

Developing the Basketball Community: Supporting Outdoor Basketball Courts Social and Community Interactions (UK)

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ABSTRACT

Participation in informal sport practices (such as pick-up basketball) has been demonstrated to have positive impacts on essential life skills, such as confidence, communication, resilience, and teamwork. However, an essential feature in supporting and sustaining participation in sport is the quality of the facilities that participants can practice upon, a factor that is more pronounced for informal sport practices. Utilising a qualitative methodological approach and employing semi-structured interviews (n=22), this paper examines the impact of a series of basketball court renovations that were undertaken in London (United Kingdom) on the development of basketball-focused outcomes (e.g. skill development) but also on wider individual and community development. Findings revealed that the court renovations, and the free access to play on them, not only enabled basketball players to enhance their skills, but also supported the benefits of physical activity on physical and mental health, while creating opportunities to develop and broaden social networks.

Keywords : Basketball community; outdoor basketball courts; social and community interactions

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INTRODUCTION

Recent research into informal sports practice has shown the potential to develop essential life skills such as confidence, communication, resilience, teamwork and sustained goal achievement (Grossman et al., 2014; Foley et al., 2022). In particular Bolter (2010, p.29) discusses “coaching for sportsmanship” and/or moral development as a substantial derivative to sport. There is a promise of character development via sport proving an amoral blueprint on which individuals will encounter both opportunities to thrive, and circumstances to fail. Specifically, Erdozian, 2012 argues that sport allows situations whereby group goals may be valued over individual ones, thus creating a culture of unified commitment - following a collective hope that through co-ordination, communication and self belief, the achievement of such common goals may be actualized for the betterment of the group. Of note, Erdozian

(2012) comments that developing this understanding of group-working and self-management involves the skill of discipline through controlling controllables and, even more so, calculating risk in decision making.

This paper aims to develop awareness of the transferable skills and character development that can occur through the regular use of outdoor basketball facilities via participation in unstructured and informal basketball related physical activities. In contrast to traditional classroom based learning methods, an increased interest in non-formal and informal educational settings for essential life skills development (both for children and adults) has featured in the sociology of sport research landscape (Valiente et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2021). These innovative mediums are at the forefront of alternative avenues to provide emotional and instrumental support, as well as engendering aspirational qualities of young people who may be considered within an at-risk category of becoming marginalized (Morgan, 2011). Research demonstrates that when a young person is marginalized, the risk of disengagement from formal education increases, often resulting in the individual exiting the system completely and engaging in illegitimate spheres, anti-social behaviour and developing increased potential to become active in crime and substance misuse (Jansen et al., 2006). We argue that through the strategic and purposeful court renovations, it is possible to underline the value of informal sport settings within wider society, and illustrate the need to support their place in community life to support both individual and group health and character growth.

A significant body of research has evidenced the medium of sport as a mediating and a moderating protective factor against developing poor character (Hartman et al., 2006; Eitle et al., 2003; Nichols, 2010); often with purposeful and positive behaviour change being a critical point of investigation. Explorations into the impact involvement in sport can have on improving the physical health and subjective wellbeing of people (across the lifespan) has generated a plethora of research, often exhibited through community focused projects combining participation with sport as a conduit for training, employment or education within marginalized communities (Crabbe et al., 2006; Morgan et al., 2021). Consequently, sport can be exploited as a means to entice individuals to engage in self-development practices, whilst simultaneously presenting novel opportunities to create a social-network that could provide a variety of positive influences to becoming a productive member of society (Fogle, 2014). Thus, by supporting the development of sport in diverse communities, the positive outcomes and outputs associated can be experienced much more broadly and widely in society than simply to the immediate community. Of note to our paper and explorations into the site/space on which sport is delivered, Coutre- Wilhemy et al. (2021) and Dagkas and Stathi (2007) underline the strong relationship between healthy lifestyle habits and the existence of accessible sport / activity facilities developed within neighborhoods. For example, Chepyator-Thomson et al. (2010) argue that when local authorities support the creation of playgrounds and recreation facilities near school areas, this has substantial influence on encouraging young people to develop active lifestyles by seeking out and using such spaces. Furthermore, Lee et al. (2015) evidenced that developing communities abundant with maintained, safe and welcoming green spaces (i.e. parks and sports grounds) contribute significantly to developing lifelong physical activity habits used in everyday living. Without doubt, sport is an exceptional tool for physical and mental health development; but the degree to which the physical environment upholds that development is an academic line of inquiry in our project. To what extent does the renovation of an outdoor basketball court serve to enhance the power of sport?

Studies adopting a Critical Race Theory lens regularly highlight the othering and unjustified criminalization of BAME (Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic) communities (Delagado and Stefanacic, 2023). As such, and as underlined by Coaston (2019), the tendency of local authority initiatives (sporting or not) to focus solely on employment outcomes for BAME communities -

primarily as a deterrents of developing anti-social behaviours - are far too simplistic, often failing to both acknowledge and work through the complex intersectionalities which can influence societal conditions such as meaningful employment. Kallio and Honkatukia (2022) argue that a propensity to focus social inclusion programmes uniquely on employment as a determinant of illegitimate behaviours can, in fact, be counter-relatable – often pushing marginalized people deeper into spheres of marginalization by othering them further within a system for employment developed and upheld on a meritocracy of Whiteness. To evidence, in 2019 the Trade Union Congress evidenced BAME members of British society are twice as likely to be under what is considered ‘precarious employment’, for example agency or zero hour contracts. Of paramount consideration is that the link between academic success and employment is so entrenched within a structural inequality, it often prevents marginalized groups from meaningfully engaging in working environments, practices and cultures (Morgan and Parker, 2017; Cheng et al., 2006; Whittaker, 2010). Furthermore, developing alternatives can prove problematic if the focus on formal measurements of achievement, attainment and success – both in academia and employment – bares ignorance of such factors of identity and the negative internal reflection of youths who are struggling to attain success in such fields (Morgan and Parker, 2017). Thus, the development of informal mentoring relationships which can incorporate mutual trust, reciprocity, and respect (Rose et al., 2012) have been shown to deliver the greatest opportunity for social mobility. Research supports that sport can be a fertile space for such relationships to form and blossom (see Morgan and Bush (2016) for an exploration of such projects within community sports clubs). Coalter (2013) further explains that developing a strong interpersonal relationship between a trustworthy adult (for example a sports coach) and a young person can be critical to moderating and mediating aforementioned issues pertaining to social exclusion for at-risk youths. Indeed, Frederick et al. (2023) found that the probable adversity presented to at-risk youth can often germinate complex issues in adult life, ranging from substance abuse, mental health concerns and poverty, which can manifest in violent acts towards oneself, and others. In agreement, Anderson (2002) discusses regularly evidenced contributors to at-risk youths such as delinquency and alcohol and substance mis-use, and even more so if such behaviours are observed in the household (and more so in single parent households). Research into legitimate and sustainable outlets to disrupt such behaviours explicitly draws on role of non-familial adults (in formal and informal settings) such as social workers, youth workers, teachers and sports coaches; illuminating the significant influence that can be harnessed from pro-social community networks (Frederick et al., 2023).

In 2020, Sport England reported that since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, only 19% of children (5 - 18 year olds) in the UK are regularly reaching the recommended World Health Organization guidelines for physical activity levels of 150 minutes per week - down from 47% of children achieving such guidelines pre-pandemic. Should such low levels of physical activity carry into adulthood, the effects on population health could be of significant concern. A plethora of research demonstrates the links between lack of physical activity and the increased risk of developing chronic health conditions (Warburton et al., 2006; Pietiläinen et al., 2008; Katzmarzyk and Janssen. 2004; Blair, 2009; Kohl et al., 2012; Kirwan et al., 2020; Haseler and Haseler, 2022). Sport England’s latest Active Lives Survey shows 1.18 million children and young people are playing basketball on a weekly basis – the highest it has been in five years (Basketball England, 2023), with approximately 26.7% of people (children and adults) regularly participating regularly in basketball are living in areas considered to be of multiple indices of deprivation (Basketball England, 2022). Furthermore, of players licensed with Basketball England, 37.6% of junior (under 18yrs) and 35% of senior players (over 18 years) are from Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. Yet, the Sport England Active Lives Survey (2021-

2022) states that only 2.5% of Black adults and 1.4% of Asian adults are participating in physical activity twice per week, indicating the attraction of Basketball to BAME communities to regularly participate in exercise. Participating in informally organised sports can be a free way for members of any community to support a healthy lifestyle, which Haque (2020) highlights as particularly problematic for BAME families in general (and even more so post COVID-19). Haque (2020) evidences that people of black African and African Caribbean decent risk higher rates of high blood pressure in comparison to other ethnic groups, with Bangladeshis and Pakistanis communities in the UK having the highest rates of heart disease. Of consequence, being a part of a BAME group would increase the likelihood of developing diabetes threefold when compared to white British people (Haque, 2020).

Whilst research exploring and theorizing lifestyle sports has been a relatively new academic development (since the early 2000's), it has predominantly focused on white middle class sport such as surfing and skateboarding (Wheaton, 2004; Spracklen, 2013; Warner et al., 2012). However, literature in the area demonstrates interesting parallels that would warrant identifying basketball as a lifestyle sport also. In fact, Fogle's (2014) work highlights different ethnic approaches and appreciation for pick-up basketball in America. Research shows (e.g. Vieyra, 2016) that basketball was not only seen as a practice within which to relax, seek and develop social relationships and engage in physical activity in a predominately White recreational space, but that connections to status and the creation of reliable real-time social networks could help facilitate employment within a mostly Black basketball community. Indeed, to consider basketball as a lifestyle sport is to acknowledge the strength of physical community, collective expression and social identity that are born from both observing and participating in it (Stamm and Lamprecht 1997; Midol and Broyer 1995). Furthermore, as the use of technology becomes an ever-increasing communication crutch within Western culture, there is a steep decline in the use of public spaces for socialization (Putnam 1995; Costa and Kahn 2001). For example, Sussman et al. (2018) conclude that the increased diagnosis of video game addiction in young children manifests in both an inability, and undesired need, to meet in 'real life', discarding opportunities to form essential social bonds required for adaptive positive development; instead choosing the more convenient option of staying at home to engage with television, computer consoles or tablets. Concerningly, research (Putnam, 1995; Lin, 2000; Coleman, 1988; Borgonovi and Andrieu, 2020) demonstrates that the consequences of such disengagement in socializing in person impacts significant life opportunities - such as improved object health measures, increased financial stability through enhanced employment prospects; and intellectual and cultural expansion through exposure to differing and competing worldviews.

In practice, activities such as sport, and basketball specifically, have the potential to establish, consolidate, and broaden social networks, providing tangible benefits and positive influence at both an individual and community level. Therefore, the 'usefulness' of investing further in outdoor basketball facilities in the UK will be explored through local community narratives on social networks established through informal sporting settings, whilst delivering spaces that further support physical and mental health.

METHODS

The empirical findings featured in this paper are drawn from a study which examined the impact of a series of outdoor basketball court renovations on not only the local basketball community, but also on wider community development. The study was framed by interpretivist paradigmatic assumptions and based upon the philosophical notion that reality is a subjective social construction, experienced in a multitude of different ways. Consequently, the qualitative

approach adopted by the study enabled the research team to extract individual perspectives with greater depth, through personal accounts of lived experience which were bound by the parameters of the study whilst also ensuring that participants could ‘tell their truth’ (Kay, 2009).

The site of data collection was two newly renovated courts in London, England - Clapham Common and Hendon Park. These courts were chosen due to their geographical positioning within largely diverse demographic urban communities, the relative ‘newness’ of the renovations, the combination of stakeholders, and the presence of basketball related programmes and projects that were currently in progress at the sites. The lead author was involved in a month-longer period of immersion within the London basketball culture and communities. For this study, a gatekeeper acted as a central actor to facilitate internal access to the groups and communities relevant to the research (Reeves, 2010). More specifically, the gatekeeper was the founder of HoopsFix Foundation, a national basketball non-profit organisation. HoopsFix Foundation holds regular basketball related events at both the Clapham Common court and the Hendon Park court, and so were well placed to provide insight on suitable individuals to approach for interview. Participants were recruited via opportunistic sampling, and comprised (among others) recreational participants, coaches, and local authority representatives. In practice, participant recruitment occurred organically to capture an optimal level of demographic variance. All participants in the research were aged 18 years or over.

Following University ethical approval, semi-structured interviews were deployed as a method to generate meaningful data, with 22 individual interviews conducted by the lead author between November and December 2022. The interviews lasted between 45- and 60-minutes duration and were conducted at two of the sites where basketball court renovation had been undertaken. Interview discussion topics varied between participants, but a semi-structured interview guide was devised to allow salient discussion topics to emerge during each interview (Kvale, 2007). The interview guide contained a series of open-ended questions organised to explore in detail: i) how the court renovation had supported stronger interaction between and within the basketball community; ii) how the court renovation had impacted on wider community engagement and as a site for community support; iii) the personal value of the court renovations to individual participation and development; iv) perceptions surrounding the necessity of the court improvements/renovations; and v) issues that remained despite the court renovations. Interviews were audio-recorded using a digital Dictaphone and transcribed using an ‘auto-transcribe’ function. In addition, an extensive set of observational field notes and ‘memos’ were produced to create additional depth to the data collection and enable the research team to interweave the concepts in play with reflections on common interview themes (Charmaz, 2014).

Data were analysed using NVivo (Pro 2) software to identify themes which were subsequently organised into two distinct categories (Braun et al. 2016): i) how court renovations had impacted on specific aspects of basketball development, and ii) how court renovations had impacted on wider development of the local community. It is to these two themes that the paper now turns.

DISCUSSION

Impacts of court renovation on basketball skill development

Whilst some of the court users interviewed may be considered novices, there were suitable opportunities for the more experienced players to explain in depth how the renovations demonstrated a legitimate commitment from stakeholders to the development of the sport, likes of which had not been experienced previously. As such, the investment in

equipment that is safer to play on ensures the space is purposeful in skill and game development. As one veteran player noted:

"The rims the rims... Because before the renovation a big guy he goes up for a dunk and he swings and he cracks his...[performs a slicing gesture to the top of his head] he cracks open his skull" (Basketball player)

As argued by Dashper & King (2022), 'the outdoors' is a contested leisure terrain that is both a space for freedom, relaxation and enjoyment, and, at the same time, a site of exclusion, hierarchy and discrimination. Research consistently illuminates outdoor space in low social economic and urban communities (especially those for sport) as being dilapidated, unsafe and not fit for purpose; as if the physical and mental health of those likely to use the equipment are not considered as worthy of investment as more affluent areas. Furthermore, the prejudice that assumes crime, defacing and anti-social behavior will evidently ensue within such areas, rendering investment redundant (Koshoedo, et al., 2015). The above quote covertly explores such inequalities - such as the added value of the rims and the additional bleacher space (despite meeting Sport England guidance for one-meter run-off in sports halls).

"It's good for creating opportunities for people to play. Before people would not have played here because the structure you wouldn't advise people to, and that has an impact on getting more people to go back. I think it [unrenovated/supported courts] does not improve motivation to play." (Basketball promotional fashion team member)

Significant research exists exploring the tacit knowledge gained within the participation and the coaching of sport, yet research into such knowledge generated from basketball specific physical spaces is often lacking. The expression of tacit knowledge may exist fluidly and unarticulated, existing freely yet often hidden; making its value overlooked and unappreciated (Sternberg & Horvath, 1999). However, there is evidence that sports do not always keep pace with the changing demands of youth, thus the voices of modern youth voices are increasingly absent across most sporting structures and bodies (Redelius & Eliasson, 2022). With regard to court renovations (or the lack of), the majority of decision makers are often vastly removed from those using the facilities - a level of abstraction that means tacit knowledge about how the tangible space improves the physical and subjective wellbeing of youth (as known by them) is largely ignored (as the below quote demonstrates):

"I wish they would come and speak to us before because I love the court but I could have said the seatings too close, you know? Although it's great you can chill here the amount of balls people could've saved in games but don't [because it is dangerous]. It's different outside to a hall, but you wouldn't know that unless you were really deep in your game" (Young court user)

As demonstrated by Basketball England's Project Swish (a project to provide new rim nets to neglected courts across England), the need for outdoor courts to be replicas of indoor facilities is paramount. If any outdoor court brings with the promise of a space to develop essential basketball skills, a meaningful outcome becomes increasingly reduced the further an outdoor court is from regulation standards. If the intended purpose of the renovation is to create a facility whereby the users can cultivate an unconscious competence of basketball skills, it is imperative that the space support this. If a child executes skills successfully in an indoor court, but is unable to succeed on an outdoor court due to improper marking, the consequence could be damaging to their overall self-esteem, making it likely that they would cease to use the outdoor facility altogether - a reverse intended outcome of the renovation. As noted by a coach:

“It is important that the courts are marked right and the rims the right sizes because when it comes to the little kids learning and having the confidence to their moves in games, it should feel the same” (Basketball player)

Yet this need for properly marked courts was also a welcome addition to adult players and coaches alike - an often overlooked element of renovation that can pay significant dividends when it comes to developing a lifelong love, and engagement, with the physical aspects of the sport:

“Being outside was definitely a free way and, and open way to work on my game which was very necessary at the time ... and if you go there now you can see you still happening - not just playing but there's some people on the sidelines doing physical exercise together too ... to workout on court even if you can't ball anymore” (Coach)

Many participants with families expressed not having the financial freedom to afford membership to local league clubs (for progressive basketball development) or to local gymnasiums (for generic strength development). Over the past decade, youth studies research has explored the significance of cultural and subcultural spaces, for the development of identity during youth (Blackman, 2005 & 2014; Hodgkinson, 2016), and more specifically in the definition and the division of the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’. The intersection between youth studies and sports sociology is valuable to developing understanding towards why some people spend a significant part of their childhood and teen years participating in sports, in contrast to others who are not privileged to engage in any and all forms of sport and recreational activity. As this court user demonstrates, whilst they are limited to developing athletic capability in so far as the court is their only option, this is not necessarily a disadvantage:

“[there’s] not much else I can do but ... [the number of people] coming is more, so better games, learn different types of basketball from different countries and match up against people from...[abroad]... all backgrounds and all skill levels to come and play here ... you learn the game quicker .. so much more than staying with the same people at a club” (Court user)

This serves to illustrate the value of basketball specific spaces to develop basketball specific skills - the transferability from informal to formal games. This could explain why even in the autumn months, each evening will see 50+ people (not including friends and community members in the seating) regularly attending the Clapham Common court to participate in scrimmages and ball skill sessions.

Nash and Collins (2006) articulate how sports coaching mixes scientific principles, for example motor skill development and physiological data, with psychological and sociological influences - describing this as both the science and the art of coaching. By identifying the value in coaching expertise through the role of tacit knowledge, Renshaw et al., (2019) further identify the necessity for input into developing appropriate pipeline facilities, as well as talent for ‘the game’. Historical decisions to omit expert coaches opinions from facility development may indicate that the planning of outdoor basketball facilities (especially) requires review. Thus, in order to produce effective player pathways for the next generation, the expert knowledge of coaches needs to be harnessed strategically:

“I used to use it [the court] to, to work on my game ... now I have had athlete’s go abroad go to play Division 1 in the USA and this is the court [Hendon] I’ll take them on in summer to do skill work. I’ve been on so many courts and I know what works and what doesn’t for real talent development” (Coach)

The opportunity for community members to develop their basketball skills through a specifically designed renovation signifies for the court to be taken seriously. When treated with respect, users of the court feel connected to a proud feature of their neighbourhood (c.f. Broken Windows Theory as described by Wilson & Kelling, 1982). To conclude this section, the court is both utilized and respected in equal measure, bringing with it a sense of purpose and prestige to two previously disregarded postcodes. The development of basketball skills, health, fitness and intercultural relationships is a testament to the collective positive consequence of such investment.

Impacts of the court renovation on the wider community

In addition to the clear benefits to the basketball community that the court renovations had provided, respondents also indicated how additional benefits had been acquired for users of the courts to connect with and engage their wider community. Mirroring previous research, the data indicated how the courts acted as a 'third space' (Carter, 2022), offering both the Clapham Common and Hendon communities a shared space to socialise and impart a sense of pride and community. More specifically, several respondents noted how the provision of this renovated community space not only supported the pursuit of their passion for basketball, but also provided them with an arena to develop personal qualities such as resilience and social capital (Morgan et al., 2020a). Other respondents noted how the courts acted as a site to build social responsibility and community cohesion, whilst at an individual level enable people to develop self-reliance, promote social relationships and mutual support, and empower individuals and families to solve common social problems (Tony et al., 2019). To exemplify the wider impact that the renovated courts had on both communities and the personal development of users, one individual explained:

"The best thing about the [renovated courts] has been the atmosphere ... There's a lot more development and all backgrounds all skill levels come and play ... I would say for life preparedness I think the usage of it can provide like [an] enrichment programme, providing skills development training [for] some of them". (Court user)

More specifically, the data demonstrated how the renovated courts provided a community facility that offered support to individuals at a social, recreational, and educational level to enhance the quality of life experienced in each community (Tony et al., 2019). At a social level, numerous participants spoke about the courts offering a 'safespace' (Rom, 1998; Tony et al., 2019) where they could practice their basketball skills, but do so while interacting with friends in a neutral location which offered participants the opportunity to express themselves with confidence, and develop, and mature at their own pace (Morgan et al., 2020b). Several coaches who used the courts mentioned how their basketball participation had enabled them to form lifelong personal friendships, a point that other users identified. As one user of the court explained:

"[When I go to the courts] I'm going to see someone, keep relationships, and I think it's really, really, good ... you know, you want to play. It really highlights the place [the courts] has in my community". (Court user)

In addition, on numerous occasions participants outlined how the courts offered a space for "escape" and "release", especially during and within the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, one participant reported how having the opportunity to visit and play on the renovated court at Clapham Common had helped her to "feel back to herself again" and ease her return to work after the pandemic. She continued:

“On a personal level, I was really struggling after lockdown. I found it difficult to get myself back to work and it was a problem... It wasn't until I started to get back to the court really that I started feeling comfortable around people again really ... I know so many people in that community they were happy to see me back ... I could just come down and watch sometimes and it would really get me to the point where I felt back to myself again and up going to work.” (Court user)

At a recreational level, several participants highlighted how the courts offered a space for different forms of entertainment and expression (Tony et al., 2019). During fieldwork, a variety of activities were observed at the courts at Clapham Common, including netball, dance, and rollerblading, alongside private/individual and group fitness classes. Furthermore, there was evidence to suggest how being engaged at the basketball court provided a diversion from other, potentially, anti-social activities, and provided participants with a sense of purpose (Morgan et al., 2021). For example, one of the players commented:

“... for the youth [the courts] bring together a togetherness for the community, [they] don't have to be out there doing different things; they can be on there and be productive ... this outdoor court being renovated, it gives them another place to go so they can stay focused, be productive and go for their goals instead of lingering around and possibly getting up to who knows what”. (Court user)

Along similar lines, a local resident indicated how the open accessibility of the renovated courts was in stark contrast to their own experience as a young person, where sports facilities, and basketball courts in particular, were often locked or located within schools that were not open outside regular educational opening hours. He explained how a lack of accessibility had led to him engaging in anti-social behaviour:

“We used to try and get in the basketball courts in school back when I was a kid and the police used to come and kick us out and I used to say “what do you expect us to do now? If I go and get some eggs and chuck them at a house because I'm bored I'm going to be in trouble aren't I”, [and when we played basketball] we weren't causing any trouble”. (Local resident)

Above all, several participants highlighted how the opportunity to utilise the courts as a space for non-formal education to take place was arguably the most significant wider impact that had occurred since they were renovated. In this sense, there were numerous examples observed where the courts enabled particular subgroups of the community to engage with organised and systematic educational activity, that resided outside of the framework of the formal education system (LaBelle, 1982; Morgan et al., 2021). For example, participants commented on how the courts provided an enjoyable environment for participants to learn through trial and error on the basketball court, but also translate skills around leadership, team working, resilience, and communication to other life domains (Erdozian, 2012; Turnnidge et al., 2014). As one participant observed:

“I learnt how to win there, how to lose there, had some moments in my life. You know when you learn how to win and lose, for example, you can take that into your life when you have a disappointment in your life, how to be disappointed in the right way and how to stand up, and if I had a bad game [I] had people around me to pick myself up and watch people pick themselves up...”(Court user)

Other respondents noted how these episodes of non-formal education provided opportunities to learn important life lessons about cultural tolerance and respect, a feature that was particularly relevant within the multi-cultural communities within which both renovated courts were located. For example, one of the coaches who delivered basketball programmes at the courts revealed:

“There's a lot more places for them [young people] to go to, to express themselves, to communicate with adults as well. And you know going to the park and playing helped me communicate with people, learn about different people from different walks of life”. (Court user)

The courts hosted people of all ages - especially children and young adults. Whilst the study did not garner data from anyone under the age of 18 years (for ethical considerations), there came the opportunity to interview parents and family members using the courts together. Furthermore, whilst some parents were lifelong residents of Clapham / Hendon, others had recently moved to the area(s) for their work - undertaking occupations such as senior level engineers, managerial positions in multinationals, and creative corporate positions. These participants explained how, despite earning well, they would find it too expensive to hire indoor courts to play basketball with their children, and quickly found the renovated courts became victims of their own success. The swelling popularity of the courts ensured interclass and intergenerational crossover, with many parents recognizing the benefits of this, as indicated by one coach:

“The leisure centre because they closed ... so we decided to do it here every Sunday morning... About 50 kids from all over the borough, with parents on the sidelines watching and talking... But after the renovation we saw such a boom and we become so popular with so many families that we got too busy really”. (Local coach)

Sport, with a long history of parental influence on children, provides a unique lens to understand some of the challenges of ‘modern parenting’ - that of a lack of time to dedication to oneself, ones work and ones children (Kay, 2011). Sport presents familiarity for some participants, providing comfortability for first time parents to introduce their children to a controlled activity which remains fun and engaging; on top of this, sharing in an activity or interest of their children may facilitate developing a paternal or maternal bond.

"I moved here for work many years ago, and recently my son has started getting into basketball, so I get to take him down here and introduce him to the game I love whilst I get the chance to brush a bit of rust off myself" (Court user/parent)

As some participants navigated the complexities of new parenthood, the courts actually provided opportunity to facilitate social competence during recreation (Wang and Chen, 2021). With modern parenting being an evolving challenge (McDaniel, 2021; Reeves, 2022), the experience of stress and the challenge of expectation can be paused with many reporting the courts as an ‘escape’. The provision of an opportunity to support the mental and physical health of those challenged for time, is a significant benefit to these particular court renovations, as one user commented:

"I just come down for a bit of exercise it's hard to fit it in being a first-time dad. I just walk her about the park until she falls asleep, then I take some shots whilst I can still keep an eye on her [gestures towards pram]" (Court user/parent)

Seemingly, data revealed the need for more renovated basketball courts within the area (and most likely other geographical locations beyond London); that the value of the court is both known and felt deeply by the community, with benefits manifold. Firstly, the ability to develop basketball players within parameters that they appreciate and can be transferable to indoor organised basketball, and grow the sport from grass/concrete roots. These parameters can be found through consulting with the basketball community in order to cultivate best practice for stakeholders creating such spaces. Furthermore, once these spaces are created,

the sociological value evolves to cultivate friendships/relationships, confidence, team work and resilience which users can take from the court into almost any life circumstance.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to explore to what extent the renovation of two outdoor basketball courts in London, UK influenced the construction of social networks, the development of social capital and the merging of socio-economic standing. Furthermore, it sought to examine social interaction within a diverse community, exploring through the lived experience of community members the importance of developing basketball specific spaces which may support the enhancement of objective health measures, but also the subjective uniqueness of basketball culture to develop pro-social group and individual identities. The findings allow us to reinforce existing research on the facilitative nature of physical sporting spaces as conduits for societal change, yet contribute novel insights on how the renovation of outdoor basketball courts may be of significant value to positive community development.

Our results highlight the potential of public sporting spaces to support individuals to overcome socio-economic backgrounds; championing how status can be both gained and equalised via the development of friendships, confidence, teamwork and even resilience - an evidenced psychological skill for future success (Duckworth, 2018). Importantly, we have demonstrated through the manifold use of the space - from informal opportunities for career progression to formal inclusive fitness classes - the renovation of the basketball courts has mediated the discovery and strengthening of social bonds within and between a diversity of members in two London communities.

Whilst only a small percentage of the data are presented here, the interviews were abundant with tacit knowledge, held by community members utilizing the outdoor courts for both unique and common experience. This included regaining physical and mental health after the COVID-19 lockdowns, developing familial identity and strength, and reimagining social opportunities that transcended simply playing basketball together. As argued by Nash & Collins (2006), the supplementary knowledge gained during court use (knowledge beyond the basketball specific garnered from practice) presents unexplored opportunities of covert community meaning(s), which may be of interest for future research on court renovations. This may include the extent to which families with lower-income may purposefully use the courts to achieve and maintain fitness, to socialize in green spaces and find healthy ways to dispel stress - all of which are evidenced as being more difficult wellbeing practices to engage than for more affluent groups (Koshoedo et al., 2015). Furthermore, a shared investment in sports (participation or teams) provides fertile ground for interrogating social boundaries, and integrating people of different social status into a small geographical community (Carter, 2022). Of novel note, highlighted by data, due to the intergenerational interest in basketball as a sport, there is opportunity to further explore the extent of how renovated basketball courts can become a catalyst for essential family bonding, allowing both parent and child to develop meaningful identities and relationships with one another. Lastly, our data demonstrates that the court renovations provide a safe and familiar space outside of the home for young people to flourish - specifically to take their self care and their self development seriously.

In summary, this study has explicitly leaned into exploring the social value that respondents placed on having a community space that was not only designed to facilitate a safe and professional playing space for basketball, but that also provided a site for connection with and between other members of that community. Undoubtedly, our study would have benefited from a longer data collection timeframe (e.g. 12 months) to provide more detailed insights into the variation of court use through different seasons, and to examine more closely

how demographic factors such as sex, age, race, religion, life stage and financial income impacted on the benefits received. Indeed, from a policy and practice angle, such insights would be critical in determining how future court renovations could be planned, to not only maximize return on financial investment, but also ensure an optimal level of community interaction. Nevertheless, what our study does highlight is the importance of basketball court renovations taking account of local histories, cultural embeddedness and community needs to ensure that the health and wellbeing benefits of informal sport participation are maximised.

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