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## YOUNG PEOPLE'S VOICES IN SPORT

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*'Like sports, some people would think maybe that physical education is something that you kind of have to do in school, and then people then who might think they're kind of sporty people and join a club, and activity...well, it's their choice and they kind of do it outside of school and in their own time, kind of like that. That one would be by choice and would, maybe not'* (Senior level active girl, Woods, Moyna, Quinlan et al., 2010).

*'Well physical activity would be like swimming or, would that be sports? I'm confused, um'* (Inactive girl, Woods, Moyna, Quinlan et al., 2010).

## INTRODUCTION

The young people's responses above to a question asking them to differentiate between physical education, physical activity and sport conveys a certain level of ambiguity, and perhaps this is understandable. Moreover, providing a definitive definition of sport would be illogical in a chapter that seeks to present young people's voices on their experiences of what they construct as sport, acknowledging that sports themselves are 'contested (physical) activities' (Coakley, 2004) and that 'sport' is more than just a physical activity. It is feasible, however, to identify some commonalities when young people define and discuss their experiences of sport. These shared views relate to a wide range of informal and formal recreational and fitness-related team

and individual activities, competition, being a member of a sport club, concern with improving performance, presence of a coach and being motivated internally and / or by external rewards.

This chapter foregrounds what young people convey, using their own voices, about their sport experiences (i.e., what they construct to be sport experiences) and how such experiences *may* result in young people feeling included or excluded in youth sport. Inclusion is about equal opportunities for all young people, whatever their background, experiences and circumstances, and has tended to focus particularly on disadvantaged and under-represented young people in sport (Collins, 2004). Other authors have examined social inclusion by examining the interface between issues of equity, equality and social justice (acknowledging that clear definitions for each remain contested) that arise when young people feel included in or excluded from sport (Hayes & Stidder, 2003; Penney, 2002). Arguably, exclusionary practices in sport can arise from stereotypical views and expectations of sport and resulting assumptions that not only impact a young person's (lack of) current involvement but also future participation. Moreover, it is important to remember that poverty has been identified as the core of exclusion (Collins, 2004), although there is limited evidence about the extent to which young people are either conscious of this at a young age or can clearly articulate the issue in their own voice.

The key purpose of this chapter is to allow young people's voices in sport to be heard, rather than adults' recollections of their involvement in sport as youngsters. Previous studies have reported, retrospectively, adults' reflections on the sport they experienced as a child (e.g. David, 2005). However, if sport is to be valuable and valued in young people's lives, it is imperative that the voices of young people inform and help to create appropriate, worthwhile and meaningful sporting provision. It is also important to remember that discrimination against

individuals or populations in sport is extensive and well-documented (Fernandez-Balboa, 2000). Concerns have been raised about issues of (in)equity in sport and the influence of the interlinking of a number of characteristics including social class, disposable income, levels of educational attainment, location, gender, ethnicity, (dis)ability, sexuality and at-risk youth.

What this means is that young people's voices are always positioned within a range of physical, social, geographical, and economic factors and, moreover, that some of the potential inclusion/exclusion factors may not yet have arisen due to the young person's age and exposure to particular life opportunities. What young people convey about their experiences of sport will therefore, to some extent, be positioned by their exposure to, and experience of, different stages of sport participation. The development model of sports participation accommodates a progression from the 'sampling phase' to the 'specialising years' and then to the 'investment/recreation phase', acknowledging that at any stage of involvement young people can choose to move to take part on a recreational basis or drop out (Côté & Hay, 2002). It is not always possible however, from the available extracts of young people's voices, to match the stage of sport participation with what young people share about their experiences of sport.

Coakley and White (1999) set out to explore how young people (aged between 13 and 20 years) made decisions about playing sports and how they integrated sport participation into their lives. This study remains one of the few that has deliberately set out to identify young people that reside at various points on the participation continuum (as participants in a sport programme or as a 'drop out' or 'non-participant'). The young people reported that sport participation was not a separate experience in their lives, but rather was closely tied to four factors, (1) growing up and being seen as competent, (2) sense of identity, (3) constraints associated with involvement and, (4) past experiences of sport and physical education. Aicinena's (2002) fourteen-year participant

observer investigation of youth soccer in the US is evidence of an impressive level of commitment towards presenting young people's experiences of soccer. The study identifies issues around minority participation, cultural differences resulting in a Mexican-born youngster departing from the team, the demands of competing roles in sports for young people, the experiences of unwilling participants and also those who excelled in sport at an early age only to become an average player as they entered adolescence.

### **YOUNG PEOPLE'S POSITIONING IN SPORT**

Along the sport participation continuum on which young people reside, there are varying degrees to which young people view sports as social activities that make up a part of their everyday lives (Sport England, 2005). Examining the sporting motivation profiles of a cohort of 2510 11-14 year old boys and girls (Wang & Biddle, 2001), five groups of young people were identified, ranging from those who were most physically active to those who were not physically active. The group that was the most physically active had more boys than girls in it and this group was found to have the highest level of physical self-worth. . The group that was not physically active contained more girls than boys and was found to have the lower levels of physical self-worth. Kirk (2004) argues that these data suggest that between the ages of 11 to 14, young people's motivational profiles, and their dispositions towards active participation in sport, are well on their way to being formed. If this is the case, it heightens the need to seek, understand and learn from young people's experiences of sport in order to inform sporting practices and provision that meets the needs, interests and capabilities of all young people.

### **Establishing young people's access to, and maintenance in, sport**

How inequality is exhibited, and how it can be identified, are discussed elsewhere, recognising that sport is not isolated from other inequalities in society and so does not exist in a vacuum (David, 2005; Hylton & Totten, 2001). Interestingly, the paradoxical nature of sport in society is evident in that while it is often presented as a tool for putting right a whole range of social wrongs (such as violence, racism, and sexism), these issues also permeate sport itself (Gatz, Messner & Ball-Rokeach, 2002).

If the aim of sport is to foster 'inclusion', then 'exclusion' (i.e., persistent barriers to participation) and its social context must be better identified and understood (Hylton & Totten, 2001). Just as is the case with adult populations, there has been limited success in gaining access to particular populations of young people who are not involved in sport in order to establish potential exclusion criteria.

While there is evidence that the number of opportunities for participating in sport for young people continues to increase (Smith, Green & Roberts, 2004), caution needs to be exercised in making any assumption that particular populations of young people can access such opportunities. For example, we need to ask critical questions about whether new opportunities for underrepresented groups simply result in more participation by those already heavily engaged in sport by adding new options to an already impressive portfolio of sporting opportunities. While quantitative data provides us with evidence about broad patterns in young people's sport participation and highlights trends that reveal inequalities in participation (Hylton & Totten, 2001), there is a need for more qualitative data that can provide greater insight into *why* particular young people are included in, or excluded from, sport.

This chapter is concerned with providing an overview of what young people tell us, collectively, about their experiences of sport and it seeks to identify shared experiences of inclusion in, and exclusion from, sport. In order to present this overview, the chapter draws upon interpretive research in order to examine sports ‘from the inside’ through the experiences of the participants (Coakley & Donnelly, 1999).

As was noted earlier, there is a limited pool of studies that convey, in the voices of young people, the extent to which sport either contributes to social inclusion or marginalizes and disadvantages particular groups of young people within society. Numerous studies do promote the importance of listening to young people’s voices with regards to providing inclusive sport practices, yet there has been an over-reliance on studies that (1) aggregate responses without sharing the richness of the young people’s voices and (2) do not disaggregate the data by different population groups. There is a tendency, for example, to group young people into the structures through which their views are accessed, e.g., school or clubs, thereby failing to link young people’s inclusion in or exclusion from sport to the age, gender, ethnic, social and other groups to which young people belong. While a young person’s experience of sport conveys an individual perspective, the association with other young people from a similar group, for example gender or race, can be either important or irrelevant. Certainly we can argue that there is a need to begin to identify the relationships across demographic factors, e.g., the intersection of gender, race and sexuality (Oliver, 2010).

## **GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUNG PEOPLE’S INVOLVEMENT IN SPORT**

The practice of sport has the potential to have a positive impact on young people’s physical, social, psychomotor and mental development. The majority of young people have high levels of

intrinsic motivation in relation to sport (Sport England, 2005), with a noticeable pervasiveness and variety of activities evident in primary school aged children. As they grow older, more boys than girls take part in sport, with the gap increasing as teenage girls begin to drop out from taking part in sport (Slater & Tiggeman, 2010). Boys have a preference for more traditional and team sports, with a focus on performance, physical contact and competition, while girls favour individual and social sports (Rees, Kavanagh, Harden, Shepherd, Brunton, Oliver & Oakley, 2007). Girls' awareness of the perceived risk to female identity that success in a physically demanding sport can bring may (un)consciously lead to girls in the majority preferring sporting opportunities that allow them to socialize with friends (Sport England, 2005). This does not dismiss those girls whose sporting habits tend to resemble what is more commonly referred to as boys' sporting habits, i.e., an investment of time and energy, in improving their performance in a chosen sport. Boys and girls who are more active in sport are more likely to be characterized by high levels of self-worth than sedentary young people (Trew, Scully, Kremer & Ogle, 1999). Middle-class children are overrepresented in sports clubs, with membership in a sport club related to gender, social class, and family situation (Kirk, 2004). Enjoyment has to be prevalent in sport experiences for continued participation (Sport England, 2005).

### ***ETHNICITY, SOCIAL CLASS AND DISABILITY***

Before sharing a sample of young people's views of their experiences of sport, it is important to remember that our understanding of the rich experiences of young people affected directly by, for example, ethnicity, social class and disability is still limited (see Macdonald and colleagues; and Dagkas and colleagues in this volume). While it is possible to identify patterns of participation between different ethnic minority communities, and associated barriers to

participation in sport (Sporting Equals and Sports Councils, 2009), data reporting young people's voice on the dynamics of ethnic relations in sport is limited. It is interesting to speculate on why this is the case. Social class and its impact on participation in sport is well documented (see also Hay in this volume). There is agreement that low social class, in conjunction with other social structures, creates an inequality in individuals' access to sport (Collins, 2004). However, the lack of data on young people's voice with respect to social class is limited and this may be the result of sensitivities in questioning young people about socio-economic inequities. What we do know, however, is that better opportunities for involvement in youth sport exist (as one might expect) among children from middle and upper socio-economic classes;

*'The most exciting thing that ever happened to me was the first time I went skiing. And I've loved going there ever since I go every winter with my Mom'* (Aileen, Fifth Class, First Level)  
(O'Connor, 2009, p. 116).

Disabled people participate less and undertake a narrower range of sporting activities than non-disabled people. This can be explained, in part, by a lack of support, poor access to facilities, and stereotypical and discriminatory assumptions held by non-disabled people (Fitzgerald, 2009). There is a need for more detailed narratives from this population to understand not only the intricacies of providing inclusive sport practices for disabled people but also the interrelationships with other social characteristics that affect their sporting lives (see also Downing & Peers in this volume).

In the next four sections of this chapter, the reader can begin to engage with the richness of insight that listening to young people's voices offers. In hearing their voices we can attempt to appreciate and understand how some sport experiences can result in young people feeling



included or excluded from sport. The data sources that convey young people's voices in this chapter include written narratives and interviews. The spelling and grammar of the written narratives are reported as written by the young people and the interviews are recalled verbatim.

### *(1) Sport and gender*

Research on the ties between sport, gender and a sense of identity report consistent findings. Boys tend to report positive experiences that are fun, team based, require a certain level of physical competence and entail competition;

*'The fun. The fun and competitive, both. You have to have a laugh. If it's not competitive then there is no point playing football. To enjoy it. You wouldn't say you play football to have a fight over it. If it wasn't competitive you wouldn't really bother, it's better like winning matches. It doesn't matter with me. More competitive, yeah. You get something out of it. Boxing is more competitive so you can't have fun in boxing'* (Woods, Moyna, Quinlan et al., 2010).

The contradiction in the above quote where the interviewee discusses the necessity of competition but then admits that boxing is 'more competitive so you can't have fun' perhaps provides an insight into the type of competition that is preferred to that of an overtly contact sport. Girls tend to report positive experiences where they are fun and encourage friendships;

*'my hobbies are football, camogie, swimming and running. My favourite one is camogie because it is great fun and you make new friends on the team'* (Carol, Transition Year, Second Level) (O'Connor, 2009, p. 115).

Girls tend not to identify themselves as athletes, even when they are physically active in a sport. However it is important not to generalize too much because there are some instances where this is not the case;

*'The thing I enjoy doing most is sailing. I try to be the best I can be at anything I care about, and I take sailing very seriously. I've been on the under sixteen sailing team for the last two years and both years were really good fun. I was especially pleased with my results last season because I got to represent Ireland at the European Championship. I hope to still be sailing for many years to come because I enjoy it so much and I'd like to be able to achieve a lot in this sport. Whenever I am not sailing (I've probably bored you enough on the subject!) I'm usually doing other sports or going out with my friends (GSS, 30)' (MacPhail, Collier & O'Sullivan, 2009).*

The level of investment in sport noted in the above extract is found more often in the research on boys and young men, particularly in the ways that they tend to convey their identity as someone invested in sport. It is often found, for example, that boys are significant consumers of 'media sport' while girls identify a range of competing interests and experiences (MacPhail, Collier & O'Sullivan, 2009). The following extract denotes not only a 15-16 year old boy's desire to be a participant in sport but also his desire to be a consumer of sport in the form of the national soccer league;

*'Im sitting in English class writing this note at 11.35am. I'm looking forward to our football match against [name of club]. I'm really big into sports and Im [sic.] so glad that Leeds beat Arsenal last night because that gives Manchester United (my team) a great chance to won the premiership (BCS, 52)' (MacPhail, Collier & O'Sullivan, 2009, p. 294).*

While numerous studies report girls' reasons for choosing (whether it be forced or unforced) not to take part in sport, or to drop out from sport (Slater & Tiggemann, 2010), it is important that we also acknowledge boys' drop out. Although likely to be lower in number than girls, boys also avoid participation in organized sports due to factors related to their feeling of (in)competence (Coakley & White, 1999; see also Wellard in this volume). It has also been argued that many girls are, in fact, interested in being involved in sport or physical activity, but they are disengaged from the nature, structure and opportunities of existing provision (Coakley & White, 1999). For example, they find limited opportunities to socialize with their friendship group in a non-competitive environment, and they are unhappy with sporting opportunities that tend to draw attention to their self-consciousness and perceptions of personal ability and body shape.

## ***(2) Perceived competence in sport***

Young people have reported that their perceived competence in a particular sport encourages and maintains their interest in participating in that sport;

*'My favourite sport is soccer because I think I am a very skilful player. My greatest ambition is to be a soccer player'* (Dermot, Fifth Class, First Level) (O'Connor, 2008, p. 115).

While some young people may not yet have experienced the power that competence can have in future decisions on their personal involvement in sport, this reflection from an elite adult athlete reminds us that success is important:

*'My main sport was running ... [but] I wasn't getting anywhere, I wasn't winning races.*

*Whereas with swimming, I didn't enjoy it but I was getting quite successful. I was winning races,*

*so it just seemed logical at the time to continue doing that, although I didn't enjoy it to begin with'* (Stevenson, 1999, p.93).

An interesting contrast to traditional views on the importance of competence in sport was uncovered by Beal (1999) who interviewed a group of skateboarders (average age of 16 years) to gain insight into their subculture. Here it was evident that while the emphasis was on skill development, these young people attempted to downplay any association between the acquisition of skills and the value of engaging in skateboarding. As one 13 year old boy expressed;

*'Well, we don't, we're not like competitive like saying, "I can Ollie higher than you so get away from me," and stuff like that, we're like, we just want to do a few things people are doing, and skaters help out skaters ... and if I were to ask a good skater like some people I can skate with, like Brad Jones, he's the best skater I know in Welton, if I asked him he would like give me tips and stuff, you know on how to do it and that's just how we do it, we want to show other people how to skate'* (p. 141).

In another study, one group of sport-active boys lamented the fact that their trainer was not good at encouraging anyone who displayed low physical competence;

*'he would never encourage the weak players as much and then they lose confidence, they lose interest then you know that's a big thing. It's a big thing with our manager like. He's a man that will pick the good players and keep encouraging them like and the weaker players he won't. And then it's up to the players to encourage the weaker players so once the higher up players are encouraging the weaker players then they'll get on alright, but like it isn't right'* (active boy, Woods, Moyna, Quinlan et al., 2010).

## **INCLUSIVITY RELATED TO ABILITY LEVEL**

In seeking responses from over 600 14- to 18- year olds about what can be done to help more young people to participate in sport (MacPhail, Kirk & Eley, 2003), it became clear that making sport inclusive to all (dis)abilities was a recurring concern. The issue of being ‘left out’ reflected the frustration experienced by young sports participants who felt this was due to an overemphasis on elite performance. Instead, young people suggested that learners should be grouped according to ability, offering opportunities to participate in forms of competition regardless of ability. These concerns convey the need for recognition of, and attention to, individuals who want to take part but are perhaps excluded because they do not excel. Young people’s continued requests for access to a wide range of sports further highlights the importance of ensuring young people can find a sport to which they are attracted, in which they can remain involved, and that caters for their individual abilities and interests.

## ***MOVING TOWARDS ELITE SPORT***

‘Elite sport’ describes young athletes who train for a minimum of one to two hours a day, on at least five days a week (David, 2005). The intense expectations that some parents and coaches have for a young person to succeed at the highest level in a particular sport are illustrated throughout David’s (2005) research. Such a reliance on retrospective data conveys that for particular individuals, as young athletes, their views and experiences of elite sport were not taken into account to prevent and protect them from harm;

*‘We should have been able to make decisions about when we could go no further ... I mean you know within your own body, if you’re so sick that you should not be training, you should be*

*allowed to say 'I can't come today' ... You should be able to have a day off every week, you should be able to make decisions about your own career in sport, and about what your level of involvement would be. You shouldn't have to accept the coach's view on everything, you should be able to make your own choice on what level of sport you want to be on'* (A British female elite athlete quoted from Brackenridge, 2001 in David (2005), p. 195).

Young people's perceived competence in a sport can also be attributed to the role that sexuality plays in encouraging an elevated or undermined status in a particular sport, resulting in young people feeling included or excluded from sport.

### ***(3) Sexuality and sport***

With an interest in learning about masculinities in sport, Ingham and Dewar (1999) interviewed 14 year-old males involved in organised competitive ice hockey. The following extract highlights a particular version of macho sport from the perspective of these boys;

*Interviewer: On the team you played for, what's the thing that you admired most?*

*Player: Taking shots [read: being able to take a hard hit from an opponent].*

*Teammate: Your shot, your goal average, how well you can kick ass. You have to hit hard. You have to be able to put five kids in a crying position before the end of the season.*

*Interviewer: Is that right? You've got to show that you're tough and can take it out there?*

*Player: There's some that will call you pussy even if you do. I've put about fifteen kids down and a couple of them had to be carried off, and [he] put like five down. He [another boy] put a lot down. I mean these aren't rough hits. I mean they're not rough like in sticks up.' (p. 22).*

The authors concluded that these boys were exposed to a narrow set of ideas about masculinity and that they not only strived to reproduce this in sport, but also as a basis for how they should conduct themselves outside of sport. Coakley & White (1999) support the suggestion that participation in sport is considered by young men as being associated with becoming a man. These authors found, however, from interviewing a sample of 26 young women and 33 young men aged from 13 to 20 years, that none of the young women viewed sport participation as being important in their transition to adulthood. On the other hand, the young males in Ingham & Dewar's (1999) study also articulated the elevated status that was accorded to involvement in what were considered prestige sports in high schools;

*Teammate: Soccer players. No the soccer players are like the same as us – no actually they're more popular than us.*

*Interviewer: So tennis players and golfers are like ...?*

*Teammate: Geeks! There are some popular ones who play other sports. But after that they're like geeks. That's how football and basketball players consider hockey players. [We] hockey players just look up and say "play tennis". (p. 21-22)*

(4) The above extracts hint at the socializing forces that encourage young people to be involved (or not) in particular sports. The role that significant others play in encouraging young people to feel included or excluded from sport is frequently reported by young people. ***Role of significant others in sport participation***

Parents, siblings, peers, teachers and coaches have all been reported as important socialising forces in young people's entry to and continued participation in sport (Côté, 2002; Côté & Hay,

2002; Kay, 2004). The reciprocal interaction between young people and these socializing forces results in young people developing self-perceptions about their competence in a particular sport (Stroot, 2002). In some cases, there is evidence that socialising forces assert too much pressure on a young person to participate in club sport;

*I don't like parents and teachers telling me what to play, like, you are built for rugby so why not give it a go? Is it good to be built for rugby?.....no* (Inactive boy, Woods, Moyna, Quinlan et al., 2010).

Young people may choose not to share the extent to which their sport experiences are pressured by significant others, yet peers sometimes observe the pressures and will talk about them. One sport-active girl talked about a friend who was active in gymnastics to the point of not being allowed to do anything else;

*'her Mom has to collect her from school and bring her straight to the gym until like 8o'clock and then she comes home and rushes her homework like so like you can be kind of obsessive as well in some sports or and it's kind of like she doesn't even like it that much, her Mom wants her to be like the greatest, so you can go overboard in sport like its good to have kind of balance and try loads of different things and not just have the one thing...it is too bad'* (Woods, Moyna, Quinlan et al., 2010).

## **CONCLUSION**

Article 2.1 of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) declares that children should not be discriminated against on grounds of 'race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property,



disability, birth or other status'. A case has been made that there is a low level of awareness and understanding about the specific human rights issues generated by intensive training and competitive sports (Brackenridge & Rhind, 2010; David, 2005). However, a case can also be made that there is a low level of awareness and understanding about particular groups of young people and their access to, and experiences of, sport (e.g., disabled young people). There is also a need to ascertain how best to sustain the activity levels of younger children into their adolescent years and beyond. Decisions about sport participation are made continually through the lifecourse, not just once and for all time (Coakley & Donnelly, 1999). Social conditions and structures can aid or hinder young people's involvement in sport, making certain choices more or less likely at a point in time. A recognition of the facilitators for, and barriers to, young people's involvement in sport allows sport providers (be they teachers, coaches, families, sport development officers, national governing bodies, youth workers) to strive towards providing sporting experiences that accommodate all young people;

'When young people have a voice they are much more likely to seek information about the programme in which they participate and the community context in which the programme exists. Many young people desperately need experiences that show them they can exert control over their own lives and the contexts in which they live' (Coakley, 2002, p. 27).

As teachers, coaches, researchers and policy makers we need to be cognizant of the complex mix of motives that attract and sustain, or fail to attract, young people to sport. Arguments for examining sport from the point of view of young people in relation to other aspects of their life, in order to present the realities of young people's lives, are gaining momentum (see chapters from O'Sullivan & MacPhail, 2010; O'Connor, 2009). Young people's experiences of sport are

multifaceted and, external to the personal circumstances in which a young person finds themselves, the delivery of sport provision and the culture of the sporting context affect such experiences.

Andrews and Andrews (2003) call for further evaluative research of a longitudinal nature, in a variety of settings, with samples of children with different demographic characteristics. Long and Carless (2010) challenge us to extend our thinking in order to devise innovative and effective practices and methodologies to encourage young people to share their stories about sport. What we need, they argue, is to move the voices of young people from the margin to the centre; ‘This involves not just hearing, but actively listening to the stories with a view to facilitating change. Somewhere along the line someone has to take the step from understanding individual experiences to formulating policy and devising practice. To facilitate this important step we might promote the idea of young people as co-researchers or active partners in a research agenda which strives to *engage* and *affect* its audience in an immediate and embodied manner’ (Long & Carless, 2010, p. 223).

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Key words: sport; young people's voices; inclusion; exclusion; gender; perceived competence; sexuality; significant others