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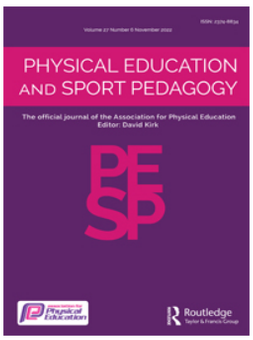

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Rethinking pedagogical practices with care-experienced young people: lessons from a sport-based programme analysed through a Freirean lens

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ABSTRACT

Background: Several studies demonstrate the benefits of socially critical work in sport pedagogy, which value young people's strengths, capabilities, knowledge, and resources. This body of research argues that young people have the agency to analyse their social contexts and to negotiate the forces that impede their choice of possibilities. While advocacy for a more transformative education process through sport has grown over the years, there is little research that aims to explore pedagogical practices with care-experienced young people (e.g. those who have been removed from their families and placed in the care of the 'state').

Purpose: This article draws on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy as a theoretical framework to examine pedagogical practices with care-experienced young people in a sport-based programme.

Participants and settings: This case study took place at a football-in-the-community programme in the West Midlands region of England, which aimed to develop the skills necessary to support care-experienced young people's transition from primary to secondary school. Participants included eight key adult stakeholders involved with the delivery, and ten care-experienced young people.

Data collection/analysis: The research was conducted in two phases to understand the specific pedagogic practices employed within the programme. In the first phase, all adult participants took part in semi-structured interviews designed around their understanding of the programme and their perceptions about what care-experienced young people gained from it and why. For the second phase, observations of the programme were employed as well as a variety of participatory methods with young people such as drawings, mind mapping and photo-elicitation.

Findings: The analysis resulted in the identification of three key themes relating to pedagogic practices: (a) problem-based learning with spaces of freedom; (b) contextualised learning activities; and (c) developing mutual trust and respect. By critically analysing a sport-based programme, this paper highlights how specific pedagogic practices might create spaces for empowering care-experienced young people, and the challenges and tensions in this process.

Implications: We conclude by outlining how a Freirean critical pedagogy could be better utilised for care-experienced young people within sport-based programmes, in order to recognise their knowledge in naming, critiquing and negotiating barriers to their engagement in their sport context.

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Introduction and theoretical framework

Internationally, the number of care-experienced young people is increasing. 'Care-experienced' is a term used to capture the transient nature and experiences of those children and young people who have at some point in their lives, been removed from their family and placed in the care of local authorities, in foster care, a children's home or in an adoptive placement. In England, there were 80,080 children and young people in the care of local authorities as of March 2020 – a 2% increase on the previous year (Department for Education [DfE] 2021). In total, 72% were living in foster-care while 13% were in secure residential settings, children's homes or semi-independent living accommodation (e.g. hostels or flats where staff are employed to provide support and advice) (DfE 2021). This growth in numbers is reflected in the USA, where the number of young people in foster care rose from 414,259 in 2014 to 437,283 in 2018 (US Department of Health and Human Services 2019) while in Australia, figures increased by 18% between 2013 and June 2017 (Australian Institute of Family Studies 2019). There is also international consensus that this population are among the most vulnerable and marginalised, with widespread evidence suggesting continued educational underachievement when compared to the broader population of young people (O'Higgins, Sebba, and Luke 2015; Sebba et al. 2015).

According to the literature, there are a range of factors that contribute to the marginalisation of care-experienced young people. For instance, home and placement instability is thought to contribute to increased rates of exclusion and non-attendance of school and this ultimately disrupts their education more broadly (Harker et al. 2003; Sebba et al. 2015). Experiencing maltreatment, abuse and neglect prior to entering care may impact negatively, while socioeconomic deprivation that predicts entry into care may also explain such marginalisation (Evans et al. 2017). Difficulty dealing with issues related to attachment and trauma – that are influential in shaping learning and behaviour (Dann 2011) – often mean care-experienced young people exhibit challenging or difficult behaviour (Harker et al. 2003). This is problematic because school policies that focus on controlling behaviours (often aimed at those 'at risk' pupils), result in already struggling pupils having their options further reduced (McInerney 2009). As a result, care-experienced young people are more likely to be viewed by schools and teachers as 'alienated' or disengaged, lacking the confidence, self-assurance, motivation and social capital to function effectively in school. Inappropriately, this prevailing discourse tends to reproduce a deficit perspective of care-experienced young people, partly resulting from a lack of awareness and understanding of the realities of their day-to-day lives (Quarmby et al. 2021).

There is a growing interest in developing sport-based intervention programmes to create spaces for social transformation for marginalised groups through critical pedagogy (Spaaij and Jeanes 2013; Wright et al. 2016). The literature suggests that critical pedagogy could increase the effectiveness and sustainability of sport-based intervention programmes by creating spaces for empowering young people (Spaaij and Jeanes 2013; Wright et al. 2016). This body of research has argued the need for strength-based approaches that recognise young people's strengths, capabilities, knowledge, and resources. In addition, the development of sport-based intervention programmes should happen as a collaborative process, instead of a process whereby young people need to 'fit-in' by adopting core values implemented by the programme (Luguetti, Singehebhuye, and Spaaij 2021). To be consistent with critical pedagogy, the creation of spaces for critical reflection on issues of justice, equity, and power relations is also suggested (Spaaij and Jeanes 2013; Wright et al. 2016). Despite the advocacy for sports to overcome issues related to marginalisation, there is a lack of evidence about the positive impact of sports-related settings with care-experienced young people.

To date, relatively few studies have considered the role of sport-based interventions with care-experienced young people (Sandford et al. 2021; Quarmby 2014). Recently, Quarmby et al. (2021) described the stories of three care-experienced young people and the role of sport/physical activity in their lives. They argued that by describing the stories, it provided a counter-narrative to the wider societal deficit discourse about care-experienced young people that permeates the literature. As the

stories demonstrated, while care-experienced young people may face challenging situations, their care status cannot be attributed simply to personal fault, nor are they necessarily troublesome or uneducated (Quarmby et al. 2021). In a similar way, Sandford et al. (2021) have argued that the existing body of research has often drawn more on the voices of adults than care-experienced young people themselves. The authors argued for a more holistic understanding of care-experienced young people's lives and for more thought to be given as to how different stakeholder groups can work in partnership to facilitate access to sport/physical activity (Sandford et al. 2021).

As noted above, while advocacy for a more transformative education process through sport has grown over the years, there is little research that aims to explore pedagogical practices with care-experienced young people. This article therefore draws on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy as a theoretical framework to examine pedagogical practices with care-experienced young people in a sport-based programme. This study represents a move away from a deficit-based approach that would usually focus on what a person or system cannot do or does wrong (e.g. why are care-experienced young people 'failing' in comparison to their peers?). In contrast, it adopts a strengths-based approach and seeks to identify what works in given contexts and therefore poses different questions (e.g. what pedagogic practices support care-experienced young people?). By adopting a Freirean lens, our analysis advocates critical, reflexive educational projects with explicit social transformation objectives.

A Freirean pedagogical lens: dialogue, problem-solving and radical love

Freire (1987) was fundamentally opposed to the 'banking concept' of education; the authoritarian pedagogic practices where teachers simply 'deposit' information (what he or she considers to constitute 'true' knowledge) into their students. In this concept, students are not conscious subjects; they are empty minds 'passively open to the reception of deposits of reality from the world outside' (Freire 1987, 48). Freire viewed this concept as particularly problematic, suggesting that what is 'deposited' is often detached from reality and lacking significance; students become spectators, not re-creators. Hence, the banking concept reflects a deficit view of students as passive objects with little if any autonomy and ability to rationalise and conceptualise knowledge.

In contrast, Freire's critical pedagogy involves ideas of praxis and critical consciousness (*conscientização*[1]), where students and teachers become subjects who can look at reality, critically reflect upon that reality and take transformative action to change that reality. For Freire, liberation is a praxis: 'the action and reflection of students and teacher upon their world in order to transform it' (Freire 1987, 48). To develop praxis, Freire used different approaches such as dialogue, and problem-posing (Freire 1987, 2005).

A liberating pedagogy could only with difficulty be conceived without a profound commitment to dialogue (Freire 2005). Teachers do not consider themselves the proprietors of history, or the liberators of the oppressed; but they commit themselves 'within history, to fight at their side' (Freire 1987, 13). Dialogue is the encounter between students and teachers, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. For Freire, problem-posing means the process whereby students and teachers ask critical questions of the world (questions of material realities experienced one a day-to-day basis), and critically reflect on what action they may take to change their material conditions (Freire 1987). The problem-posing approach requires that teachers and students act as co-investigators. In that sense, the curriculum or programme is built around the themes and conditions of people's lives, allowing learners to reflect on the lives they lead and to ask questions to discover their meaning and value (Freire 1987).

For Freire, dialogue and problem-posing cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound radical love for the world and for people. Dialogue is nourished by radical love, humility, hope and trust (Freire 2005). The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself, because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. As an act of bravery, love cannot be sentimental; as an act of freedom, it must not serve as a pretext

for manipulation. Freire offers a framework that not only challenges the 'status quo' but also articulates a language of hope (Spaaij and Jeanes 2013).

Freire's pedagogical lens has therefore been used in previous studies within sport pedagogy (Spaaij and Jeanes 2013; Wright et al. 2016). Spaaij and Jeanes (2013) considered Freire's work to examine the sport for development and peace (SDP) programmes from their research in Zambia and Brazil. They concluded that SDP initiatives often do not go far enough in providing a truly transformative educational experience for young people. Building on Freirean pedagogy, they outlined a series of general principles about the practical implementation of critical SDP education: (a) the curriculum or programme is to be co-created around the themes and conditions of young people's lives; (b) consider what are likely to be the most effective methods to increase awareness and develop a sense of agency in young people; and (c) the educational process should be directive without being authoritarian or manipulative. Wright et al. (2016) combined the teaching personal and social responsibility (TPSR) model with Freirean principles of critical pedagogy in a sport programme. Participants included eight youth sport coaches who became local trainers. They concluded that TPSR was a relevant approach that combined effectively with the principles of critical pedagogy to foster transformative learning among the participants.

Luguetti et al. (2017a, 2017b, 2021) also considered Freire's pedagogy to co-create an activist sport approach with young people from socially vulnerable backgrounds and refugee-background young people. The approach was designed as a means of listening and responding to young people in order to use sport as a vehicle for assisting them in becoming critical analysts of their communities and developing strategies to manage the risks they face. This activist approach combines key critical elements: (a) student-centred pedagogy is the ability and willingness of adults to listen to young people and respond to what they are hearing; (b) inquiry-based learning centred in action means to engage the young people in inquiry in order to help them better understand what facilitates and hinders their learning opportunities in sport and to imagine alternative possibilities; (c) ethic of care describes that the coaches' role is to show interest in, and respect for, the young people's lives outside of the sport context; (d) attentiveness to the community defines that it is essential to be aware of the problems that the young people encounter playing sports in order to facilitate local actions; and (e) community of sport means that it is necessary to create times for the young people to see other possibilities and this requires collective action on the part of the community.

Hence, Freire's critical pedagogy offers a suitable theoretical framework for rethinking pedagogical practices with care-experienced young people in a sport-based context. It provides a strength-based approach that rests on the political premise that marginalised people may transform their realities through education, research, reflection, and action (Freire 1987, 2001). It emphasises that young people, when given the opportunity, have the agency to analyse their social contexts and to negotiate the forces that impede their choice of possibilities (Freire 1987). While advocacy for social transformation in the sport pedagogy area has grown over the years, there is little research that aims to explore pedagogical practices with care-experienced young people. This paper addresses this research gap and advances these issues by analysing pedagogical practices with care-experienced young people in a sport-based programme through a Freirean lens.

Methodology

The backdrop for this paper is a project that explored how an after-school sport-based programme supports care-experienced young people to develop the skills necessary to help them during the transition from primary school to secondary school.[2] In order to gain insights into participants' perspectives on how the programme works, the project was designed as a single case study. Thomas (2015) suggests that a case study design has the ability to observe phenomenon in its natural environment, employ a variety of different research methods in order to obtain rich description and, takes an in-depth look at relationships and processes. Hence, a case study specifically allowed

for an understanding of young people as they engage in numerous practices and interactions within the specific programme context.

Case study setting and participants

The specific case described in this paper is a football-in-the-community programme associated with a professional football club in the West Midlands region of England. The club's registered charity (henceforth known as 'the foundation') ran a programme on one evening a week, outside of school hours specifically for care-experienced young people in school years 5–9 (ages 9–14), across three separate 10-week blocks that aligned with the academic school year.

The purpose of the programme itself was (a) to support care-experienced young people to develop the skills necessary to aid their transition from primary school to secondary school and (b) enhance their school attainment. To support their transition, the programme sought to improve skills such as resilience, teamwork, organisation and independence as well as enhance their literacy, numeracy and communication skills. More importantly, the programme was developed to bring care-experienced young people together to enable them to 'see' that they were not the only ones 'in care' and, to developed positive relationships between adults and young people. The programme was therefore student-centred, consisting of three 10-week blocks designed around different themes from sport and youth-culture. This paper draws specifically on the second of three 10-week blocks that used football as a means of developing the skills noted above.

In exploring the after-school sports-based programme, the research was split into two phases, with different participants engaged in each phase. The first phase included eight key adult stakeholders involved with the foundation and local authority who supported the programme (see Table 1 below). The second phase engaged with ten care-experienced young people aged 10–12 years old (five girls and five boys) who fulfilled the following criteria: (a) at the start of the study were 'in care' of the local authority and also on roll at a nearby school; (b) were in year 6 and about to make the transition from primary to secondary school, or had recently moved to secondary from primary school; and (c) they attended the programme delivered by the foundation at the time of the research being conducted.

Data collection

Ethical approval was obtained from a university ethics board and at a local authority level. The foundation acted as the primary gatekeeper and sent information letters to all carers informing

Table 1. Key adult stakeholders characteristics.

Name	Gender	Age	Role	Description
Natalie	Female	40	Education and Inclusion Manager & Assistant Director of the Foundation	Managing, developing and sustaining all of the education and inclusion programmes run by the Foundation.
Mark	Male	25	Foundation Looked-after children Coordinator	Responsible for planning, delivering and recruiting participants to the after-school sports programme
Lucy	Female	23	Foundation Looked-after children Coordinator	Responsible for delivering and recruiting participants to the after-school sports programme
Katy	Female	52	Head of Looked-After Children and Education (LACE) Virtual School	Raising the educational attainment of children that are in care within the local authority
Sarah	Female	46	Education Development Officer	Working with children and young people aged 3–18 years old to support their educational attainment
Hiten	Male	54	Education Development Officer	Working with children and young people aged 3–18 years old to support their educational attainment
Kieran	Male	17	Programme Volunteer	Care-experienced volunteer who had been involved with the programme previously, acting as a mentor for current participants
Claire	Female	17	Programme Volunteer	Care-experienced volunteer who had been involved with the programme previously, acting as a mentor for current participants

them about the nature of the research. Detailed discussions then took place about the research and particularly issues around consent and confidentiality. With regard to gaining consent to conduct the research, Kendrick, Steckley, and Lerpiniere (2008, 88) state:

> There is the possibility that they [children] have been placed there [in care] because of abuse by their parents, or because there has been a breakdown in relationships in the family. In such situations, it may not be appropriate and in the best interests of the child to approach their parent(s) for consent for the child to be involved in research.

As such, consent was negotiated through the gatekeeper and provided in loco parentis by the foundation manager before individuals were asked to give informed assent in the presence of key staff and carers.

Following ethical approval, the first phase involved all adult participants being invited to take part in a semi-structured interview. We asked questions centred around three main themes: (a) what their understanding of the sport-based programme was; (b) what the experiences of care-experienced young people were involved with the programme; and (c) how did the programme prepare young people for their transition from primary to secondary school? The interview schedule was provided to participants in advance, and interviewees were encouraged to elaborate on their answers through the use of pre-defined probes, in order to maximise the depth and richness of responses. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and with consent were recorded.

For the second phase, observations were initially employed because they were considered part of care-experienced young people's normal routine and still offered a means of engaging with young people that respected their independence, interests and ability to make choices (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, and Bottrell 2015). In total, ten observations were conducted by the first author, each lasting two hours – the duration of each session. These observations focused on the pedagogies of the programme sessions and the young people's interactions with staff, but also helped build rapport between researcher and participants before other data collection methods were employed. Over time, a variety of participatory methods were also introduced. Participatory research methods enable young people to find their voice and articulate what they know and thus, are no longer silenced or rendered invisible in the research process (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, and Bottrell 2015).

Hence, the participatory research methods employed within this study included *drawings, mind-mapping* and *photo-elicitation*. Drawings were considered less confronting than interviews and helped build rapport with participants (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, and Bottrell 2015), while mind-mapping was employed as it allowed participants to organise and illustrate their thoughts and meanings in more visual ways (Buzan 2003). Finally, photo-elicitation allowed participants to take photographs of key features of the programme (and the space in which it took place) before generating a supporting narrative (Banks 2001). Importantly, each method generated several research artefacts that were used as discussion points in follow-up focus group interviews (recorded with permission from participants). It is important to also note that, in an attempt to reduce the power relations, participants were offered some choice over the research instruments and were able to direct (to some extent) the course of their final 'interview', albeit within the overall themes of the research (Kendrick, Steckley, and Lerpiniere 2008).

Data analysis

Data analysis was ongoing throughout the research process with the findings from the first phase (adult interviews) used to inform and develop the focus of later phases of data generation (with the young people themselves). For instance, adult stakeholder's spoke prominently about the space that young people engaged in, which led to the introduction of photo-elicitation in the second stage of the research. Importantly, the artefacts that young people created (e.g. drawings, mind-maps, photographs) where used to prompt discussions in follow-up interviews. These interviews,

along with the observation field notes were all thematically analysed at the end of the second stage of research (Braun and Clarke 2006). Following multiple readings of the transcribed texts by the first and second author, the data were coded with simultaneous memos being recorded. Following this, codes were collated into potential themes before a thematic map was generated. The themes and patterns within the data were identified in both an inductive ('bottom up') and a deductive (theoretical or 'top down') way (Braun and Clarke 2006). The former ensured that themes identified were strongly linked to the data themselves without trying to fit them into a pre-existing coding frame. The latter allowed for a more detailed analysis of some aspects of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006), specifically with regard to Freire's critical pedagogy. The resultant themes were then refined, expanded, or adapted to help tell the overall story.

Findings

Three themes were identified – the first theme explores how the pedagogical practices were based on problem-based learning with spaces of freedom. The second theme focuses on the ways in which the learning activities were contextualised, while the third theme identifies the mutual trust and respect between care-experienced young people and the staff, which helped to create a sense of belonging.

'Each week we do like different problems and have to work out what to do': problem-based learning and spaces of freedom

The first pedagogical practices observed with care-experienced young people were problem-based learning and spaces of freedom. Every activity during the 10-week block was centred predominantly around football and considered a problem-based learning pedagogy. These activities began with young people drawing and creating their own players. They then chose what they looked like, the kit they wore and their key features and characteristics, with subsequent weeks each centring around the players they created (see Table 2):

> As with previous weeks, once the initial task had been set, pupils were given control over how they tackled it. This week the problem posed was to create a healthy food plan for their 'professional football player'. Some pupils worked with staff, asking questions and suggesting ideas. Others used the internet to find out what a healthy food plan might look like and what would be contained within it. From initial conversations, it appeared that this approach was contrary to what they had experienced at school before and allowed them to work at their own pace in solving problems (First author field note entry).

Staff at the foundation were, however, aware that while the purposeful introduction of football-orientated activities may relate well with boys, for some boys and girls, it might not always have the same effect. As such, the young people had the freedom to choose other themes:

Table 2. Overview of weekly activities.

Week	Programme Activity
1	Create a football player
2	Create a player profile
3	Write a persuasive letter to sell their player to a football club
4	Write a 7-day diary entry for their player
5	Design a promotional poster to sell the new kit
6	Create a healthy eating food plan for their player
7	Budget skills using 'Come Dine with Me' as the stimulus
8	Luggage allowance challenge working with weight
9	Scale drawing and budgeting skills
10	Celebration event

> Yeah, some of the girls do like football but some of the girls don't. If they don't, we would relate that to something they do like so, for instance, there's music so then we would just change the focus and instead of it being a football player, it would be a musician. So, they'd have to write a letter to a recording label rather than a football team and then healthy eating would still be the same focus and the same lesson just with a different person (Mark, Foundation coordinator).

There was an awareness from adult stakeholders that these activities helped to engage care-experienced young people, for instance, '*boys come and are not engaged in school and learning but they love football so because of the football element that engages them in the work*'. Moreover, it was evident from some of the young people's responses how much they valued and enjoyed the activities because they could choose and solve the problems:

> Jenny (young person): Each week we do like different problems and have to work out what to do. So, like just the other week we had to imagine our player bought a new house and we had to try and work out what furniture would go in the rooms. I worked with Sarah [staff member] and shopped around at Ikea for some stuff to see if it'd fit.

> Chris (young person): The lessons have been great; you know to sort of make us understand how it works and stuff … doing the players and that have been really fun!

> Priya (young person): When we come here, we get to do new tasks every day and it's good that we don't do the same one everyday cos we'd just get bored and plus you get to meet new friends and … you're just involved with everybody.

In addition to the problem-based learning activities, the young people were provided spaces of freedom, for instance, they were given opportunities and some free-time to play pool, table-football, table-tennis, videogames, and access computers during the programme and the learning activities:

> Ross (young person): He [staff member] lets you move about, the teachers [in school] say sit down in your seat and don't move and you can't talk!

> Mel (young person): Yeah, and like you glue your bum to the chair but here you can move about and here they actually let us talk.

In a daily routine, young people would arrive early and access the computers when waiting for their peers to arrive. The staff would explain the problem-based learning activities at the beginning of the two-hour session (e.g. using a whiteboard and engaging in a discussion). After approximately 30 minutes of engaging in the activities, the young people would have a break and have drinks, and/or play with friends and staff members. The environment happened without restrictions and the young people had choices with regards what to do in the two hours. Freedom and problem-based learning created spaces to help them take ownership over their learning. For instance, one of the staff members commented:

> We're not constantly telling them what to do. They have input in the lessons as well err, don't get me wrong there are rules and there are boundaries that they've got to stay in but they have ownership over what goes on … so every week we're not just saying you must do this person this way, I would say to them right you created your player how would your player react, what would they do, can you find out … they can have the ownership on that lesson (Sarah, Staff).

While a banking model of teaching in schools may position young people as passive objects (Freire 1987), here, they were engaged as active subjects. This is particularly important for care-experienced young people who are often viewed by teachers from a deficit perspective (Dann 2011; Harker et al. 2003) and identified as 'at risk' of failing and so often taught accordingly. However, in the foundations' programme, care-experienced young people were actively involved and challenged to engage in problem-based learning and spaces of freedom.

'It's scary because you don't know what it's going to be like': contextualised learning activities

The second pedagogical practice was that the learning activities were contextualised to those involved. For instance, the activities considered the barriers care-experienced young people face. It was identified that one of the main barriers in the young people's lives (at that time) was the transition from primary to secondary schools. One of the themes identified from the data centred on the perceptions of the forthcoming transition, the worries and anxieties care-experienced young people have and the subsequent barriers to a successful transition. Drawing on data from the mind-maps, drawings and focus group interview, several key anxieties emerged. For instance, the care-experienced volunteers initially recalled how worried they were about their forthcoming transition from primary to secondary schools:

> I wasn't really excited I was more like anxious, a bit frightened … just the whole concept of will I get the same support, will I be able to do the work erm, will I fit in … [and] I was anxious cos I didn't really know anyone at the school that I was going to (Claire - Care-experienced volunteer).

> I think I was scared of new things … I was scared of like changes really err yeah, I just didn't know what to do or anything (Kieran - Care-experienced volunteer).

Kieran and Claire shared anxieties that were consistent in young people's voices about leaving behind friends, meeting new people, and having to make new friends in a new school. Their lived experiences allowed them to engage in dialogue with young people in order to understand their fears and anxieties:

> Wilf (young person): It's going to be upsetting cos I've known my friends for six years now and it's just going to be upsetting moving away and I probably won't be able to see them again cos I'm going somewhere far away.

> Ayesha (young person): The thing with moving to secondary school it's kind of good but bad at the same time cos you're leaving all your friends behind if they're not going to the same secondary.

> Helen (young person): It's scary because you don't know what it's going to be like

> Sally (young person): I'm petrified

> Beth (young person): Cos it's like you don't know what the people are going to be like, but the teachers could be nice or they could be strict.

For care-experienced young people who regularly experience change, another transition may generate memories of past experiences that might have been negative, and so these fears appeared common and were magnified for these participants. There were also fears expressed about being bullied: '*also what happens if people get bullied there and they call you silly names like ugly or monkey face*' (Priya, young person). Interestingly, these fears about being bullied appear much more prominently when students were asked to discuss secondary school as opposed to primary school and seem to stem from stories they hear from others (see Figure 1).

The programme addressed this issue by entering into dialogue with young people. Using the mind-mapping activity as a prompt many of the young people discussed their views of learning (and school) prior to the programme, reiterating common points that lead to them disengaging:

> Priya (young person): It's a bit boring sometimes because you basically … especially literacy it's a bit boring … cos all you do is write it's just not fun to learn.

> John (young person): Sometimes it [school] is just really boring and like not interesting, I don't want to be there.

> Claire (young person): I never really used to like lessons and I never really like paid attention, they used to bore me and so I didn't pay attention in school and didn't think I'd do much.

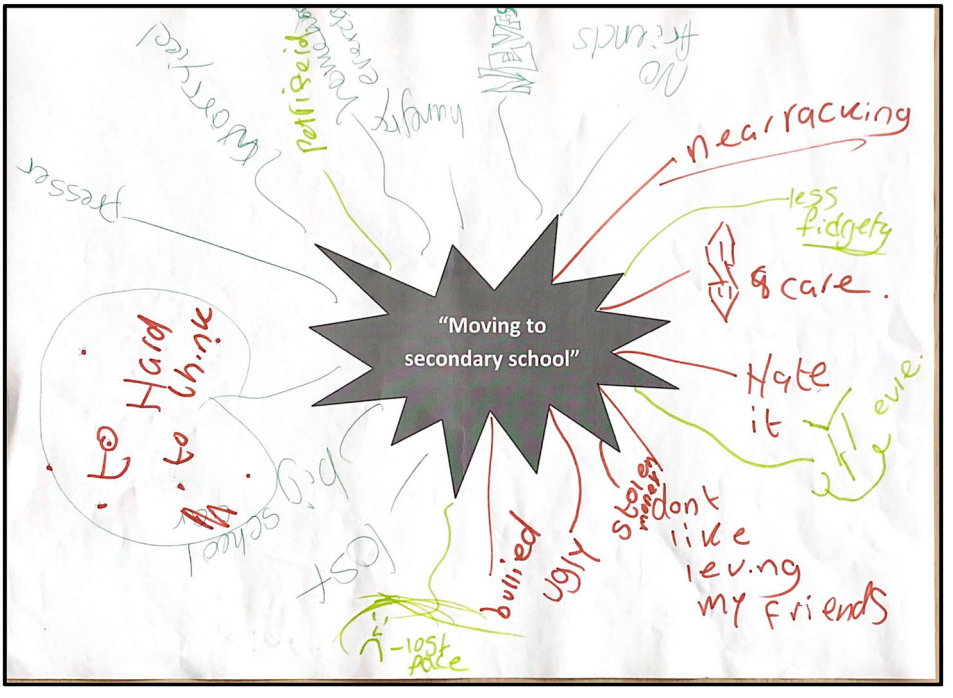

Figure 1. Mind Map.

It was clear from the responses that respondents viewed the process of learning as passive, boring and un-engaging which led to a general disinterest in school. This mirrors Freire's (1987, 2001) notions of the banking concept of education and how it could contribute to student alienation and disengagement. Despite these, predominantly negative views, there was evidence to suggest that engagement with the after-school programme did alter their perceptions of learning in some way. For instance, although one young boy initially recalled how he disliked school, he also identified that aspects of the programme made him re-evaluate: '*It kind of changed how you think learning was like I thought it was boring and here they kind of make it more fun and you realise what you can do*' (Ben, young person). Similar changes in attitudes to learning and school more broadly were reported by another young person:

> It made me, like, I realise now I can do this stuff. Like the maths stuff, I couldn't do it in school and got bored but I've done it here working out what my player can take on a plane and stuff (Rob, young person).

In addition, to entering into dialogue with young people about learning, staff members were available to go with the care-experienced young people to a new school. For example, staff would walk around the school with them. They would go to the school and map up the layout, drawing a map on the school environment:

> I spoke with Priya, Claire and Chris today about their anxieties of moving to a new school, another move in their already mobile lives – but - I was surprised to learn that staff from the foundation had gone with them, individually, to walk around their new school. They did this at quiet times, when students would be in lessons or after the school-day had finished, in order to familiarise them with the layout. Together they told me how they would walk and talk while the staff member drew out the corridors, rooms and general layout on a note-pad that they would then later draw out more fully on A4 paper to help them remember and navigate their new surroundings (First author field note entry).

Staff members would subsequently discuss – in the sessions – young people's feelings and emotions of entering a new school. Evangelou et al. (2008) suggest that a successful transition is

based on pupils demonstrating an increased interest in learning and school. Hence, this programme helped care-experienced young people increase their interest in learning, including their views of learning itself, as well as what they believe they could achieve. The activities in the programme considered the barriers care-experienced young people face and created spaces for dialogue between staff and care-experienced young people.

'Coming together to understand that they are not alone': development of mutual trust and respect

The third pedagogical practice identified was the mutual trust and respect between care-experienced young people and the staff, which helped to create a sense of belonging. By creating a safe environment, the lead member of the delivery staff had the opportunity to engage with young people on a personal level. This staff member was very open, demonstrating a willingness to reveal something of himself to the students in an effort to help redress power relations, earning students' trust and attempting to understand their worlds. This was a key feature of the pedagogical approach: staff respected the young people and their care backgrounds and did not view them from a deficit perspective.

With smaller class sizes this is arguably easier to achieve than in school, yet there was still a conscious effort to build trust and rapport with students. As the Programme Manager identified: '*I think they enjoy coming here because it's not school … They enjoy coming here because of the focus and attention and that fact we build trust with them*' (Natalie, Programme manager). This was also evident in the young people's voices:

> Nial (young person): They [staff] really try to get to know us and that's way different from school.
>
> Helen (young person): We're not treated like a baby here. At school they ban everything but at Thursday Club they trust you not to go on anything you shouldn't.
>
> Sally (young person): You kind of feel trusted when you are here. It's different to school cos they trust you and yeah, I guess I trust them.

Young people also highlighted the differing levels of trust that were afforded in both environments. For instance, in schools, young people reported limited trust from teachers yet at the foundation, staff were perceived to be more trusting. Staff spent time with the young people in the two hours activity. The fact that the young people could choose the activity also allowed the staff to have informal conversation all the time. In addition, staff and volunteers spent time playing with the young people.

A pivotal feature of the programme as seen by both adults and young people alike was that it was different from school. There was a sense from staff that they are not viewed as 'teachers' which helps build rapport and thereby aid programme delivery:

> I think they respect us more because we're not like teachers (Sarah - Staff)
>
> I think they enjoy coming here because it's not school … They enjoy coming here because of the focus and attention span … there are smaller number and more focus on them as opposed to a class of thirty (Hiten - Staff)

The small class sizes enabled more one-on-one support and was vital to the success of the programme. The fact that the environment and setup were also visibly different from school ensures there is no stigma – young people know that staff are not 'teachers' (who may judge them for being 'in care') or social workers.

Generating a safe space for these young people not only supported their continued engagement but helped to develop a sense of belonging which is particularly important for care-experienced young people. Evident from all respondents, and from observations during the visits, was the value of having *just* care-experienced young people attend (alongside volunteers with care-

experience too). For instance, bringing young people together from similar backgrounds who they would not normally meet helps young people to understand they are not alone, nor the only one in their position:

> This programme is about bringing young people together that are in care so they understand, or they feel and see visually that they're not the only people that are in care … they understand that they're not maybe entirely different. They might be one of only a small number of young people in care in their school and the others may not identify themselves as being so or will be as open about it. So, I think that the whole point of them coming together is to understand that they're not alone (Hiten, Staff).

The nature of the programme, the activities they engage in and the fact they engage in these activities with other people in similar situations helps to make them feel '*part of a team … they feel that they're not the only ones going through it*' (Sarah, Staff).

Unquestionably, this group identity is shaped by creating a safe space in which young people are afforded time to realise they are not alone. However, although not a prominent factor in their engagement with the programme, once there and immersed in the surroundings, the pictures of the football club, the players, the football shirts, etc. – does add to the sense of a group identity. Perhaps though, the most important factor in developing a sense of belonging centres around the safe pedagogical environment and the positive relationships, mutual trust and respect that care-experienced youth develop with both other young people and staff.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have drawn on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy as a theoretical framework to examine pedagogical practices with care-experienced young people in a football-in-the-community programme. In this section, we discuss: (a) problem-solving, contextualised learning activities and the need to co-design sport-based programmes with care-experienced young people; (b) mutual trust and respect, radical love and the context of football; and (c) future directions.

Problem-solving, contextualised learning activities and the need to co-design sport-based programmes

In this article, we described how problem-based learning, contextualised learning activities and spaces for freedom were key pedagogical strategies used with care-experienced young people. As described by Freire (1987), those strategies move from a concept of banking education to considering education as the practice of freedom. The care-experienced young people were invited by the staff to create their own players, a healthy food plan, and others problem-based learning tasks. In addition, staff recognised the barriers the care-experienced people faced and planned contextualised learning activities such as problematising the transition from primary to secondary schools through dialogue. The sessions and work the care-experienced young people did was connected to real-life contexts and it was evident that staff purposefully introduced these activities so that pupils could better relate to the content.

Problem-based learning and contextualised activities seemed different from what the care-experienced young people experience in their schools. Care-experienced young people viewed the process of learning in the school context as passive, and un-engaging. This finding might explain the gap in education between care-experienced young people and the broader population of young people (O'Higgins, Sebba, and Luke 2015; Sebba et al. 2015) and mirrors Freire's (1987) notions of the banking concept of education that could contribute to young people's alienation and disengagement. In this banking education, learning becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories (e.g. patiently receive, memorise, and repeat) and the teacher is the depositor.

In considering problem-based learning and contextualise learning activities, knowledge is co-created and re-invented, through a process of inquiry (Freire 1987). In this process, teachers should invite students to be co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. Students and teachers become partners 'jointly responsible for a process in which all grow' (Freire 1987, 80). The problem-posing approach requires that teachers and students act as co-investigators or co-participants, and the curriculum or programme is built around the themes and conditions of people's lives (Spaaij and Jeanes 2013). In our study, although the young people were given some ownership over their learning, they were not directly invited to co-construct their sport-based programme and they did not necessarily have ownership in terms of the programme development. Although staff would change their strategies and pedagogies when the young people required, we did not find evidence of pedagogies to invite them as co-participants of the developments of the programme.

Mutual trust and respect, radical love and the context of football

In this paper, we identified mutual trust and respect between care-experienced young people and the staff, which helped to create a safe pedagogical environment and sense of belonging. By creating a safe environment, the staff had the opportunity to engage with young people on a personal level, building relationships with them. This mutual trust and respect might be an expression of what Freire (1987, 2005) described as radical love. Here, we observed a horizontal relationship where the staff were not considered 'a teacher' for the care-experienced young people. For instance, the staff members and care-experienced volunteers spent time getting to know the young people via informal conversations and through playing games with them.

Having care-experienced volunteers working with young people might help in the process of developing mutual trust and respect and consequently the translation in the concept of radical love. In a similar finding, Luguetti and McDonald (2020) studied pre-service teachers from socially vulnerable backgrounds who were working with young people from the same backgrounds and found that they embodied experiences of oppression, which created a space for them to see themselves in the young people, to reconnect with their own identity, and develop empathy. They concluded that these experiences helped them give back to their community, creating more socially just communities.

Here, the safe and dialogic environment produced a climate of mutual trust where staff did not see the care-experienced young people in a deficit manner. Since they recognised care-experienced young people's realities and understood their stories, they moved away from a deficit perspective of care-experienced young people, often resulting from a lack of awareness of the realities of their day-to-day lives (Quarmby et al. 2021). According to Freire (1987, 95), 'revolutionary leaders do not go to the people in order to bring them a message of "salvation," but in order to come to know through dialogue with them'. In that sense, solidarity emerged through the way staff and care-experienced young people related. This solidarity is born only when the teachers 'witness to it by their humble, loving, and courageous encounter with the people' (Freire 1987, 129). The staff members were willing to fight at the care-experienced young people side by considering their lived experienced and the barriers they face.

Although we noticed the mutual trust and respect between staff and care-experience young people, we believe the programme could better explore the football context as a way to further develop mutual trust and respect and, as a consequence, the sense of belonging. For instance, the young people were not actually playing football as part of the programme and while they were signposted to other programmes that the foundation offered (where they could play football) we see this as problematic. By playing football together we believe they would learn values and emphasise the sense of belonging.

Future directions

Based on the limited amount of research on care-experienced young people and critical pedagogies, future studies should continue to investigate the effectiveness of sport-based programmes to create

spaces for care-experienced young people to name, critique and transform the social injustices they face. Our recommendations would be to explore critical pedagogies as the foundation of the interventions with care-experienced young people. For example, what would be the impact of a Freirean sport-based programme on care-experienced young people and staff involved? A Freirean lens in the implementation would create spaces to invite care-experienced young people to act as co-participants in the development of the programme. We therefore support the position of Wright et al. (2016) who adopted a Freirean lens to work with coaches to promote social change through youth sport. They argue that the combination of informal instruction, critical reflection and empowering experiences created conditions for transformative learning though also recognise that, in keeping with Freirean thinking, training and knowledge should emerge from the community members themselves to be truly authentic and relevant (Wright et al. 2016). Finally, we recommend that a future intervention should also incorporate playing the sport (e.g. playing football). Although we acknowledge that sport can be taught and re-signified in diverse ways (e.g. videogames, table-football and the creation of players), we believe that there are embodied learning activities that happen when we play sports. We believe that this study provides direction to readers interested in working with care-experienced young people and other marginalised populations in sport programmes, recosgnising the need for strength-based approaches which value young people's strengths, capabilities, knowledge, and resources.

Notes

1. *conscientização* (in Portuguese) or critical consciousness focuses on achieving an in-depth understanding of the world, allowing for the perception and exposure of social and political contradictions. Critical consciousness also includes taking action against the oppressive elements in one's life that are illuminated by that understanding.
2. In England, primary school includes children aged 5-11, while secondary school includes young people aged 11-16.

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