during the interview process, both researchers spent considerable time within the clubs and settings where intervention activities took place. These interactions (ranging between one and three hours per visit) occurred in the weeks leading up to the start of data collection and continued throughout the data collection process. While these interactions had nothing to do with the data collection per se, this informal engagement enabled both researchers to familiarize themselves with the research context and the eventual interview participants (and vice versa).

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