

EXPLORING THE DEVELOPMENTAL ROLE OF VOLUNTEERING IN SPORT FOR YOUNGSTERS IN SOCIALLY VULNERABLE SITUATIONS

There is a growing belief that volunteering in sport has a distinct human capital developmental potential for youth in socially vulnerable situations. In this respect, it is amongst others believed that development at individual level can even lead to changes at a wider societal level. However, at present, conclusive empirical evidence is lacking regarding the developmental potential of volunteering in sport for youths in vulnerable situations. In addition, there is little understanding of the mechanisms through which volunteering in sport is supposed to foster youth human capital development. More specifically, insight is lacking in necessary (i.e., attracting and retaining youngsters in vulnerable situations in sport) and sufficient conditions (i.e., working towards broader human capital outcomes). In order to gain more insight, this PhD study, by means of different qualitative research methods, investigated three sport contexts in Flanders where youngsters in vulnerable situations are volunteering on a regular basis (i.e., youth work, community sport and sport clubs).

Among other things, it was concluded that a generalization of necessary and sufficient conditions can be made for the different practices within the investigated sport contexts. For the necessary conditions, this related to youngsters' intrinsic motivation, optimal accessibility, club functioning/program design, active volunteer involvement, professional support. For the sufficient conditions, this primarily related to the provision of experiential learning opportunities, thereby emphasizing the central role of a reinforcing environment. Three subcategories were identified, namely valuing and recognition of youngsters, making youngsters feel good and creating a sense of belonging, and providing opportunities of equality regarding their relation to others (e.g., with coaches, professionals or peers). Furthermore, it is concluded that while

the investigated practices show potential in dealing with sufficient conditions, in most cases complying with necessary conditions is already too demanding to go any further. The minority of the practices that were (capable of) focussing on development and supplying sufficient conditions in a systematic way, were heavily relying on specific expertise and knowledge situated within youth work. In addition, the study illustrated that practices utilizing a critical educational approach provided more developmental opportunities for participating youth.

With regard to the perceived human capital developmental potential, it is concluded that when necessary and sufficient conditions are met, youngsters in vulnerable situations can develop their human capital. A variety of human capital outcomes on personal (e.g., taking more initiative and feeling responsible) and interpersonal level (e.g., taking up social responsibility) were reported by the young volunteers and confirmed by professionals. In addition, youngsters indicated to behave differently in their daily lives as a result of an increased self-awareness and acquiring insights into their own (inter)personal competences, attitudes, behaviour and development. This PhD study illustrated that within a critical educational perspective, young people can be encouraged, to a certain extent, to critically take part in the transformation of (their own experiences within) society. However, improving the vulnerable situation of youths is no individual responsibility and for a more radical transformation of their position changes at the institutional level are needed.

The research unit Sport & Society (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) engages in independent research regarding the impact of sport and sport policy - both recreational and elite sport - within different areas of society. Through active dissemination of research findings and educational activities, we contribute to the development of policy and practice.



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