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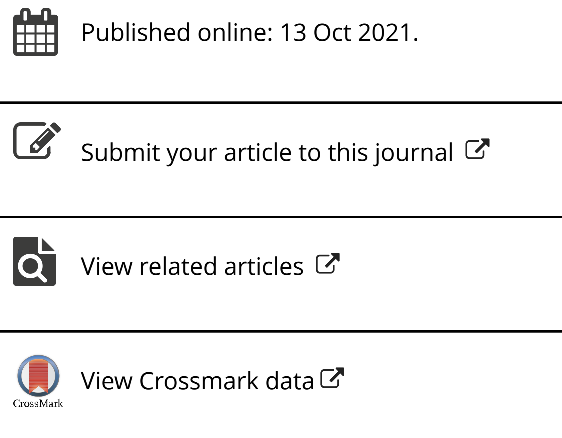
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Re-Imagining Sport Pedagogy through Youth Engagement: An Exploration of the Youth Engagement Continuum

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ABSTRACT

Sport represents an important leisure context for promoting youth development. In particular, sport-based youth development (SBYD) initiatives have emerged to offer programming informed by theory rather than assumptions regarding the "power of sport". While the importance of theory is well established in SBYD research, critical perspectives remain relatively underutilized. The purpose of this study was to analyze the sport pedagogy of six urban SBYD initiatives that work with youth from underserved communities in Belgium. Through a multiple case study approach, data were generated from focus groups, interviews, and observations. The Youth Engagement Continuum (YEC) framework was utilized to analyze data through a deductive thematic analysis. Findings indicate that the SBYD initiatives focused primarily on youth development categories of the YEC, with less engagement with more politicized and actionable elements of youth engagement. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed to inform SBYD initiatives.

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Introduction

Leisure is an important context for promoting youth development, yet can also be a space for risky behaviors that induce negative outcomes (Motamedi et al., 2020). This highlights the importance of understanding how leisure service organizations engage with youth to intentionally promote youth development (Watts & Caldwell, 2008), particularly in communities with risk factors such as high crime, deviant behavior, and limited adult role models to support positive developmental trajectories (Autry & Anderson, 2007). Researchers have explored youth development in a wide range of leisure contexts including summer recreation programs (Morgan et al., 2016), out-of-school time programs (Brown et al., 2018), and camps (Sibthorp et al., 2013), yet youth sport programs have attracted considerable attention since sport is one of most popular leisure activities among youth and associated with a wide range of potential benefits (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009).

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Previous research and practice focused on youth development through sport has been critiqued for relying on assumptions regarding the "power of sport" to induce change (Coakley, 2011). Growing recognition of this issue has spawned a burgeoning field of inquiry, sometimes referred to as sport based youth development (SBYD), which emphasizes the importance of underpinning sport-based initiatives with sound theory and logic that specifically targets youth development outcomes (Whitley et al., 2019). In contrast to competitive youth sport programs that may not create appropriate motivational climates or recreational clubs focused on participation, SBYD programs rely on intentional curricula designed to promote youth development through sport (Jones et al., 2017).

Similar to other areas of youth-focused leisure research, SBYD scholars and practitioners have drawn heavily from positive youth development (PYD) literature, which focuses on cultivating skills and competencies in youth that foster positive outcomes (Jones et al., 2020). Yet many scholars have argued that the field of youth development needs to "take a political turn" by cultivating youth engagement (Flanagan et al., 2007, p. 234), a sentiment echoed by other community development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) and leisure (Brown et al., 2018) scholars. Indeed, leisure service organizations such as SBYD programs play an important role in fostering civic engagement and democratic citizenship (Sharpe, 2006), but are not always seen as spaces for political activism (Brown et al., 2018).

With an emphasis on individual self-empowerment, SBYD research and practice fits within broader PYD narratives yet departs from such politicized, community-focused conceptualizations (Haudenhuyse et al., 2013). This critique is particularly salient considering how social and political issues often manifest in sport (e.g., Glover, 2007), as well as the permeation of neoliberalism in youth sport policy (Hartmann, 2016). When addressing these issues, critical researchers often distinguish between dominant, *instrumental* approaches that integrate people into an inequitable society and *politicized*, critical approaches that ask how sport aligns with, diverges from, or potentially transforms structures of inequality (Darnell et al., 2018). While the importance of theory is well established in this work, critical theories and conceptualizations remain relatively underutilized (Nols et al., 2019) and thus limit the theoretical and practical understanding of how SBYD programs may influence youth civic engagement (Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013).

The purpose of this research was to critically investigate the underlying pedagogy of SBYD programs in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, focusing specifically on how dimensions of youth engagement manifested in program logic and implementation. A multiple case study approach was utilized to generate data from six urban SBYD initiatives in Belgium. A deductive thematic analysis informed by Sullivan and colleagues' (2003) Youth Engagement Continuum (YEC) was conducted to critically investigate underlying pedagogies and dimensions of youth engagement. In the following sections, we provide a brief background on PYD through sport, youth engagement, and the YEC before presenting the research questions that guided our analysis.

Literature review

Positive youth development (PYD)

The positive youth development (PYD) perspective emerged in contrast to earlier conceptualizations of youth development that focused on mitigating difficulties believed to

be an inherent part of adolescence (Lerner, 2005). Rather than diagnosing problem behaviors and keeping youth "out of trouble," PYD emphasizes cultivating personal skills and abilities that help youth thrive and ultimately make meaningful contributions to self and society. Although positive orientations to adolescent development are evident in the work of early scholars such as Gisela Konopka (1973), PYD arguably did not gain traction in research or practice until the 1990s. The theoretical basis for PYD is traceable to developmental systems theories (DST) of human development (Lerner, 2005), which represent a fusion of biological and psychological perspectives that account for how personal and environmental factors influence ontogenetic change (Gottlieb, 1991).

It is important to note that PYD has also been shaped by theories of positive psychology. Positive psychology represents "a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institution's promises to improve quality of life" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5), and youth-focused research in this area has offered theoretical and empirical insight into traits such as subjective well-being, hope, optimism, and happiness that influence youth development (Park, 2004). While positive psychologists tend to focus more on subjective experiences, the importance of supportive contexts is also recognized within this literature. For example, Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) "flow model" has emerged as a popular framework for analyzing how structured leisure settings such as sport facilitate optimal experience for youth (e.g., Larson, 2000).

PYD through sport

Sport is an intriguing leisure context for research focused on PYD. Preconceived notions regarding the power of sport have long proven an influential rhetorical tool, as Coakley (2011) noted how sport evangelists frequently tout the positive outcomes believed to be inherent by-products of participation. However, a growing body of research has revealed sport participation does not automatically lead to positive outcomes (Lin et al., 2016) and can induce neutral and negative experiences as well (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). This highlights the importance of intentional programming to maximize the likelihood of promoting PYD through sport (Trussell & Shaw, 2012). Accordingly, research has focused on identifying features of youth sport programs that positively influence PYD outcomes (Jones et al., 2018). Programs that intentionally integrate these features with the specific purpose of promoting PYD are often referred to as sport-based youth development (SBYD) programs (Whitley et al., 2019).

Scholars have increasingly emphasized the importance of considering the influence of broader social, political and economic contexts on SBYD programs (Lin et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the PYD perspective has been critiqued by scholars from leisure (e.g., Pinckney et al., 2018), sport (e.g., Nols et al., 2017), and mainstream developmental science (e.g., Sukarieh & Tannock, 2011) for its narrow emphasis on personal development. As stated by Coakley (2011), most SBYD programs are "based on the assumption that for young people, sport has a fertilizer effect – that is, if it is tilled into their experiences, their character and potential will grow in socially desirable ways." (p. 308). Although potentially beneficial for some youth, this approach does little to address prevailing social and structural issues that perpetuate disadvantage (Jones et al., 2020).

INTERVENTION	DEVELOPMENT	COLLECTIVE EMPOWERMENT		SYSTEMIC CHANGE
Youth services approach	**Youth development**	**Youth leadership**	**Civic engagement**	**Youth organizing**
		Includes components of youth development approach plus:	*Includes components of youth development & youth leadership plus:*	*Includes components of youth development, youth leadership and civic engagement plus:*
• Defines young people as clients • Provides services to address individual problems and pathologies of young people • Programming defined around treatment and prevention	• Provides services and support, access to caring adults and safe spaces • Provides opportunities for the growth and development of young people • Meets young people where they are • Builds young people's individual competencies • Provides age appropriate support • Emphasizes positive self identity • Supports youth-adult partnerships	• Builds in authentic youth leadership opportunities within programming and organization • Helps young people deepen historical and cultural understanding of their experiences and community issues • Builds skills and capacities of young people to be decision makers and problem solvers • Youth participate in community projects	• Engages young people in political education and awareness • Builds skills and capacity for power analysis and action around issues young people identify • Begins to help young people build collective identity of young people as social change agents • Engages young people in advocacy and negotiation	• Builds a membership base • Involves youth as part of core staff and governing body • Engages in direct action and political mobilizing • Engages in alliances and coalitions

Figure 1. Youth engagement continuum (Sullivan et al., 2003).

Youth engagement

This highlights the importance of "taking a political turn" with youth development (c.f., Flanagan et al., 2007) and considering how leisure spaces may be leveraged to promote youth engagement (Pryor & Outley, 2014). For example, Pryor and Outley (2014) drew on a social justice youth development (SJYD) framework to examine how urban recreation centers function as just spaces for marginalized youth by promoting self-awareness and critical consciousness. In addition, Brown and colleagues (2018) examined how out-of-school time programs were leveraged to promote the socio-political development (SDP) of Black youth, highlighting the importance of racial/ethnic identity development to political activism. Youth engagement represents an integrated youth development and social justice perspective similarly focused on meaningful institutional and social change (Gambone et al., 2006). The perspective represents an outgrowth of PYD that works toward more holistic and applied forms of youth organizing involving direct civic action and activism (Sullivan et al., 2003).

There are a variety of youth engagement frameworks available to guide leisure researchers, as theories of PYD and community organizing have been woven together to promote the engagement of marginalized youth in social justice issues such as public education reform, welfare reform, and youth service funding (e.g., Gambone et al., 2006). The Youth Engagement Continuum (YEC) provides a particularly well developed framework. Initially developed by the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO), the YEC framework conceptualizes youth engagement on a continuum spanning five phases: (1) youth services approaches, (2) youth development, (3) youth leadership, (4) civic engagement, and (5) youth organizing (see Figure 1).

Youth services approaches make important contributions to the long-term health and survival of young people, yet critics argue they conceptualize youth as clients instead of active members of a politically informed and civically engaged base (Sullivan et al., 2003). Conversely, *youth development* is understood as the mix of services, supports, and opportunities youth receive to build skills and stay engaged in a variety of societal spheres such as education, labor and civic life (Lawson, 2005). *Youth leadership* represents the next progression in development that helps youth look beyond their personal needs and deepen their historical and cultural understanding of collective community experiences and conditions (Sullivan et al., 2003). When youth develop the skills needed to actively shape democratic society in collaboration with others, meaningful *civic engagement* is more likely (Sullivan et al., 2003). Finally, *youth organizing* relies on the leadership of youth to define issues that influence their communities and design, implement, and coordinate direct action (Gambone et al., 2006).

In addition to providing the conceptual basis for a wide variety of both local and international initiatives (see Brady et al., 2012; Pittman et al., 2007), the YEC has also guided academic research on youth civic engagement (e.g., Otis, 2006; Richards-Schuster et al., 2013). Scholars have emphasized the sequential ordering of YEC, which reflects youth becoming more competent and comfortable engaging in civic processes as they progress through stages that are mutually reinforcing, not mutually exclusive (Shaw et al., 2014). Specifically, Olson and Brennan (2018) acknowledged that the first two stages are key to internal development, while the last three phases "represent the most valuable forms of engagement to aid the emergence of community" since they prioritize youth voice and expanded opportunities for direct action to challenge power relations and create meaningful community-level and institutional change (p. 270). That being said, the experiences of youth across these stages are understood to be cyclical, iterative, and non-linear (Shaw et al., 2014), which in many ways reflects leisure research on social justice and socio-political development (Arai & Kivel, 2009; Brown et al., 2018; Pryor & Outley, 2014)

In re-imagining how sport may contribute to youth engagement, researchers have called for more critical research (Spaaij et al., 2016), which echoes similar calls from leisure scholars to critically examine the politics of leisure and explore opportunities for civic engagement (see Brown et al., 2018). The transformation of social, political, and institutional structures requires a more politicized connection between sport, education, and research (Stewart, 2014), yet few empirical studies of SBYD programs have operationalized such frameworks (Evans & Davies, 2017). This emphasizes the importance of examining sport pedagogy, which relates to how children and young people learn sport-specific skills and "how that learning can be structured and managed to ensure they also gain wider personal, social and health benefits from their participation" (Armour, 2011, p. 12). Sport pedagogy exists at a rather complex intersection of sport and education that involves interacting dimensions of knowledge, learners, and teachers (Kirk & Haerens, 2014). Currently, most SBYD programs are driven by top-down approaches whereby coaches teach curriculum *to* participants in order to promote internal development (Jones et al., 2017), yet scholars have increasingly called for more critical pedagogy to promote advanced forms of youth engagement (Haudenhuyse et al., 2013). For example, Nols and colleagues (2019) drew on Paulo Freire's (2005) conceptualization of

critical pedagogy to explore how sport may foster dialogue *between* coaches and participants through curriculum rooted in their unique life situations, ultimately resulting in youth learning their potential role in transforming marginalizing structures rather than simply overcoming them.

This study contributes to the current literature by investigating how youth engagement manifests in the sport pedagogy of six SBYD programs through the lens of Sullivan and colleagues' (2003) YEC framework. Specifically, the analysis focuses on two primary research questions:

1. How do different phases of youth engagement manifest in the sport pedagogy of SBYD programs?
2. What practices are employed by SBYD programs to contribute to different elements of youth engagement?

Methods

Study context

A multiple case study approach was taken to understand the pedagogy of six urban SBYD initiatives operating in three cities across Flanders, the northern region of Belgium. Case study methodology is particularly conducive to exploring complex sociocultural phenomena (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) and has been utilized effectively in previous research focused on leisure programming and pedagogy (e.g., Brown et al., 2018). Based on the lead researcher's knowledge of the Belgian SBYD field, six SBYD initiatives were selected using two criteria: (1) a recognized track record of working with youth in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities and (2) an explicit focus on youth development through sport. More precisely, these initiatives can be regarded as SBYD programs since sport was viewed as an important context for changing values, attitudes and behaviors but also supplemented with additional developmentally focused programming. Each initiative used a targeted approach to attract young people in urban communities with higher degrees of ethno-cultural diversity, poverty, unemployment, school dropout and a lack of accessible public spaces and facilities (see Nols, 2018). Table 1 provides a description of each SBYD initiative.

Belgium has been described as a cautiously progressive liberal democracy whose political institutions are segregated into a federal government, three community governments (i.e., Flemish, French and German-speaking Community), and three regional governments (i.e., Flemish, Walloon and Brussels-Capital Region) (Van Poppel et al., 2018). Since sports, culture, education and welfare are governed at the community level, there is no national approach to sport policy per se. In the Flemish context, governmental agencies initially played a leading role organizing sport infrastructure and programming, yet the current system now comprises a multitude of multi-sector providers that reflect a shift in local government "from a regulating and directing role to stimulating and facilitating initiatives from individuals, groups and civil society (Van Poppel et al., 2018, p. 280). This aligns with recent urban regeneration policies that have rapidly gentrified metropolitan areas such as the ones served by the six SBYD initiatives. Despite being championed as progressive forms of social and economic development, public

Table 1. SBYD initiative descriptions.

Name	Sport	Youth Served	Context	Description
Wolf Pack	Basketball	60	Antwerp	Wolf Pack offers 60 children and young people chances to get familiar with basketball in a pedagogically safe environment and works with them on their personal, social and sport related norms, values and skills to empower young people and strengthen their social engagement.
City Pirates	Football	1,100	Antwerp	City Pirates offers 1,100 children and young people chances to develop competences via football that emphasize respect, equity and engagement to provide a stable and balanced future.
Kras Sport	Futsal	550	Antwerp	Embedded within youth work organization Kras Jeugdwerk, Kras Sport connects with the life world of 550 young people by inviting them to experiment and grow in sport and focusing on social engagement and responsibility.
BBA	Boxing	500	Brussels	BBA encourages 500 young people to grow in boxing by taking responsibility as assistant trainer and getting a coaching degree, while also organizing non-sport activities to broaden their life world.
BBJJA	Jujitsu	300	Brussels	Focusing on both physical and mental development, BBJJA puts the well-being of 300 children first and emphasizes friendship, volunteerism, and the emancipation of children and young people within the social reality of Brussels.
Opboksen	Boxing	850	Genk	Opboksen focuses on respect, discipline, perseverance and communication as important values by using boxing to work around young people's self-identified objectives in a way that is fun and engenders successful experiences.

opposition has critiqued such policies for doing little to support the local populace and exacerbating marginalization (Loopmans & Dirckx, 2012).

Data collection

The research design was discussed with administrators and head coaches involved in the management of each SBYD initiative and data were gathered over a six-year period (2015–2020) through three primary procedures. First, in 2015, focus groups were organized with the head coaches and key practitioners of each SBYD initiative. In total, twenty-eight practitioners participated in six focus groups with each focus group consisting of four to five respondents. The focus groups focused on the sport pedagogy of each initiative that facilitated the use of sport for youth development. Sufficient time was reserved to talk about the life situations that young people and their families faced. On average, each focus group lasted approximately two hours and thirty minutes. After a preliminary analysis of data from focus groups with each initiative, three additional focus groups including representatives from all six SBYD initiatives were conducted in 2016 to allow for additional reflection. These additional focus groups lasted an average of approximately two hours.

In addition to the focus groups, a total of eighteen interviews were conducted with head coaches and key mentoring figures between January 2016 and August 2018. The interview guide was focused on the sport pedagogy of SBYD initiatives and sensitizing concepts related to the YEC. For example, key sensitizing concepts included providing a safe space (e.g., "*how do you organize the offer in order to attract and retain these young people?*"), access to caring adults (e.g., "*as a coach/mentor, how does the offer meet the needs of young people?*"); and providing opportunities for youth leadership (e.g., "*besides*

being sport participants, are young people further involved in the organisation of the offer?"). Documents and websites of the initiatives were also consulted to inform the questioning. On average, each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Besides interviews with head coaches and key mentoring figures, in 2017, ten in-depth interviews were conducted with youth involved with the Wolf Pack Basketball initiative, where the lead researcher was most intensely involved. Participants were selected purposively based on the lead researcher's knowledge of the program and consultations with head coaches. Interviews were conducted during training hours and lasted an average 54 minutes. The questions focused on issues such as the participants' background, their involvement in the initiative, the meaning of the initiative to them, the characteristics of the head coach, the sport pedagogy, and perceived impact. All names used in the article are pseudonyms.

Finally, between January 2015 and October 2020, open observations were utilized to triangulate data generated from focus groups and interviews. Observations occurred on-site at various programming locations (i.e., clubhouses, fields) of the six initiatives. Through approximately sixty observations conducted across the six initiatives, the lead researcher observed various aspects of program pedagogy in practice. Most observations lasted for about one hour, although some observations were longer depending on the observed activity (e.g., a training versus a family day). Where possible, the researcher introduced himself to young people, parents, and other adults to have informal chats ($n \approx 125$), where respondents provided the researcher with additional insight about the initiative and community context. The lead researcher kept several research diaries to take notes from informal chats and personal reflections, which was synthesized with field notes from observations.

Data analysis

Tape-recorded focus groups and interviews were transcribed verbatim and collated with observational field notes and research diaries to create a corpus of data for analysis. A deductive thematic analysis (TA) was utilized to code data. Deductive TA approaches are guided by theoretical frameworks that the researcher brings *to* the data (Braun et al., 2017), thus providing a viable approach for examining specific, theory-driven patterns and themes within multiple sources of data (Braun et al., 2017). The YEC provided an *a priori* coding scheme and the lead researcher followed the six-step process of deductive TA outlined by Braun and colleagues (2017). Specifically, the coding process focused on identifying salient themes associated with the YEC to understand how each phase of youth engagement was activated. For example, *youth-adult relationships* was coded as one of four sub-themes under the primary theme of *youth development*, indicating this dimension of the YEC was particularly salient to the sport pedagogy of the six SBYD initiatives. Conversely, no sub-themes were coded under the primary theme of *youth services approaches*, indicating this dimension of the YEC was not salient to the sport pedagogy of the six SBYD initiatives. Coding followed a reflexive process of moving forwards (and sometimes backwards) through the data and acknowledging the researcher's own theoretical assumptions, disciplinary knowledge, research skills and experience, and the content of the data. Aligning with our ontology and epistemology,

the study was guided by a relativist approach (Burke, 2017). The criteria for judging the quality of the research was informed by Smith and Caddick (2012) and included: coherence (different parts of the interpretation created a complete and meaningful picture), credibility (the lead researcher spent a significant amount of time in the field and engaged in member reflections with the head coaches and other mentoring figures) and transparency (co-authors and several other colleagues served as 'critical friends' that examined aspects of the data analysis process and talked through preliminary findings).

Findings

The findings are presented based on the phases that comprise the YEC: youth services approach; youth development; youth leadership; civic engagement; and youth organizing. The data indicates that all six SBYD initiatives went beyond interventionist, youth services approaches but did not significantly engage in youth organizing as outlined in the YEC, resulting in themes only identified within youth development, youth leadership, and civic engagement categories. Within the primary theme of youth development, four subthemes of *meet young people where they are*, *developmental opportunities emphasizing identity*, *youth-adult relationships*, and *engaging the broader network* were identified. Within the primary theme of youth leadership, one subtheme of *providing authentic youth leadership opportunities* and was identified. Within the primary theme of civic engagement, two subthemes of *building politicized 'base work'* and *Sport as a "first step" to political action* were identified. The following sections discuss each theme in detail.

Youth development

All young people need a mix of services, supports, and opportunities in order to stay engaged in a variety of societal spheres such as education, labor and civic life (Sullivan et al., 2003). The following themes represent the pedagogical aspects that facilitated this process.

Meet young people where they are

An important feature of each SBYD initiative is that they met young people and families in their communities. Program infrastructure were located in the urban neighborhoods where youth and families lived, which made access much easier for local youth that often lacked mobility. Some of the initiatives worked together with local schools to promote programming. For instance, Kras Sport and BBA provided yearly initiations at schools, while Wolf Pack and BBJJA each organized sport events at schools that provided opportunities for students to join their club. At the end of the regular sport season, some initiatives also organized activities in nearby public places or playing fields to recruit members, such as BBJJA's yearly 'Street Grappling' event.

In addition to their geographic proximity, all initiatives created low thresholds and welcoming environments for youth and their families by investing in family relations and personal attention. Many providers mentioned that designing the initiative as a "second home" brought people together and, by involving both young people and their

parents, contributed to a sense of community. This required alleviating financial barriers to participation, as all initiatives provided fee reduction possibilities, family fees, and other creative payment plans. Participants explained how important it was for the initiatives to be financially flexible, with one youth participant stating, "a camp costs 15 euros, that is cheap for training, a shirt, food and drinks … [the coach] does that because he knows that not everyone has a good home situation" (Ilias, youth player, SBYD initiative C). Many coaches also paid extra attention to the transport of players for away games and other activities or included discounted sportswear in the membership fee. As part of creating a welcoming environment, most initiatives also encouraged youth to define their space through physical and social expression. For instance, field notes indicated that the outside of the City Pirates cantina was decorated with "graffiti artwork" done by participants, while attention to youth culture was also evident in notes regarding unique sport and non-sport activities, such as "panna" and "hip-hop".

Developmental opportunities emphasizing identity

The SBYD initiatives saw sport as a means for young people to get to know themselves. Working around young people's identity was formulated as a central outcome by all initiatives, and working around norms, values and rights was considered important. Several providers indicated that identity work is about understanding who young people are and developing a sense of responsibility to engage in society. As one association manager indicated during an interview:

> What we should talk about is 'identity'. We work on the identity of young people. For example, the club shirt … from the moment they wear it, they know it comes with a certain responsibility, to be 'a Pirate', is to be respectful, treat people equally, etc. It's about who they are as a person (Usain, mentoring figure, SBYD initiative A)

During the focus groups, several providers also stated how they worked toward increasing young people's self-image, self-esteem and self-confidence. Some providers mentioned the creation of a sport identity in which young people felt proud. Next to providing a welcoming and safe sport activity, all initiatives saw their initiative as an educational space that provided developmental opportunities for young people, as one coach explained:

> Sometimes, people say that 'the social' and 'sport' are not connected, and that you need to put the social into sport, but that's not true … there are a lot of elements in the sport itself that you can use to work socially with young people, it hangs together (Robin, head coach, SBYD initiative B)

Some SBYD initiatives also modified sport activities to stimulate reflection. For instance, several initiatives structured sport trainings to include pre- and post-training chats that allowed youth to express their opinion and feedback. One young person described their personal and moral development at the club:

> At most clubs … there is little personal attention for the home situation of players. But at Wolf Pack you have got various norms and values, how to live, how you can develop as a human being … There is personal guidance, they support you, there are moral values, it is not only achievement (Omar, youth player, SBYD initiative C)

Most initiatives also incorporated non-sport activities such as workshops on digital skills, rap and hip-hop sessions, and cooking lessons to mix-up programming. In addition, visits to sport events, the theater or circus, and weekend trips were also included. According to coaches, this range of activities provided life broadening experiences for young people to explore and work through a multitude of identities while engaging in broader conversations about tensions at school, family situations, or racism in public spaces. Coaches used these opportunities to stimulate reflection and encourage youth to think about their own thoughts and behaviors.

Youth-adult relationships

Another important feature of the initiatives were the relationships between young people and adults. According to several providers, young people were initially interested in sport and came to the initiative with the expectation that the coach had a high level of sport expertise. However, they also indicated that in order to retain young people, the coaches needed to have youth or social work competencies and a holistic coaching philosophy. In describing this, they referred to characteristics such as showing interest in young people and being respectful, encouraging, and patient. Humor was also an important way to befriend youth, which was confirmed by Omar, a youth player from SBYD initiative C who stated:

> The relation between [the coach] and me is like a father-son relation. I have known him all my life here in Belgium, about ten years, and he has got a good bond with my parents. (…) He is honest and straight forward. (…) He has always been there for me.

Central within these youth-adult relationships is an openness for young people to ask questions, talk to coaches, and express their opinions. Coaches felt it was important to actively listen and, at times, question young people about their behavior. This dialogue was evident in field notes that described coaches speaking about the importance of "being accountable" and "thinking about the *impact* of decisions". Samih, a head coach for SBYD initiative D, explained, "you take care of young people, but you also have to be strict … it's a form of care". Another coach indicated the importance of finding the right balance between the signals projected to youth, explaining how coaches should show that they "are there for them, but also that they need to provide for themselves, and that they cannot expect that coaches are available at every moment" (Cristiano, head coach, SBYD initiative C). Establishing meaningful relationships with *all* youth was quite difficult since building a meaningful relationship requires a lot of time and effort. Moreover, each relationship depends on other factors in youth's lives, as field notes captured one coach describing how young people often have a "bright and dark" side to their personalities that are important to read.

Engaging the broader network

As part of supporting young people more individually, several providers indicated working with young people's broader network. This was mostly parents and teachers, but also included staff from other social service partners. These relationships often developed through regular and informal chats that generated the trust necessary to talk about sensitive issues. In line with this, several initiatives did home visits either *before*

membership to set clear expectations regarding parents' role in program engagement or *during* membership to understand how participation influenced their child's development.

In addition, several providers also highlighted the developmental benefits of parents becoming more involved in their child's participation. Parents that were present at activities not only saw their children have fun, but also gave coaches the opportunity to talk with them about their child's development. Field notes also revealed that several initiatives organized specific activities to engage parents such as a family day, a parent evening, and a community feast, while two initiatives had a parent counsel. Of course, coaches indicated that engaging parents in their children's sport participation is not always easy, with one coach explaining:

> Many of our children often have stress at home or at school. For them, [this sport] is relaxation. That's why I prefer not to have too many parents, for instance during games, because they heat up the children. During the game, 'have you seen that?', 'he's not passing to you', etc. They can put them against each other. That's not good for the group (Cristiano, head coach, SBYD initiative C)

Several initiatives had strong connections with local schools and teachers. Similar to the contact between coaches and parents, some of the coaches occasionally talked to teachers about young people and exchanged information. According to one coach, Wolf Pack's school-based events not only influenced young people's development in a positive way but also influenced teachers' perception of young people's strengths and the relationships between teachers and their students. Several initiatives also referred youth to specialized social services if needed. For initiatives embedded in youth welfare work, such as Kras Sport and BBA, young people and their parents are often referred to thematic workers of the wider organization (e.g., education or employment), however most SBYD initiatives teamed up with at least one social service partner. Field notes from a site visit at Kras Sport described how one coach referred to the importance of bringing young people closer to the "culture of social services and how they work".

Youth leadership

Youth leadership development can help young people look beyond their personal needs and interests to see their relationship to a collective group, organization or the wider community (Sullivan et al., 2003). By providing authentic youth leadership opportunities, youth practice meaningful roles with organizations that involve decision-making and problem solving (Sullivan et al., 2003).

Providing authentic leadership opportunities

All of the SBYD initiatives had opportunities for young people to engage in voluntary work and leadership tasks. For example, at BBJJA encouraged young people to organize activities and find solutions to issues such as budget, transportation, accommodation, and safety. According to the coach, this kind of self-organizing helped youth learn much more than when everything is done for them because they learn to make decisions and solve problems. Another head coach, Cristiano (SBYD initiative C), commented, "we work on their inner power and because of that they dare more, they

undertake much more, they start to think what they can do, what they want to commit to. They become more independent."

In most cases, engaging young people in voluntary work was a rather spontaneous process. For instance, at BBJJA, volunteers are asked to assist the younger players or act as referees at tournaments. At Wolf Pack, field notes reflected how volunteers were deployed as "fair play coaches" who observed and scored the fair play of players and teams during matches. One coach referred to this approach the "pedagogy of the volunteer" (Robin, head coach, SBYD initiative B), which encouraged youth to take responsibility and develop themselves into teachers. Coaches indicated that young people learned a lot from taking on leadership roles within the club, which was a sentiment echoed by Younes, a participant with SBYD initiative C, who stated, "I want to play basketball and later I want to be a coach, like [the coach]: helping children, supporting them, teaching them things and making them better".

However, apart from a few selected examples, most SBYD initiatives did not have many formal, integrated channels for continuously involving young people in decision-making outside of sport activities. More often, the development of leadership skills was integrated into sport curricula, with field notes indicating that some initiatives involved young people in leadership opportunities more than others. For instance, the WolfPack empowered young people to give their opinion and decide the team rules and tactics within activity settings, City Pirates had a youth brigade and players' counsel, and Kras Sport involved young people in decisions regarding the activities.

Civic engagement

Civic engagement reflects the ability of young people to actively shape democratic society by developing the skills required to move from individualistic to collective conceptualizations of the self in relation to others (Sullivan et al., 2003). This requires the political education and engagement of youth in both internal and external initiatives that afford legitimate voice in policy and advocacy efforts (Sullivan et al., 2003).

Building politicized base work

Next to the development of leadership skills and opportunities to lead in sport capacities, each SBYD initiative tried to stimulate young people's civic engagement. Involving young people in the organization of sport activities was seen as critical to developing a conception in which youth, as individuals in relation to a broader collective, played an active role in shaping their future. For example, field notes described a day-long event hosted by City Pirates that solicited feedback from young people on the "direction they felt the initiative should be heading" and "what could be improved". Through this "base work," a term often mentioned by several coaches, initiatives wanted young people to have a voice in how the initiative should operate in relation to their families and the wider community. Central aspects of this educational base work included understanding cultural norms, rights, and ethics that foster self-respect, solidarity, and respect toward others.

While politicized components were integrated into these processes, one coach mentioned that "political education in a scholastic way was not desirable" (Usain, mentoring

figure, SBYD initiative A) since their primary objective was to deliver fun sport activities that engaged youth. SBYD initiatives rarely engaged in direct forms of political advocacy and instead leveraged special events and partnerships with other social service organizations to cultivate political base work and inspire future action. For example, BBA visited the commemoration of the Battle of Gembloux, which memorializes Moroccan and Senegalese soldiers during WW2 who were used as cannon fodder to slow down the German advance into France. Field notes from informal chats with coaches alluded to "seizing the momentum" of these experiences to talk about sensitive issues with youth, which was seen as critical to building and activating political base work. In addition, partnerships with other social service organizations and advocacy provided additional opportunities for civic engagement. For example, City Pirates organized employment workshops that involved local community partners, while Opboksen established informational partnerships with the House of the Child. Kras Sport and BBA are embedded in youth welfare organizations and have occasionally co-organized activities with other branches of social services, which provide more direct pathways for youth to become involved in civic engagement efforts.

Sport as a "first step" to political action

The SBYD initiatives did not engage in fully-fledged youth civic engagement but instead saw themselves as a "first step" by engaging youth through sport activities and providing a bridge to more politicized action without forcing it on youth or doing it for them. Field notes from site visits indicated that coaches felt this process was inherently politicized already and thus a crucial "stepping stone" for long-term civic engagement. For example, during one interview a coach explained that in order to consistently deliver high-quality sport activities they cannot stretch themselves too thin and that "other initiatives are far better placed for such youth organizing focused social actions" (Usain, mentoring figure, SBYD initiative A). This measured approach to social change resonated with one young person:

> It's about small steps that have a deeper invasive impact: mentally, physically, but also on your life trajectory. A lot of people don't want to see of believe this. But it changes a lot in a society (Branko, youth player, SBYD initiative C)

Moreover, when discussing youth engagement, field notes captured how several coaches and administrators found themselves in unbalanced power spheres with local government departments that offer crucial forms of support (e.g., subsidies). One coach highlighted their initiative's dependence on local political support and the "implicit covenant" that came with it. Zinedine, the head coach for SBYD initiative E, explained how requests for proposals result in "the chalk lines already being largely fixed," while another coach explained, "you have to choose your battles" and be careful "not to bite the hand that feeds you, because the support is essential to SBYD work" (Usain, mentoring figure, SBYD initiative A). This coach not only referred to local government subsidies but also private companies and philanthropic individuals who provide support.

Furthermore, focus groups revealed that many coaches are simply not "politically interested." As one coach explained:

> … mobilizing young people for political action is double-edged: do young people participate out of their own conviction? Because they are loyal to their mentors? Because they want to travel? Are they armed for critical debates? Are the young people not abused or misused for a political agenda of which they do not know much about? (Robin, head coach, SBYD initiative B)

Another coach indicated that political action is not always desired by young people and that coaches need to pay close attention to what young people actually want. This shows a more nuanced picture about the possibilities of implementing critical pedagogy in SBYD initiatives, which are themselves embedded in a complex socio-political contexts.

Discussion

The findings of this study are summarized in Figure 2 and highlight a preeminent focus on the *youth development* phase of the YEC. With regards to youth development, SBYD initiatives met youth and families in their communities to develop personal identities and establish connections with parents, teachers, and local services that enhanced connection and relationships between youth and their social support systems. However, more politicized features of the YEC (i.e., youth leadership, civic engagement, youth organizing) were less evident in the sport pedagogy of the six SBYD initiatives. Our discussion focuses on the theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

Theoretically, the importance of developing identities around personal reflection and a sense of self in relation to others was evident across all six SBYD initiatives. For example, each initiative created welcoming and safe environments in communities and formed relationships with young people, parents and other adults that facilitated a comprehensive understanding of young people's life world. This knowledge not only enhanced curriculum but allowed coaches to engage in dialogue that fostered a heightened sense of social consciousness among youth that stimulated critical reflections about the world and how they wanted to engage in it. Previous research highlights the importance of leveraging leisure spaces to raise critical consciousness and shape identities tied to social justice (Pryor & Outley, 2014), which Brown and colleagues (2018) aptly suggested "requires shifting the focus from changing individual youth behaviors to focusing more on youth developing a knowledge of self in relation to their community and the world around them" (p. 694). Nevertheless, the sport pedagogy of many SBYD initiatives remained rooted in individualized conceptualizations of sport and PYD that emphasize personal outcomes (Coakley, 2011).

The second theoretical implication relates to socio-political development. Our findings indicate the SBYD initiatives adopted individual empowerment approaches to socio-political development that focused on key aspects of youth development and leadership. This aligns with previous studies emphasizing the importance of exploring and developing self-agency (Pryor & Outley, 2014), yet it is important to note that SBYD initiatives rarely engaged in politicized activities and lacked the type of mobilization and direct action typically associated with youth engagement. Even the two SBYD initiatives that were embedded in broader youth welfare organizations only sporadically engaged in political activities, which were usually initiated and organized by the parent organization. Findings indicated this was partly attributable to power dynamics stemming from the broader social, political, and economic system. Indeed, the growth in SBYD

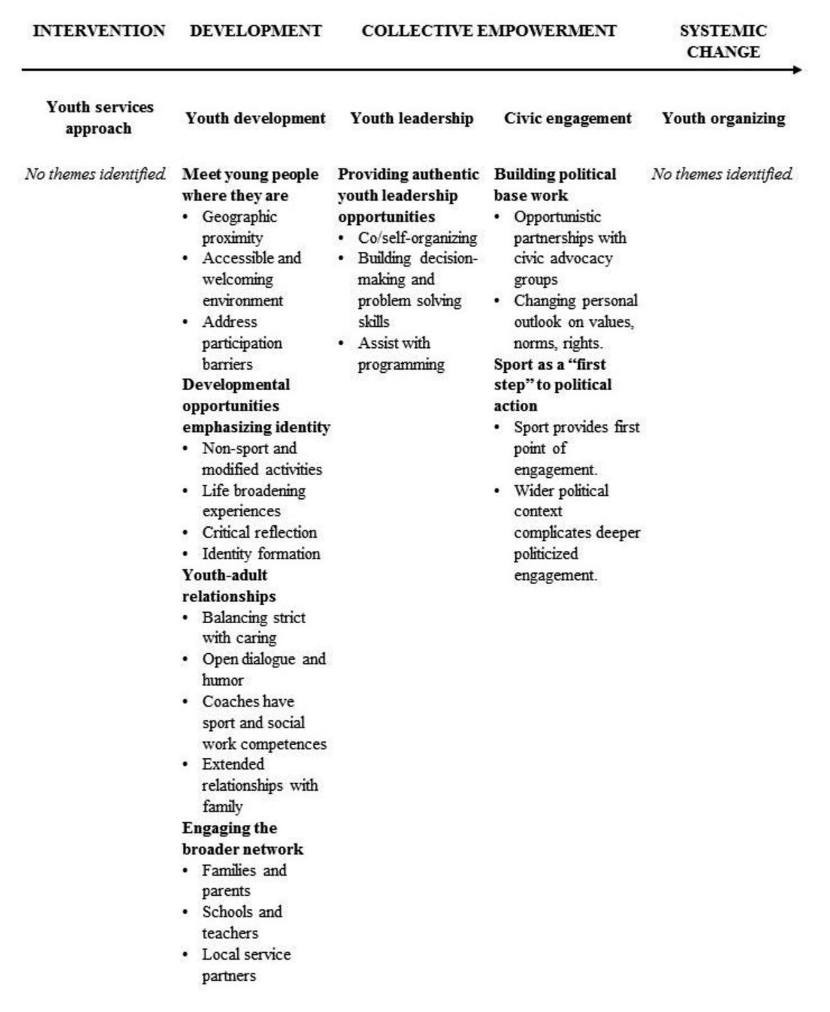

Figure 2. Synthesis of thematic analysis findings.

initiatives has coincided with shifts toward government disinvestment in social welfare (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011), a trend evident in the study context (see Loopmans & Dirckx, 2012). Based on our findings, SBYD initiatives occupy a somewhat precarious position within this climate, as head coaches explained how their dependence on government subsidies and support from local policymakers made it difficult to voice protest or counter-narratives that might disrupt the status quo.

This highlights a third theoretical implication related to the integration of power and politics into analyses of SBYD programs. A growing number of scholars have recognized the need for SBYD initiatives to directly address broader social, political, and economic inequities (e.g., Jones et al., 2020) yet have arguably fallen short of acknowledging the complexities associated with this endeavor. While most research has focused on how SBYD initiatives influence disadvantaged and vulnerable youth, Batlle et al. (2018) observed that

"comparatively less attention has been paid to how the socio-political context influences the development of youth sports programmes" (p. 853). Batlle and colleagues (2018) specifically highlighted the influence of neoliberalism within youth sport policy and emphasized the importance of understanding *how* SBYD initiatives are developed and *why* certain approaches, activities and outcomes are prioritized. The SBYD initiatives analyzed in the current study focused on internal development phases of the YEC that, in theory, compel youth to engage in more direct political advocacy and action. From this perspective, the underlying sport pedagogy was rooted in fostering dialogue and self-reflection, exploring norms and values, and cultivating political base work for future action.

However, sport was very much seen as a 'first step' to youth organizing and 'bridge' to more politicized action, as head coaches expressed caution when discussing the role of their initiative (and sport in general) in political advocacy and action. Consistent with Hartmann (2016), interest in sport was articulated as the reason why youth were attracted to SBYD initiatives and so coaches feared initiatives organized around politicized activities would not have the same appeal. Indeed, Hartmann (2016) suggested that many youth targeted by SBYD organizations just "tolerate" other educational curricula in order to "play ball", which is why coaches may have felt incorporating more politicized, non-sport components might limit engagement. Instead, coaches revealed a much more measured sport pedagogy focused on engaging youth through sport but leaving more direct, politicized action and advocacy work to youth welfare and social advocacy organizations. Interestingly, the rationale for this approach was not just to keep sport activities fun, but also because the resources other organizations have to support youth engagement efforts were far beyond the scope of any SBYD initiative.

This begs the question, how far along the YEC can (or should) SBYD organizations operate? Hartmann (2016, p. 208) mused:

> We would do well to remember that some of the most important benefits of sport-based programming for target [groups] are not about intervention and resocialization but about providing opportunities for recreation, fitness and leisure for populations and communities that are not well served by our usual market-based, profit-driven systems for provision.

Of course, sport is not an apolitical space devoid of the pressures induced by broader social, political, and economic policies. The establishment of SBYD organizations and the pedagogy upon which they are based did not just "happen" (Batlle et al., 2018, p. 853), and it is important to consider how sport is influenced and shaped by the policy contexts within which they operate. As Coakley (2011, p. 466) indicated, "politics include all processes of governing people and administering policies, at all levels of organization, both public and private. Therefore, politics are an integral part of sport" (Coakley, 2011, p. 466).

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