

Urban Studies 50(8): 1608-1624

Urban Youth, Worklessness and Sport: A Comparison of Sports-based Employability Programs in Rotterdam and Stoke-on-Trent

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Abstract

The potential value of sport as a vehicle through which urban regeneration and social renewal policy can be delivered has been extensively examined. However, there are an increasing number of initiatives aiming to use sports-based programs as a way to address worklessness and social exclusion amongst young people which have received less attention. This paper provides a critical comparative analysis of two such programs, one based in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and the other in Stoke-on-Trent in the UK. Using qualitative data collected from participants, staff and other stakeholders, the paper details the nature and perceived merits of the programs before considering the limitations and constraints of welfare-to-work initiatives using sport. The paper concludes by suggesting a fundamental shift in policy discourse is required for such programs to be able to achieve sustainable positive outcomes for workless young people with multiple problems and needs.

Keywords: Social exclusion, Worklessness, Sport, Urban Youth

Introduction

Apart from being a significant aspect of the social, cultural and economic life of many urban centres, sport is promoted as a policy instrument in a range of urban regeneration and social renewal initiatives. A number of studies have analyzed the value of sport within this context illustrating in particular how the development of sporting infrastructure within communities may contribute to their redevelopment (Thornley, 2002) and the economic, tourism and volunteering benefits of sports mega events (Gratton et al., 2005; Nichols and Ralston, 2012). Whilst in the UK sport policy has continued to maintain this focus (a significant justification for investing in the 2012 Olympic Games was the regeneration for parts of East London), research would suggest that there remains limited evidence as to whether sport can contribute significantly to urban regeneration policy objectives (Coalter, 2007).

A related but less well researched area within the sport and urban regeneration policy space is the use of sport within social investment programs directed at reducing worklessness and social exclusion among young people (Glyptis, 1989; Long and Sanderson, 2001). Such projects have been undertaken in several European countries, influenced by both the transnational European social agenda and national and local governments' social inclusion policies (Hylton and Totten, 2008). Sport and employment initiatives have remained a pervasive feature of the delivery of social policy through sport. In the UK, for example, charitable groups such as the Princes Trust deliver sports-based initiatives to 'reach' unemployed young people and provide education to enhance their employability. Whilst such initiatives have been subject to various evaluations (Mason and Geddes, 2010; Rigg 1986), academic analysis of sport and leisure based initiatives aiming to address unemployment has largely been limited to Glyptis (1989).

This paper has been developed in the context of this literature gap and seeks to critically examine the nature, merits and limitations of sports-based employability programs. Given their continued prevalence within sport and social policy, alongside the continued rises in youth unemployment across many European countries, a more detailed analysis of what sport can and cannot achieve in this policy field is both timely and appropriate. The paper utilises a comparative analysis of two initiatives: the Sport Steward Program (SSP) in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and the NEET Stoke Challenge (NSC) in Stoke-on-Trent, United Kingdom. Both programs combine educational work with sports activities to assist workless youth with developing new skills and to improve their employability. The core purpose of the paper is to examine and critique the broader constraints and limitations such projects face and

illustrate the need to move away from the somewhat simplistic view currently held by policymakers of what sport can achieve within the area of worklessness and employability amongst young people. It will be shown that while programs of this kind can be effective for some participants in some circumstances, their broader impact on employability and worklessness is inevitably limited and is strongly affected by external factors.

Social exclusion, worklessness and employability

Public investment in sports-based employability programs should be understood within the context of contemporary policy discourses on social exclusion. Social exclusion is a contested concept that can be seen to refer to non-participation in key activities in society (Hills et al., 2002). Although social exclusion has important non-economic dimensions (Bhalla and Lapeyre, 2004), many analysts interpret social exclusion first and foremost as precariousness of employment (Byrne, 2005).

The three competing, ideal typical policy discourses of social exclusion distinguished by Levitas (2005) provide a framework within which different policy rationales and strategies targeting worklessness can be understood. The redistributionist discourse (RED) relates social exclusion to poverty and focuses on the processes which produce inequality. In contrast, the moral underclass discourse (MUD) shifts the focus from the structural basis of poverty to the moral character and behaviour of the 'excluded' themselves. This discourse presents the socially excluded as culturally distinct from the 'mainstream'. Finally, the social integrationist discourse (SID) sees social inclusion primarily in terms of labour market attachment, that is, as participation in paid employment. This discourse stresses the integrative function of paid work and tends to reduce the social to the economic (Lister, 2000). For Levitas (2005, p. 27), these three discourses differ in what the excluded are seen as lacking: 'To oversimplify, in RED they have no money, in SID they have no work, in MUD they have no morals.' Levitas argues that the dominant discourse in the UK and in European social policy is an inconsistent combination of SID and MUD, with an emphasis on labour market attachment as the key to breaking the cycle of worklessness and welfare dependency. As will be seen, job retention and advancement is a relatively neglected aspect of this discourse. Instead, the focus is on getting people into work, often via skills training programs (Kemp, 2005).

The policy framing of social exclusion in terms of (non-)participation in paid employment is evident in the debate on worklessness and employability, concepts that have emerged as a central tenet of social policies in Europe. Worklessness can be defined as

‘detachment from the formal labour market in particular areas, and among particular groups’ (Ritchie et al. 2005, p. 11), whereas employability refers to ‘the character or quality of being employable’, which is derived from individual characteristics and circumstances as well as broader, external factors (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). Worklessness is similarly affected by a combination of individual, household, institutional and labour market factors (Ritchie et al., 2005; Sanderson, 2006; Crisp et al., 2009). In contemporary policy discourse, however, there tends to be a narrow focus on supply-side factors that affect employability, i.e. the individual’s employability skills and attributes (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Wilton, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2000a). This focus on supply-side factors corresponds to the ‘weak’ conception of social exclusion, one that explains social exclusion as an outcome of the individual’s handicapping characteristics (Veit-Wilson, 1998). The ‘strong’ conception of social exclusion that emphasizes the role of those who are doing the excluding (i.e. the political and economic causes of worklessness) is much less commonly used in policy (MacDonald, 2011; Byrne, 2005).

The policy focus on the supply side of employability is articulated in the Europe 2020 Strategy for ‘smart, inclusive and sustainable growth’. One of Europe 2020’s flagship activities is its agenda for new skills and jobs designed to assist labour market transitions. A key focus of this policy is youth unemployment. Economic and social changes over the past two decades have disproportionately affected young people and made their transitions into work more fragile and insecure (Kemp, 2005; MacDonald, 2011). Youth unemployment rates are significantly higher than those for adults and the consequences are deemed to be severe and damaging for society as a whole (O’Higgins, 2001). For example, the Riots Communities and Victims Panel (2012) points to the low aspirations of young people implicated in the riots that occurred in towns and cities across England in August 2011, with many young people speaking of a lack of hopes and dreams for the future due to the absence of employment opportunities. The youth unemployment rate in the EU has been around twice as high as the unemployment rate for the total population throughout the last decade. In 2011 youth unemployment was 21.4%, compared to approximately 10% for the total economically active population (Eurostat, 2012). In the UK, youth unemployment grew from 15% in 2008 to 21.1% in 2011. By March 2012 youth unemployment in the UK had risen to 22.5%, the highest since the 1980s (ONS, 2012). In the Netherlands the youth unemployment rate remains relatively low at 7.6% (Eurostat, 2012).

The EU’s flagship initiative to respond to the challenge of youth unemployment is Youth on the Move. This program seeks to put young people ‘at the centre of the EU’s agenda

to create an economy based on knowledge, research and innovation, high levels of education and skills in line with labour market needs, adaptability and creativity, inclusive labour markets and active participation in society' (European Commission, 2010, p. 22). Youth on the Move emphasizes the central role of employability in improving the transition of young people to the labour market. As will be seen below, this youth policy focus on employability also translates to the national level.

UK and Dutch perspectives on worklessness and employability

Increasing employment levels among the workless is a primary goal of welfare reform programs in both the UK and the Netherlands, where work is promoted as the fastest and most effective route out of poverty, as well as one of the key policy mechanisms for regenerating deprived areas. Both countries can be understood as 'workfare states' characterized by a general drift towards a more conditional, selective and work-orientated benefits system (Peck, 2001; Lødemel and Trickey, 2000). In both countries welfare-to-work policies are mainly conceived on what Dean (2007) calls a 'competitive/egalitarian basis', which is concerned primarily with the opportunities that are made available to individuals to enhance their productive potential and their labour market readiness, most notably through employability training and education. Workfare strategies have been targeted specifically at young people not in education, employment or training, so-called 'NEET', with jobseeker's allowances (proposed to be) made dependent on being in work, education or training (Children, School and Families Committee, 2010). However, it also seems that both countries increasingly favour a work-first approach, where the focus is on reducing welfare dependency by coercing welfare dependents into jobs, regardless of the quality, pay or longevity of the work (Peck and Theodore, 2000a; Levitas, 2005).

Despite these similarities, there are notable differences between UK and Dutch workfare policies. In the UK, there has been a strong focus on diminishing 'cultures' and concentrations of worklessness (HM Treasury and DWP, 2003). The number of workless households has increased since the late 1970s (Nickell, 2004; Fletcher, 2007). Wage disparities amongst the high and low skilled, reduced demand for low skilled workers, and failing core industries like mining and car production resulted in increasing levels of unemployment amongst certain communities whereby many households became solely reliant on state benefits for basic survival (Dickens and Elwood, 2001). Dean and Taylor-Gooby

(1992) contend that the ‘cycle of deprivation’ cements generations of families into poverty through either low-skilled and/or low-paid employment or unemployment.

To address the issue of youth worklessness, in 2009 the UK government introduced the Future Jobs Fund (FJF) which created subsidised jobs aimed at building skills and work experience for unemployed young people to assist them in securing long-term unsubsidised employment. The FJF was an early victim of the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government cuts. However, the current Coalition government also sees youth unemployment as an important policy area, and highlights that the number of NEET young people is unacceptably high (House of Commons Education Committee, 2010). It recently announced a Youth Contract worth £940 million of new funding to ‘ensure that every young person not already in work, education or training has support to get into the workplace’ (HM Treasury, 2011, p. 43). The Youth Contract provides (market-led) job subsidies, apprenticeships and work experience for unemployed young people. The initiative includes a £50 million program that targets some of the most disadvantaged 16- and 17-year-old NEET young people. It is this backdrop of worklessness and youth policy that NSC needs considering against.

The focus of the Dutch workfare model is somewhat broader than paid work alone as ‘workfare’ has evolved into a broader form of ‘activity fare’, which includes subsidized work and training but also certain unpaid activities such as voluntary work (Spies and van Berkel, 2000; European Commission, 2007). The key buzz word here is social activation, with the policy objective of improving the skills of the workless and increasing their ‘work rhythm’ in order to combat social isolation and fulfil ‘socially useful’ activities (Van der Pennen and Hoff, 2003, p. 7). Local government plays a key role in social activation policy. The Work and Social Assistance Act (*Wet Werk en Bijstand*) shifts the focus of welfare policy to the municipality, which is responsible for paying welfare benefits and developing social activation measures. In the Dutch policy, individuals who take up training or social activation placements remain on welfare. Although in this policy labour market attachment is a key goal, its recognition that training and voluntary work are also important for fostering social inclusion means that it presents a slightly different version of SID compared to the UK.

Notwithstanding these dissimilarities, however, it can be argued that the key aim of the Dutch model is nonetheless economic participation, which this policy seeks to achieve indirectly via social activation for those workless people who are deemed to be further removed from the labour market (Inspectie Werk en Inkomen, 2006). The social activation policy model developed by the Municipality of Rotterdam is a case in point, defining social

activation as the first step in a phased process towards full economic participation (Department of Social Affairs and Work, 2011). As will be seen below in the discussion of SSP, workless young people are the main focus of this policy. This focus on youth is also evident in Rotterdam's 2011-2012 youth action plan entitled 'Just Keep Going!', which aims to combat youth worklessness at the local level (Municipality of Rotterdam, 2011). This action plan broadly reflects the National Action Plan Youth Unemployment launched in 2009, a major aspect of which is to improve the employability of young people who are not in employment, education and training (Ministry of Social Affairs and Work, 2009). Workfare policies targeting workless youth in Rotterdam and other Dutch cities have recently become significantly more stringent, resembling more closely the work-first strategy discussed earlier. The Investing in Youth Act (*Wet Investeren in Jongeren*), introduced in 2009, orders municipalities to offer youth aged 18-27 who apply for social security a job or study program. Young people in this age category who are not in education, employment or training, are no longer entitled to social security. The effects of this legislation on programs such as SSP will be discussed later on in this paper. We will now turn to the research methods used to investigate the two programs under study.

Methods

The studies on which this paper is based have similar methodologies. Both studies principally gathered qualitative data on staff and participants' experiences of the programs. In the SSP study a total of 51 in-depth interviews were conducted: 27 interviews with former and then-current participants, 11 interviews with members of staff (director, manager, teachers, coaches), and 13 interviews with other stakeholders (e.g. local government, business, football club representatives). The backgrounds of the program participants interviewed are summarised in Table 1. Key respondents were interviewed multiple times at regular intervals throughout the data collection process (2008-2009). The SSP study also included two focus groups. Each group contained 12 participants, consisting of a variable combination of program participants and staff. In the NSC study, qualitative interviews were held with 24 participants and three staff members from the various agencies involved (discussed below). Group interviews took place with three groups of participants – the first two groups were current participants at NSC and present to undertake an educational workshop and sport activity session with the co-author attending and observing both. The latter group comprised

former participants of NSC who were recruited by staff at the football club to offer reflective accounts of the program.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

In both studies, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Open, axial and selective coding were conducted to ensure the reliability and validity of judgement-based decisions (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This process was not necessarily sequential; as new themes and sub-themes emerged, the observations were compared and the data were re-examined. The research findings are discussed in the next section, where the projects our data have emerged from are initially discussed. We then consider and compare some of the key outcomes for participants of their involvement in the programs before moving on to critique the constraints and limitations the programs face in achieving their ambitious goals of reducing worklessness amongst young people.

The SSP and NSC programs: context and approach

The comparative study on which this paper is based examines sport-based employability programs in Rotterdam and Stoke-on-Trent. These cities were selected because of their relatively high concentrations of youth worklessness and urban social problems (as discussed below). Stoke is an example of a city ravaged by the decline and subsequent failure of the major employment industry and as a result now experiences high youth unemployment and NEET figures. Traditionally a mining area in the west Midlands, the city has been on the steady decline since the 1970s and the volatile Miners' Strike of the 1980s had a particular negative effect as pits in the region began to close with the last closure in 1994, confirming the end of the city's chief industry. New employment opportunities in the service industry were created in the late 1990s and early 2000s but did not necessarily sustain owing to a fragile reliance on financial market conditions. Ultimately the lost mining jobs have never been replaced, and Stoke was selected as a microcosm of the problems facing other former mining communities such as south Wales, Yorkshire and central Scotland. Rotterdam is an example of a city where there is longstanding political concern about and policy focus on social cohesion, immigration, welfare dependency and crime. It was selected as a microcosm of the contemporary social issues facing large cities in the Netherlands. The two programs - Sport Steward Program (SSP) and NEET Stoke Challenge (NSC) - serve to illustrate how

public-private partnerships in such urban settings operate around youth, worklessness and sport. Both combine educational work with sports activities in order to assist workless youth with improving their employability. The programs do so in partially different ways owing to their social and organizational contexts.

SSP commenced in 2007 as a partnership between the City Steward Rotterdam Foundation, two colleges, professional football clubs Sparta Rotterdam and Feyenoord, and local government agencies in Rotterdam, the second largest city of the Netherlands with a population of approximately 600,000. SSP was initially funded through the European Fund for Regional Development and the colleges, but since 2008 it has been financed by the Department of Social Affairs of the Municipality of Rotterdam. Youth unemployment in Rotterdam is the highest among the major cities in the Netherlands, with 4,585 unemployed job-seeking young people at the end of 2010, and has gradually increased since the onset of the economic downturn in 2008 (Municipality of Rotterdam, 2011). Delfshaven and Feijenoord, the two districts where SSP was first established, are characterized as vulnerable areas in the municipal government's social index. Both districts feature comparatively high levels of workless and NEET young people and low average household incomes (COS, 2008).

SSP uses sport as a tool for motivating young people to participate in educational activities. However, playing sport is a relatively minor aspect of the learning activities in SSP, even though six hours per week are devoted to sports activities. Instead, the emphasis is on the prospect of working in a sporting environment. The four-month SSP program is aimed specifically at creating an educational platform where workless youth obtain knowledge of and experience with the profession of sport steward. SSP is primarily concerned with the development of subject-area knowledge specific to the sport steward training, as well as more general skills such as communication, computer and job search skills. SSP participants are males and females aged 16 to 31; most are in their 20s and approximately one-third are female.

NSC is delivered in Stoke-on-Trent, a city with a population of approximately 240,000 and the 15th most deprived area in England (DCLG, 2010). In the West Midlands, 9% of individuals aged 16-64 are economically inactive (ONS, 2012). These figures are considerably increased for young people aged 16-24, of which 30% are classed as economically inactive. 9.1% of young people in Stoke-on-Trent are currently claiming unemployment benefit compared to 5.6% of adult claimants (ONS, 2012)

NSC is delivered by a multi-agency partnership between Connexions Staffordshire – an advisory service for young people – Stoke-on-Trent Local Strategic Partnership

Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and Stoke City FC Community Program (SCFCCP). SCFCCP staff are the key delivery agents of the project with young people being referred via Connexions Staffordshire. The project is funded by contributions from all partner agencies and the Football Foundation. NSC delivers sports-based activities and personal development education workshops over two days a week for 10 weeks to 15 NEET male and female participants aged between 16 and 24 in two groups. The education sessions are more general than those in SSP and focus on resume writing, team work, problem-based learning, interview techniques and developing social skills. The program also seeks to equip participants with a range of predominantly sports-based qualifications including coaching awards.

The value of sport in employability programs

The core content of SSP and NSC is similar to more general training programs aiming to encourage young people from welfare to work. However, the integration of sport is seen as a critical additional dimension of the programs, the ‘value’ of which can be found across four dimensions: its role in attracting young people who may not otherwise attend employability training programs; the wider physical fitness and social benefits associated with participating in sport; the opportunity it provides for staff to develop relationships with participants outside the educational context; and finally the opportunity to capitalize on an interest in sport by developing skills that could lead to a career in this industry.

Staff from both programs agree that sport can be used to attract young people who might not otherwise engage with such support projects. Steve, a current participant, speaks of how ‘it’s not a classroom we are in but a room at the football club and it’s less pressure as I have bad memories from school’.¹ Indeed, the sport component and setting of the program appeals to many of the participants by virtue of being different to traditional educational contexts. For NSC participants, participating in a program run at a professional football club is highly appealing and gives them a certain status amongst their friends. Participant Karl states: ‘We get to use the Dome where Stoke City play. We see first team players around... it makes me feel great, a right confidence boost’. Within NSC sport is predominantly used to engage and develop relationships with young people but there is also the opportunity to obtain sports and fitness specific qualifications with the possibility of participants moving into a sport and leisure career.

Like NSC, SSP uses sport as a motivator, an approach that is articulated by SSP’s physical education teacher Kees:

There are a number of people who are really motivated. But there are also several people who are not and you try to get those on board. I think that's the most important thing about sport [in SSP]. They get their classroom activities and are continuously studying. Then including a bit of sport is very good. And you get to know them in a very different way. They can express themselves differently.

The use of sport to facilitate a career is an integral part of SSP where the emphasis is on the prospect of working in a sporting environment and enabling youth to obtain knowledge of and experience with the profession of sport steward.

Perceived outcomes of sports-based employability training

In the previous section we have seen how SSP and NSC seek to combine sports and educational activities in order to improve workless young people's skills and employment prospects. How, then, are these efforts experienced by participants in practice? Overall, SSP participants recognize the importance of the skills taught in the SSP program and how these can help improve their employability. For example, former participant Mustapha (late 20s) believes that participation in SSP enabled him to improve certain skills such as CV writing and job interviewing. Mustapha notes that SSP gave him a 'push in the back' and the tools he needed to gain employment. He now has a job as a security guard for 32 hours per week and also works as a steward at Sparta Rotterdam and Feyenoord on a casual basis.

NSC participants report broadly similar learning experiences. Former participant Ian indicates that NSC provided him with the confidence to develop his CV and interview skills which led to him regaining employment as he had been referred to the program not long after being made redundant. In addition, some NSC participants point to the development of social skills as a major outcome of the program. For example, Sarah (late teens) discusses her lack of confidence but the 'course has allowed me to improve my social and personal skills, basically to deal better with people as I was – well, still am – quite shy but this is helping a lot'.

The two studies indicate that the use of sports activities in helping workless young people to improve their skills can enable them to better compete for jobs. The experience of former SSP participant Mustapha is a case in point. In the past, he had repeatedly failed to get a continuing job due in part to his lack of qualifications. He believes that his SSP diploma

gives him ‘the extra step I needed’, as do the social credentials provided by SSP coordinators: ‘They really supported me by saying “this guy is highly motivated and skilled, so give him a chance.” That’s how I got my job.’ Mustapha is confident that the positive impact will be durable: ‘I’m almost certain that I will not fall back into a social security situation’. In a similar vein, Fatima (late 20s) now holds a full-time job as an airport security officer. Like Mustapha, Fatima had been unemployed for several years before she enrolled in SSP. She ended up in this situation as a consequence of family and relationship problems which caused her to drop out of school at a young age. She describes how she ‘was going through a very rough time’ and desperately seeking an opportunity to change her fortunes. Fatima notes: ‘I commenced here [at SSP] for a foundation, as a new beginning. And it has paid off ... I have a little house in Rotterdam and I work at the airport’.

The above ‘success stories’, however, conceal the fact that even in those cases where participants have been successful in their quest for decent work, the sustainability of their employment varies greatly. Some participants experience a mix of training programs, temporary and part-time jobs, and periods of unemployment. For example, former SSP participant Jennifer (mid 20s) was unemployed for several years but with the help of SSP staff she obtained a part-time job with an event security company. She also studies part time to become a qualified event security officer. At present, however, Jennifer has a temporary contract and her employment future remains uncertain. Jennifer’s situation is quite typical in this regard, as the work situation of several SSP participants who are now employed is fragile and in constant flux with the main difficulty obtaining longer-term job security.

It is also clear that not every participant is able to benefit from the programs to the same degree. Overall, the effectiveness of the programs is more limited for people with multiple problems and needs. Participants who face particular learning difficulties struggle to increase their employability. For example, a few SSP participants are young men and women with refugee backgrounds who did not complete secondary education and have a relatively limited understanding of the Dutch language. One of them, Carlos (late 20s), failed to meet the entry requirements for the jobs he pursued, and the only alternative SSP staff were able to offer him was low-skilled manual labour. This turned out to be a major disappointment for the participant, who had already grown resentful of Dutch society in general and employers in particular. Clearly, repeated failure to find secure employment or the awareness of being trapped in ‘poor work’ can lead to increased aversion towards work. NSC staff recognize this challenge. The Connexions staff member points out that although there are valid success stories: ‘we accept we get problem people, those who come on and are trouble and end up

either leaving or being referred elsewhere. It is something we are working on but worklessness is just so engrained with some young people’.

Limitations and constraints

SSP and NSC provide an educative context that can serve as a basis for the development of employability skills and attributes. However, the data point to a series of limitations and constraints that profoundly affect the programs’ capacity to improve participants’ labour market attachment. As will be seen, these issues are not restricted to the two programs or to sports-based employability programs, and resonate with the more general criticisms that have been levelled at workfare policies.

Beyond short-termism

The research results highlight the need for longer-term investment beyond what programs such as SSP and NSC are able to offer in order to enable participants to acquire sufficient skills to access satisfactory jobs, support them in retaining those jobs, and assist them in moving on to a better job. Post-program support may well be a key factor in breaking a vicious cycle where young people repeatedly move between unemployment, employability programs and low-paid work, a cycle that could deepen insecurity rather than lead to sustainable work that provides some element of progression (Kemp, 2005; Peck and Theodore, 2000a). SSP manager Danny argues that ‘some problems can resurface along the way. If they lose their job, the chance of falling back is very high. That’s why post-program support is very important, so they can come to you for support and reassurance’. However, both he and NSC staff recognize that post-program assistance is not always adequate due to limited resources. SSP coordinator John also laments this because ‘with these target groups you often see that they start a new program but for one reason or another they end up in a downward spiral again. ... Sometimes the program seems successful, but six months later they are back at square one’.

Worklessness as a multifaceted phenomenon

The data indicate that there is some merit in the policy assumption that investment in a person’s skills and training produces return that can benefit her or his labour market position.

However, this assumption typically focuses on individual agency - personal attributes, qualifications, skills and behaviour - rather than on socioeconomic structures and the opportunities and choices these offer to workless young people (Kemp, 2005). This focus on individual agency undervalues the impact of external factors such as poverty, class, parental and peer group influences (Dean, 2007). As noted earlier, worklessness is a complex phenomenon that is affected by a combination of individual, household, community, institutional and labour market factors.

SSP and NSC provide ample illustrations of the limitations of an individualistic approach. Staff from both programs are particularly cognizant of the mediating effects of family and peers on young people's responses to the program. Whilst attempting to involve SSP participants' parents during the project, staff are critical of the extent to which they presently engage family. NSC respondents specifically discuss the challenges presented by the intergenerational nature of worklessness:

Unemployment and worklessness in this region is significant and engrained. We have three generations in the same household without work so how do you change that? Even if we engage them we know they are going back to a house where no-one works and even if they want to they won't get family support. (football club staff member)

This was a consistent issue staff faced as most participants had family members who were unemployed and there was little motivation or support at home to move beyond this.

The limits of supply-side interventions

The recent economic downturn has a significant negative effect on youth unemployment (OECD, 2010), which highlights the limits of supply-side interventions such as sports-based employability programs. The decisive determinant of successful welfare-to-work programming remains the underlying nature of labour demand (Peck and Theodore, 2000b; Crisp et al., 2009). Greater attention therefore needs to be given to demand-side factors, especially in areas where lack of labour demand constrains the effectiveness of efforts to secure work for the workless (Sanderson, 2006).

Stoke-on-Trent is one such locality where there is a need for job creation in order to tackle geographic concentrations of worklessness as discussed how Stoke has been 'badly hit by the collapse of the mining industry and we have high unemployment in the area'

(Connexions staff member). The disintegration of the mining industry led to worklessness becoming deeply established within the city not only during the period of pit closures but also across generations (Coates and Barratt-Brown, 1997). Many young people have grown up in post-pit closure communities and subsequently in households where grandparents and parents have never worked (Fieldhouse and Hollywood, 1999).

A key issue for NSC, then, is that, as the football club staff member argues, ‘there actually are not that many jobs going locally’. This is problematic in the context of NSC as a sports-based employment initiative. Whilst the project intends to provide participants with a broad range of employment skills there is a focus on obtaining sports-specific qualifications to improve participants’ chances of working in the sports industry. Given that many participants initially are engaged in the program because of their enjoyment of sport, the possibility of employment in this area is appealing. However, with the recent economic downturn the UK government’s investment in public sport provision has greatly lessened. Large-scale redundancies are already occurring in key public sector sports agencies suggesting that NSC may be providing participants with an ambition that is unlikely to be fulfilled and a skill set that is not currently valuable.

In Rotterdam, the main issue appears to be the quality of work rather than its availability. A concern is that employability programs mobilize young people for low-quality and low-waged work by ‘churning’ them into the bottom of the labour market, usually in temporary work placements (Peck and Theodore, 2000a; Levitas, 2005). When the focus is on work first, young people can become trapped in ‘poor work’ characterized by low pay, poor conditions and pervasive job insecurity (Crisp et al., 2009). As noted earlier, this can deepen insecurity and underemployment rather than lead to sustainable jobs that also provide an element of progression. Former SSP participant Mustapha (late 20s), who had previously participated in employability programs, criticized their mere focus on finding a job, regardless of the quality and longevity of the job: ‘[They made you look] for jobs on a daily basis, but that was all it was. It gave you a temporary job, but after a couple of months you were out on the streets again. It didn’t give you any lasting improvements.’

Other demand-side factors, such as recruitment factors, further constrain the effectiveness of SSP and NSC. There is some evidence of employer reluctance to recruit the long-term workless, especially those with personal problems or a criminal record. SSP staff recognize this issue and seek to build sustained positive relationships with potential employers in order to reduce employer prejudice. However, this remains a problematic constraint to overcome for some of the most vulnerable young people. These findings are

consistent with recent work that adopts a broad approach to employability that incorporates (the interactions between) individual factors, personal circumstances and external factors (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005).

Avoiding the numbers game

A key theme emerging from the studies is that programs are likely to be more successful with individuals who have a limited number of external factors constraining their ability to gain employment (Dean, 2003; Sanderson, 2006). Individuals with low motivation, mental health problems, learning disabilities or a combination of these factors can present extreme challenges to project staff but should, as individuals potentially suffering from severe social exclusion, arguably be the priority target group for welfare projects. With increasing focus on number-led regimes within worklessness policy (Ritchie et al., 2005) project staff face dilemmas when determining who they should work with. This tension emerged in both studies. Whilst wanting to work with the most ‘difficult to reach’ young people, SSP has recently encountered changes to its funding allocation with 65% of funding now based on achievement of targets relating to the percentage of youth who find employment or enrol in formal education within 12 months of entering the program. SSP manager Danny expresses this tension as follows:

We do our jobs with certain idealism. That’s how we started the program for this difficult target group. But ... from a business perspective, we have discussions like ‘should we keep working with, say, a person with a long criminal record for drug dealing or robbery, who is also cognitively impaired, because the chance that you won’t be able to find them a job is relatively large?’ Which means that, as an organization, you invest a considerable amount in the education, whereas the chances of successful outcomes, which is the most advantageous for us financially, are small.

Staff in both projects discussed the need to be selective to maintain an appropriate success rate. This was a difficult process but ultimately to ensure the sustainability of the program they felt they had to target those young people with less complex broader problems who it was felt would be more likely to respond to the support available.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a critical analysis of sports-based employability programs. Whilst the introduction of sport into wider social agendas has been accompanied by a desire of sports practitioners to prove the value of themselves and their ‘product’ within mainstream social policy (Coalter, 2007), there is a limit on what sports ‘can do’ to address complex social issues such as worklessness. Our analysis suggests that although sport undoubtedly has value as an alternative medium through which to engage and build relationships with young people, it cannot overcome the wider issues influencing the success of programs aiming to move workless young people into employment. In short, the impact of such programs on worklessness is inevitably limited (Kelly, 2010).

It is useful to analyze these limitations in more detail by returning to Levitas’ (2005) three policy discourses discussed in the initial part of the paper. The programs reflect a broader trend within both the UK and the Netherlands of underpinning interventions using a combination of SID and MUD. In both projects, there is an assumption that social inclusion can only be achieved if young people are attached to the labour market as typified by a SID approach. The focus therefore, and the outcomes which the projects are measured by, is the number of young people either in work at the cessation of the project or moving towards work by (re-)enrolment in mainstream education and training. Within NSC in particular there is an underlying MUD focus. Project staff repeatedly refer to potential ‘problem’ participants and the need to motivate certain young people to alter their lives. NSC staff discuss the ingrained, intergenerational attitudes which view worklessness as a normal element of everyday life and problematize these as an individualized issue of a lack of motivation, desire and drive to work by young people that the project is targeting. In so doing, they risk reproducing a reductive analysis of worklessness, highlighting individual deficits and de-emphasizing structural inequalities (Kelly, 2010). Ultimately, approaches underpinned by these discourses are likely to be ineffective for many young people because they fail to address the external factors that contribute to their inability to find employment. In simple terms, they do not create a RED that seeks to alter the underlying causes of worklessness and redistribute employment opportunities in a more durably inclusive way.

We have indicated that for some young people, this is still a successful approach. For those young people that come to the programs with a level of intrinsic motivation and some base competencies, the projects can be extremely effective in providing them with the additional layer of skills and connections needed to be able to move them into decent work.

However, we have also demonstrated the limits of supply-side interventions when few opportunities exist for newly mobilized potential workers. This was particularly noticeable in Stoke-on-Trent where unemployment exceeds job availability. When devising such programs there needs to be an acknowledgement of the competitive nature of the job market, and that even low-waged, unskilled jobs are not readily available. In such a competitive environment, it is unlikely that programs will have much success supporting young people facing multiple barriers to work. And even if they are able to give participants a competitive advantage so that they can get jobs, this may be at the expense of others in the labour market, for example older workers (Levitas, 2005). Staff are instead forced to make difficult decisions about who they work with. We can argue that staff, at times, have to give up on those most excluded and in need of support because of the unlikelihood of them overcoming the various issues they face and gaining employment within the short duration of the program. This is not to criticize the project teams in any way, they clearly found this process difficult, but their work is being driven by external policy agendas which prevent the projects from providing sustained support to those young people most in need. Whilst continuing to be underpinned by a SID approach and success measured by the number of participants moving into employment, it is unlikely that staff can do anything to significantly address the issue and instead have to continue being selective regarding who they work with.

The experiences of some SSP participants suggest that even when jobs are available SID approaches still remain problematic, especially with regard to the quality and longevity of employment. This continues to illustrate that ‘getting people into jobs’ is not sufficient for tackling deep-rooted social exclusion (Lister, 2000); instead, as illustrated, some young people become increasingly resentful that whilst they are engaging with programs and bring high levels of enthusiasm and motivation they are still not able to gain secure, ongoing work. Inevitably, this reinforces feelings of disempowerment that projects are attempting to challenge. A fundamental tension here is that the programs seek to adapt young people to the needs of markets, rather than regulate markets to the needs of young people.

There are no easy solutions to addressing worklessness amongst young people. Our analysis, however, would suggest that a fundamental shift is required in the underpinning of employability programs. Such a shift would require moving away from the assumption that success can only be measured by job attainment, and instead develop approaches that are responsive to the local area that projects are embedded within. In Stoke-on-Trent, for example, attaching young people to volunteering opportunities that provide further development of skills and social connections and a meaningful and ongoing purpose to attach

to, might be a more realistic solution than focusing exclusively on gaining paid employment. This approach recognizes that in addition to paid work, there is a need to value and support other forms of participation such as caring, voluntary work and education both for those in work and for those that are on benefits and unable to take part in employment. Effectively, this will require a redefinition of the meaning of employment to embrace legitimate tasks in the social, public and private spheres, and rewarding these in an appropriate and non-stigmatizing way (Peck and Theodore, 2000b; Levitas, 2005).

We do not wish to suggest that sports-based employability programs are by definition ineffective, but rather to advocate a more ‘holistic’ approach that views employability as a long-term developmental process in which programs such as those discussed can play a role by supporting sustainable transitions. This approach can be informed by a broad concept of employability that incorporates individual factors, personal circumstances and external factors (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). Such a holistic framework may use sport to address factors pertaining directly to the individual such as lack of skills, motivation and confidence, as well as some external factors such as enabling support services and recruitment factors (e.g. by providing social credentials and networks). However beyond this it is essential such initiatives link to social policies that seek to alter personal and family situations and also more macro-level policies relating to the development of business enterprise and community regeneration. A refocus by policymakers away from social inclusion being equated to paid employment is required if practitioners are to have greater success at supporting the individual needs and aspirations of all types of young people that attend such programs.

Note

¹ Pseudonyms are used to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

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