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*'I guess it's kind of elitist': the formation and mobilisation of cultural, social and physical capital in youth sport volunteering*

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**‘I guess it’s kind of elitist’: The formation and mobilisation of cultural, social and physical capital in youth sport volunteering**

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**Abstract**

Policy and research portray sport volunteering as a means by which young people can develop skills and perform active citizenship. This paper draws on qualitative research with participants in a UK sport volunteering program to critically examine young people’s volunteering journeys and how these are shaped by their formation and mobilisation of capital. The results show how program structures and practices, such as selection criteria, privilege young people with higher levels of cultural and physical capital, and afford these youth additional opportunities to accumulate and mobilise cultural and social capital. The paper argues for a more critical understanding of youth sport volunteering; one that recognises that sport volunteering can reserve the practice of active citizenship for privileged youth.

**Keywords:** cultural capital; social capital; physical capital; volunteering; citizenship

## **Introduction**

Active citizenship has emerged as a public policy buzz phrase in several western societies to focus attention on citizens' contribution to their communities through participation in civic life. Volunteering is discursively positioned as a key form of active citizenship as public sector provision is progressively being replaced by a greater role for volunteers (Hogan and Owen 2000). Volunteering is a cornerstone of the UK's Coalition government policy rhetoric which highlights its contribution to personal and community development (Volunteering England 2011; Nichols and Ralston 2012; Morgan 2013; Mawson and Parker 2013). For example, Prime Minister David Cameron has championed volunteering both as a contribution to developing local communities and as a civic duty (Cabinet Office 2010), while in 2015 Rob Wilson, Minister for Civil Society, stressed that the UK government wants 'to see more social action and volunteering, with community participation embedded in our lives from school days onwards' (Cabinet Office and Wilson 2015). Currently more than 60,000 volunteer-run sports clubs exist in the UK alone (Nichols et al. 2014). In the UK, as well as in countries like Australia, sport is the most popular single area for volunteering activity, accounting for more than a quarter of all volunteers (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010).

Youth are at the centre of sport volunteering debates in the UK. Sport England stated in 2004 that a key challenge for the future of UK sport was to capitalise on its most valuable resource: young people who 'have the energy and drive to inspire sport towards new horizons' (Sport England 2004, p. 2). Already in the UK, 16-24 year olds have been shown to be one of the largest contributors to sport volunteering (Leisure Industries Research Centre

2003; Low et al. 2007). Young sports volunteers provide other school-aged children and young people with opportunities to participate in sport, while simultaneously contributing to their own personal and professional development (Eley and Kirk 2002). The potential of sport volunteering to provide ‘a form of social participation or civic engagement that can foster connectedness between young people, empower them as resourced individuals and engage them within their communities’ (Kay and Bradbury 2009, p. 121) is framed as a key means for addressing young people’s personal development as well as their civic duty.

Previous research has explored how engagement in sport volunteering can enhance young people’s resources and, in particular, their social capital (e.g., Bradbury and Kay 2008; Kay and Bradbury 2009; Bradbury 2008). In line with the dominant representation of sport volunteering in policy discourse, this research tends to present sport volunteering as an unequivocally beneficial experience both for participants and for society as a whole. Yet, little is known about young people’s sport volunteering journeys and how these are shaped by their access to, and mobilisation of, different forms of capital. This paper draws on qualitative research undertaken with young sports volunteers to critically examine their experiences of sport volunteering pathways, their capacity to accrue different forms of capital through sport volunteering, and the way this capacity is shaped by the social, cultural and physical resources that they possess. In doing so, we direct analytical attention to the mobilisation of capital and privilege as important, yet often neglected, aspects of youth sport volunteering. In the next section, the conceptual framework for the study is presented.

### **Forms of capital in youth sport volunteering**

Scholars have turned to the concept of social capital to assess the benefits of sport volunteering and other initiatives for young people (e.g., Harvey et al. 2007; Bradbury and

Kay 2008; Kay and Bradbury 2009; Phillips 2010). Social capital resides in social connections and interaction with others. It refers to an unequally distributed 'resource to action' that is produced through social relationships and interactions between individuals for their personal and mutual benefit (Portes 1998). Social capital may be partially inherited but is mostly developed through investments and social exchanges. Research suggests a strong correlation between volunteerism in sport and social capital, especially in relation to long-term volunteer involvement (Harvey et al. 2007). However, social capital is distributed unevenly based on a range of (inter)personal, institutional and structural factors (Kay and Bradbury 2009; Spaaij 2011). Harvey et al. (2007) note that this 'speaks to the complexity of the distribution, formation, and reproduction of social capital not only within society in general but also within smaller social worlds such as community sport organizations' (p. 220). Social capital is part of a wider set of structural relations (Morrow 1999, 2001; Lin 2001; Blokland and Savage 2008), in a way that allows privileged individuals and groups to protect and further their interests (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Fine 2001).

While most studies of youth sport volunteering focus on social capital, social capital cannot be divorced from other forms of capital. Of the different social capital theories (see Portes [1998] and Schuller et al. [2000] for a review), Bourdieu's (1986) work is the only to theorise these different forms of capital in conjunction. His use of the term 'capital' signals 'the intention of addressing differential resources of power, and of linking an analysis of the cultural to the economic' (Schuller et al. 2000, p. 3). In particular, Bourdieu (1986) highlights the interplay and dynamics of conversion between different forms of capital. The possession of any form of capital can reinforce the power of another or the capacity to acquire another. The sum of social, economic and cultural capital possessed by an individual or group may be viewed as their entire portfolio of capital, whose volume and composition vary enormously (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Anheier et al. 1995).

For the purpose of this paper, two additional forms of capital need to be specified: cultural and physical capital. The concept of cultural capital, first developed by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) in their analysis of social reproduction in education, refers to high status cultural signals such as attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours and credentials that are used as a basis for exclusion from, and access to, employment, resources and high status groups (Lamont and Lareau 1988). This definition applies to sport volunteering, as a site for personal development and citizenship, and leaves room for personal biographies by taking into consideration variations in how individuals use their cultural capital (Lareau and Weininger 2004). Cultural capital is developed in the contexts of learning within families, formal education and informal learning, including volunteering.

The concept of physical (or bodily) capital is directly relevant to the research question addressed in this paper. Shilling (1991, 2013) and Wacquant (2004), who have adapted and developed Bourdieu's work, provide a suitable framework for conceptualising physical capital. Physical capital highlights the body as a possessor of status and distinctive symbolic forms integral to the accumulation of resources. The production of physical capital refers to the development of symbolically valued bodies by individuals through participation in sporting, leisure and other activities (Shilling 2013). As will be shown later in this paper, the recognition of particular bodily forms and abilities as physical capital is field specific. Physical capital may be converted into different forms of capital, such as social and economic capital (Shilling 1991, 2013). For example, in professional sport this may take the form of recognition, titles and income. However, physical capital cannot be transmitted or inherited directly; rather, its development is an active, ongoing process (Wacquant 2004).

The accumulation and conversion of capital does not occur automatically, but requires effort and investment. The notion of 'capital mobilisation', which focuses on how capital is actually formed, directs our attention to people's strategic, pragmatic and affective

investments through everyday practices, oriented to the acquisition of capital (Devine 2009). In this context, Bassani (2007) argues that resources must first be mobilised in order for individuals to benefit from their presence: it is this mobilisation of resources that creates capital. Moreover, any form of capital not only directly affects wellbeing, but also indirectly through the mobilisation and formation of other forms of capital (Bassani 2007).

This paper builds on these theoretical considerations by examining young people's experiences of and pathways into a UK sport volunteering program through a critical lens. It focuses analytical attention on the formation and mobilisation of different forms of capital that shape their volunteering journeys.

## **Methods**

This research investigated the experiences of participants in a sport volunteering program based in a UK city. The program was purposively selected due to its stated objectives, its relatively large size (more than 150 young volunteers), and its reputation as a successful formal volunteering initiative. The program's vision is to develop the next generation of city leaders. It has three stated aims: to develop social cohesion between diverse individuals, to raise aspirations in young people, and to provide meaningful opportunities for young people to develop skills and competencies. Program participation lasts for two years in conjunction with UK General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) between the ages of 15 and 16, with the option of continued participation if students proceed to further education.

At the time of data collection (2011-2012) approximately 150 young people participated in the program. They were selected on the program through nomination by staff members from a feeder leadership academy in the city. The leadership academies ran in conjunction with the Youth Sport Trust's (now defunct) Step into Sport Program (SSP). SSP

was a national framework across England aimed at providing structured pathways and promoting leadership and volunteering opportunities for young people in sport. The leadership academies trained and mentored young leaders in helping run school sport festivals and competitions, and provided placements within local sports clubs and sporting facilities across the city. Some facilities hosted regular regional and national sporting competitions. Once recruited onto the program, volunteers are offered various volunteering opportunities within the city. Volunteering opportunities are grouped into four categories: school sport (e.g., helping with after-school sport activities), community volunteering (in local sports clubs), one-off events (district netball/football tournaments requiring umpires) and major events.

A qualitative research approach was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experience of the sport volunteering program. Data collection comprised three components over a 12-month period. The first component involved 30 semi-structured interviews on a one-on-one basis with young people engaged in the program. The interviewees were aged 16-18. There was a balance of males (n=15) and females (n=15) in the sample, which was representative of the volunteer program and the city's demographic. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were held in a mutually convenient location, at either the program offices or the local university. The interviews were conducted around key volunteering events and training days to provide a manageable way of collecting data among under-age participants. The second component consisted of two one-hour focus groups with program participants aged 16-18 who had been selected to volunteer at the London 2012 Olympic Games. Eight young people participated in each of the focus groups. The focus groups were at one of the Olympic venues in London where the young people were volunteering. The final component involved semi-structured interviews with two program staff members who had been interacting with the participants on a regular basis. The purpose



of this final component was to gather contextual data on the program to enable contextualisation of the accounts and perspectives offered by the participants.

Participants were recruited for the study through information sessions, advertisements and consultation with staff members. Prospective participants were given an information sheet that explained the aims, nature and expected outcomes of the study, as well as the nature and conditions of participation. The support of the sport volunteering program was invaluable to the study in light of child protection and safeguarding procedures, minimising any concerns that the young people or their parents or carers may have had. Program staff and parents were kept informed about the times of the interviews, but anonymity was ensured by allocating a participant number and not disclosing to program staff which young people were being interviewed.

The interviews and focus groups were recorded with the permission of participants and transcribed verbatim. The data were entered into NVivo 11 software and analysed using thematic analysis techniques. We examined and coded the data to identify the issues and themes that recurred. This process was not necessarily sequential; as new themes and sub-themes emerged, the observations were compared and the data were re-examined. Divergent or outlier themes and perspectives were also identified through this process.

Full human research ethics clearance for the study was granted by [TEXT REMOVED FOR BLIND REVIEW]. The lead author held a full working with children enhanced disclosure, and had extensive training and experience from the Youth Sport Trust in working with young people.

In the next section, we successively discuss four major themes that emerged from the research: respondents' social, cultural and physical capital; their initial involvement in sport volunteering; selection criteria and access to the leadership academy; and the availability and appreciation of profits and opportunities.

### *Respondents' cultural, social and physical capital*

The social backgrounds of the respondents matter because they shape both how respondents experience their volunteering and the capital they are able to mobilise. The vast majority of respondents had middle-class backgrounds and their parents had professional or semi-professional jobs. For instance, Peter and John's parents were teachers, Marc's father was a doctor, Neela's father was an engineer and Sandy's father was an orthopaedic technician. All participants were socialised into sport from an early age; if not by parents and family then at primary school. Many participants commented that they were encouraged or introduced to sport by their parents or family members, and this initial socialisation into sport was reinforced in school. For example, Richard commented: 'My dad is really sporty so he got me into football from an early age. I got involved in cross country through school and stuff.'

As in Richard's case, the respondents' nuclear family was typically intensively involved in the (re)production of the young people's sports behaviour, enabling them to learn from an early age which sports were suitable for them and develop a sense of their place in these sporting spaces as well as a feel for the game (Stuij 2012; Spaaij and Anderson 2010). In other words, parents were able to create 'empowering socialisation processes' through which their children developed symbolically valued ways of speaking, moving, feeling and thinking as well as social capital (Paulle et al. 2012, p. 85). The sports the young people engaged in were mainstream sports such as football, hockey, athletics and netball, and no participants spoke of 'smart club' (Tomlinson 2004) involvement, such as golf, polo, hunting or riding. The latter are typically high status cultural markers associated with high levels of cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu 1978; Pociello 1995; Wilson 2002).

In addition to cultural and social capital, respondents had acquired physical capital through their childhood involvement in sport. Richard's earlier comment illustrates how his propensity to play sport, which stemmed from his parents, led to his initial sporting involvement and was then nurtured and developed through his school. Playing on sports teams and interacting with athletes and coaches facilitated the accumulation of physical capital through the development of his sporting prowess. Physical capital is developed when the body of an individual is ascribed symbolic value and social status, for example by engaging in sports that cultivate and demonstrate physical skill and ability (Shilling 1991). This type of capital, being good at sport, was valued in Richard's school and in his broader social environment.

Class is important for understanding how Richard and other respondents developed physical capital. Nearly all of them were actively involved in regular extra-curricular sporting activities and clubs. It is important to note that young people have unequal opportunities for acquiring physical capital (Shilling 1991). Its initial accumulation requires an investment of leisure time and economic capital (Wilson 2002). The young people in this study all had social and economic resources available to accumulate physical capital, such as transport to and from clubs/venues and parents who were able to pay for their membership fees, sporting equipment and clothes. These resources allowed the young people to be heavily involved in organised sport from an early age. As David highlighted:

Well I started playing rugby after the World Cup in 2003. I played football like everybody did when I was 3 or 4 years old, my dad ran the football team so I played for that, and I also do allsorts at school; basketball, hockey, allsorts really.

Like Richard, David's early sporting involvement was encouraged by his father, and his involvement with several sports both in and outside school enabled him to develop physical capital. In David's case, parental involvement was highly significant: his father managing the football team he played in.

The young people's physical capital only had value in a particular field: the field of physical education (PE) within their respective schools or colleges. The field of PE is a 'structured system of social relations between the educational authority, PE teacher educators, [National Curriculum] PE writers, individual school administrators, PE teachers and PE students' (Hunter 2002, p. 176). Within this field, physical capital is valued by PE staff and teachers and by students' peers, and operates as a key factor in the selection process for sports teams.

The young people did not just demonstrate previously acquired physical capital. Their cultural capital, accumulated during childhood and early adolescence, had value outside the sporting field and in the classroom. This cultural capital contributed to their selection on the sport volunteering program. Young people had developed leadership skills, organisational qualities and communication skills through their sporting involvement and interaction with other young people (cf. Bailey 2006). These qualities and competencies were valued and considered desirable for volunteering by PE staff and other teachers in the students' schools or colleges. This draws attention to the ways in which the young people's social, cultural and physical capital shaped their access to and experience of volunteering in sport. It is to this issue that we now turn.

### *Initial involvement in sport volunteering*

All of the young people interviewed reported that they were initially asked by PE staff to volunteer. This invitation was based on the young people demonstrating the 'right' forms of cultural and physical capital within the field of PE in their schools or colleges. When asked if they would have chosen to volunteer had they not been invited to do so by their teachers, the majority of those interviewed responded 'no', arguing that they viewed being asked to volunteer as a reward. While, as shown below, the young people recognised the value of volunteering, getting involved initially was often a spur of the moment decision in response to a request from a teacher, which points to the serendipitous opportunities that can trigger young people's engagement in volunteering (Holdsworth 2010).

The perceived reward of volunteering can be conceptualised as a pathway for the young person to enter the field and accumulate and mobilise various forms of capital. Sean described this reward as follows:

It makes you feel good that you've got some sort of recognition to go on [the volunteer program], which is seen as really good. I think that's a good thing, because it shows that you've got that opportunity, which means you must be doing something right and good.

Sophie echoed this sentiment by stating that the individual approach to the recruitment of volunteers in her school, as opposed to a general recruitment approach open to everyone, was seen as positive: 'Yes, I think it needs to be more individual as well, because you have been noticed, and if you have been asked, then you feel like you have got that talent.'

This reward – the opportunity to develop further social and cultural capital through volunteering – was not extended to all young people to the same degree. Respondents often considered those less engaged in the school or sport setting as ‘less deserving’ of this opportunity than ‘high-performing’ students. When asked whether volunteering could be used to engage those ‘at risk’ or those with limited resources for volunteering (e.g. time, family support, educational attainment), participant Emma stated:

Yes it can be a tricky one, as you don’t want to be like, people who are naughty you can have this thing and opportunity, this really cool thing. Like why should a naughty person get treated like all good and everything and we do everything right and they get the opportunities too?

Several participants offered similar accounts of other young people, describing them as ‘the naughty ones’. The young people in the sample identified that the volunteering opportunity allowed access to the field, and thus an opportunity to develop capital, in particular cultural capital in the form of valued experiences, coaching qualifications and so forth. If those less engaged or supposedly ‘naughty ones’ were offered the same volunteering opportunities, this would, in a sense, reduce their symbolic value for the more privileged students. A program staff member explained how those identified by participants as ‘the naughty ones’ were never asked to volunteer on the program:

The way it started originally it was much an elite leadership academy, where people were nominated by their schools, they came to a selection day at the EIS and they delivered a session, watched by the staff, this was before I was involved, and they were pretty much handpicked. Now, that was probably a bit too elitist particularly

now we are a charity, there are certain criteria you need to meet to enable it to be accessible by everyone.

However, engagement with the program beyond fieldwork found that the selection criteria did not change and still favoured young people with higher levels of cultural capital. This was discovered through follow-up conversations with staff and student volunteers.

This finding is particularly revealing when compared to studies that address the use of sport to assist disadvantaged youth to accrue capital. The selection criteria in programs that target the latter are inversed: young people are recruited onto such programs because they are considered ‘at risk’ and lack the social and cultural capital that is perceived to be needed to successfully undertake the volunteering tasks offered by the program discussed in this paper (e.g., Spaaij 2009; Haudenhuyse et al. 2012; Spaaij et al. 2013), or to offer them a deliberate, structured opportunity to develop capital (Farooq et al. 2013). Put differently, whereas the program examined here focuses and builds on young people’s perceived *assets* and *efficiencies*, sports programs that target marginalised youth typically emphasise their *vulnerabilities* and *deficiencies*.

The relationships between PE staff and students were prominent in discussions on how the young people initially came to volunteer. Young people who helped PE staff with lunch-time and after-school sport activities alleviated the pressures on PE staff, and essentially engaged in an apprentice-style placement. In this informal apprenticeship, PE staff mentored young people by offering them advice and information on their coaching skills, sport specific techniques, and how to plan and deliver a lesson or coaching plan. In some instances, the PE department financed young people to take up leadership and coaching courses, child protection and safeguarding training, and first aid training. The informal apprenticeship also offered participants’ opportunities to connect with other young people

who shared their passion for sport and had similar academic and social backgrounds. Other opportunities to volunteer included helping out at feeder schools and their sports days, after-school activities and sports clubs. Student support roles consisted of helping teachers and coaches and organising younger children in activities. After approximately one year of volunteering in their local schools and communities, young people were then given the opportunity to be selected for a leadership academy, ran by the local school sport partnership. This leadership academy proved to be a gateway for the volunteering program that participants in the study were recruited from. It is to this gateway that we will direct our attention in the next section.

### ***Gaining access to the leadership academy***

After volunteering in their local schools, the young people were recruited into a sports-based leadership academy. Their narratives indicate that possessing, and being able to mobilise, cultural, social and physical capital were critical (informal) selection criteria that served as a kind of social sorting mechanism for regulating access to the academy. As noted earlier, the four leadership academies in the city provided structured volunteering and leadership opportunities for selected students, in direct association with the now defunct Step into Sport Program. The main opportunities included coaching roles within local schools, officiating, and organisational support for school sport festivals and competitions held by the SSP. The SSP academy also provided the option for young people to take on non-active roles, such as providing administrative support. Many coaching and officiating positions usually required some playing background, although one of the female participants in the sample, Sandra, did not come from a playing background. She had a passion for sport as a spectator, and discussed in her interview how it was refreshing for her to be able to take on roles that did not



require playing experience as a prerequisite. For example, when the National University Sport Championships were held in the city, Sandra was able to volunteer by providing administrative support with the scoresheets and competition data. This was identified by staff as a novel way to engage volunteers who did not actively participate in sport and to increase youth participation in volunteering opportunities in sport.

Recruitment for the SSP leadership academy began with young people being identified and nominated by PE staff within their local school or Sports College. Most participants offered broadly similar explanations as to why they were originally nominated for the academy. This was then later explored in interviews with program staff members. John, a young male participant, articulated the criteria as follows:

The selection process for that was, someone that was doing well at school, reasonably well academically, and was really committed and driven in sport, and that's what the teachers, well they chose two people, me and another girl at the same level as me in her sport, it was my skill at sport and as well my commitment to school that helped me get on.

John's comments indicate that the main criteria centred on both academic and sporting ability, as forms of cultural and physical capital. In a similar vein, a program staff member stipulated that each school 'pick their 10-12 best'. This was echoed in John's comment that he and another girl similar to him were 'chosen'. Further, when asked to offer some clarification on selection criteria, the staff member explained that key factors included enthusiasm and passion, a willingness to get involved with a variety of activities, and the ability to lead. It was also identified that there was slight competition between the leadership

academies with regard to their reputation, identified earlier which meant upholding a strict selection criteria. The below exchange with a program staff member illustrates this:

Q: You said they [SSPs] might not nominate people as it would look bad on them and the school. Why is that?

P: Because they have a reputation to uphold as well, and even more so now they are separate entities, they are all private organisations. They don't want to let people down and they need to be seen to be working in a way that provides opportunities for people to develop to a standard that the other [leadership academies] are working to. Kind of benchmarking each other in a way.

It was suggested that some academies were reluctant to risk sending a volunteer to the program in case they let the academy down. Letting the academy down was characterised by not being a good volunteer and having to be asked to leave the program, or demonstrating undesirable qualities such as being unpunctual, lacking ability or interest in the volunteering activity, or not performing the specified tasks to a high standard. Young people with lower levels of cultural capital were therefore not invited to participate in the program, through fear on the part of program staff that they might negatively affect the reputation of the SVP.

The young participants were aware of the exclusivist nature of, and the selection process involved in, the program. As Sarah reflected: 'I guess it's kind of elitist.' The sport volunteering program had a prominent reputation in the local community and at sporting events across the city. The exclusive nature of the program and the plethora of unique and exciting opportunities were highly valued by the young participants. Several participants explained how their peers ascribed value to the program. For example, Joanna stated:

People from school, like if I said I'm volunteering from school that I'm volunteering at this event they would be like oh right, where as if I said I'm volunteering with [the program] they'd be like 'Oohh'.

The choice of language in 'oohh' provided by Joanna was offered in a tone that portrayed reassurance and value placed on naming the program, as if the name of the program held particular significance. The program had acquired this reputation over the years due to its presence at major sporting events in the city and the provision of high-calibre enthusiastic volunteers to these events. This was echoed in an interview with a program staff member who stated that a key aim was to develop and train the next generation of city leaders. Over a period of two years, young people invested in the accumulation of cultural and social capital through volunteering within their schools and respective SSP leadership academies, in order to enter the program and have access to the available profits.

#### *Availability of profits and opportunities to accumulate capital*

In the narratives of the respondents, volunteering is a positive and meaningful experience that affects young people in significant ways. Their experiences indicate the role that volunteering can play in a young person's life, at a time during adolescence in which they navigate a complex challenges such as puberty, schooling, developing friendships and fitting into peer groups (Larson 2006). Each young person spoke with pride and passion of their volunteering experiences and reported a range of positive outcomes they received from their participation in the program. Once a young person was recruited into the program, they received access to unique and prestigious volunteering opportunities. Sam summarised the positive outcomes of his three years in the academy in a pertinent analogy:

Almost like a portfolio, as in what you do, the experiences you get, which you obviously put in your university applications and stuff, and whatever you do, jobs etc. That's like a positive, and enjoyment, meeting new people, for people that might not be socially good, if you understand it helps as in because basically if you don't talk to someone then they will talk to you, as in I could sit in a room, and never met them before, and don't say anything then someone else will say the first word.

Sam's reference to a 'portfolio' of benefits strongly resonates with Bourdieu's (1986) aforementioned conceptualisation of capital.

Some participants reported that they were able to mobilise various forms of capital and convert these into economic capital in the short or longer-term. For example, Michael stated that he had found a part-time job in a local restaurant through another volunteer. Through his volunteering experience – itself a function of cultural capital – he was able to leverage his newly acquired social capital and convert it into economic capital by securing part-time employment. In addition to creating employment opportunities for themselves, other opportunities to invest in economic capital occurred when participants used their cultural capital in the form of valued experiences, qualifications and credentials on university and curriculum vitae. Further, some participants in their final year of college spoke of how they would be using their experience to secure part-time employment to help finance their studies, in the form of coaching and umpiring.

The benefits described by Sam and Michael reflect the positive outcomes that each young person reported in the interviews. Further, the young people expressed the uniqueness of the opportunities given to them by the program; for example, they proudly echoed that other young people did not receive the opportunity to volunteer at 'massive sport events'. The

young people spoke of several personal developments, specifically confidence, communication, time management and sport-specific skills such as coaching and officiating. They placed particular emphasis on friendships and social networks provided by other young people who were also on the program. They spoke of the program as a family, albeit a somewhat exclusive family. For example, James argued:

Yeh, [the program] increases your social networks massively, and I don't want to sound cheesy or anything, but it is like a big family, and these volunteering opportunities just widens that chance to see your cousins or something, and you get to see everyone from [the program] on a monthly basis, whereas you might not have done if there wasn't these opportunities that were given to us.

Many of the participants spoke of friendships that arose with other sports volunteers from initially volunteering at their secondary schools. The creation of new friendships with like-minded young people outside their local schools was something new to many and an exciting prospect, offering the opportunity to embark on new social adventures in the city. It also meant the opportunity to join a new network and hear of new opportunities and to develop their cultural capital.

In relation to the wider contexts of active citizenship and NEET in which youth volunteering is discursively positioned, a number of young people stated how volunteering had taught them valuable 'life lessons' including respect for and tolerance towards those different to themselves. For instance, Harriet explained how volunteering meant she was tested to work outside her comfort zone, which in the process taught her valuable insights about difference. Working at a Disability Swimming Championships, she interacted with athletes with a disability, something that she had not done before. Harriet stated:

It was like a disabled swim meet so it were [*sic*] like, it was good to like see people do stuff you normally wouldn't usually end up talking to people and things like that. I met a lot of new people but I think I was a bit out of my comfort zone at first 'cause it was like my first event. And people like giving me false legs and things, so it were [*sic*] a bit weird at first.

The majority of participants discussed the significance of volunteering at the Disability Swimming Championships, stating how it made them work outside their comfort zone and gave them a sense of humility and respect for the athletes. One female participant expressed that it had affected her on a personal level, leading her to do more volunteering with athletes with a disability.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This paper has examined young people's journeys and mobilisation of capital in a sport volunteering program in the UK. The young people reported that they experienced, or could experience, a number of benefits through engagement in formally structured sport volunteering, including personal and professional competencies and increased social networks. The perceived benefits accrued through sport volunteering were akin to 'a portfolio of evidence' which could be used to gain access to higher education and employment opportunities. The young people who pursued the volunteering opportunities examined in this paper often did so with the prospect of accumulating capital in mind. Research exploring young people's motivations to volunteer in sport is scant, but recent work suggests a trend toward a more reflexive and individualised form of volunteering characterised by self-interest

rather than altruism (Hustinx, Cnaan and Handy 2010). This paper presents some evidence for this development, insofar as the majority of young people in this study volunteered for their own personal interest: they sought to develop new skills or considered it beneficial for their future. Most were aware of the profits available within the field, in this instance the opportunities and benefits they could potentially derive from volunteering in general and from the sport volunteering program in particular.

These findings indicate that the young people in this study accepted the dominant discourse that volunteering is a positive experience and will benefit them, specifically with regard to their cultural capital and employability. This conclusion resonates with Holdsworth and Quinn (2011) who challenge the ‘normalised assumption’ surrounding student volunteering as a win-win situation for all involved. The young people in our study most likely accepted the dominant discourse that ‘volunteering is a good thing’ because the volunteering program reinforced and promoted their engagement as beneficial for their future, and highlighted the prestigious nature of the program. Further, sport volunteering is championed by organisations, and in this case the volunteer program, by providing participants with access to major sporting events and to the development of transferable skills such as leadership, coaching and communication. The young people also displayed an awareness of the symbolic capital and prestige that accrued from being invited to the program. Yet, at the same time, our data suggest that the impact the young people thought they had on their community and on other young people was also a factor in sustaining their involvement in sport volunteering over time.

Our findings extend previous research by showing how youth sport volunteering can act as a form and site of privilege. In contrast with sports programs that specifically target marginalised youth (Farooq et al. 2013; Spaaij et al. 2013), previously acquired capital strongly influenced the young people’s ability to gain access to the sport volunteering

program and attendant development opportunities. PE staff and other teachers in schools played a major role in this process by positively reinforcing the value of the desirable qualities and competencies students were seen to bring to the volunteering program. As such, the structures and practices surrounding sport volunteering for young people favoured students with high levels of cultural and physical capital, and exposed them to additional opportunities that were less accessible to other students. The participants valued this exclusivism and justified it by noting that young people who were 'less deserving' should not have equal access to beneficial volunteering opportunities.

The results indicate that a more critical understanding of youth sport volunteering is required; one that recognises that sport volunteering can reserve the practice of active citizenship to privileged youth. It can be argued that if youth sport volunteering is to fulfil its promise as a vehicle for active citizenship and youth empowerment, more opportunities need to be made available to those who could benefit the most from engaging in the types of sport volunteering examined in this paper. This involves the challenge of aligning young people's varied needs and expectations with institutional practices (Holdsworth and Brewis 2014). Our findings as well as our conceptualisation of capital as a scarce resource suggest that engagement in volunteering does not mean every young person would benefit, particularly when volunteering is forced upon them (Holdsworth and Brewis 2014; Farooq et al. 2013). Enabling more young people to benefit in a variety of ways from volunteering in sport would require the provision of a range of different routes in accordance with their varied needs and aspirations (Holdsworth and Brewis 2014), and hence critically addressing the kinds of social sorting mechanisms identified in this paper, such as the informal selection criteria and the way some forms of capital are symbolically valued over others.

This study focuses on a particular form of youth sport volunteering – a formally structured program – in a particular location (UK) at a particular time (2011-2012).



Considering the diversity of sport volunteering activities in which young people partake, the study's results are not believed to be capable of generalisation to other forms or sites of youth sport volunteering, such as community sports clubs or major events. The aforementioned similarities between the findings of this study and previous research suggest that the issues discussed in this paper have relevance beyond formally structured youth sport volunteering programs. Further research could explore whether similar patterns of capital mobilisation can be found in other spheres of youth volunteering. The pathways into, and social dynamics of, these settings should be critically examined, particularly in relation to the way they interact with young people's resources and social locations.

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