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Blind football and sporting capital: Managing and sustaining participation among youth blind football players in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Research question: The relationship between sporting capital and participation experiences in lower-middle income countries, such as Zimbabwe, especially amongst people with visual impairments, is hitherto unknown. This paper examines the participation experiences of Zimbabwean youth blind football players and asks how does the accumulation of sporting capital help in managing and sustaining participation in blind football?

Methods: The paper employs a mixed method approach and draws upon data from semi-structured interviews, participant observation, personal photographs, and the Sporting Capital Index questionnaire to analyse the sporting capital development of 14 youth blind football players from nine of Zimbabwe's ten provinces.

Results and Findings: The players' sporting capital domains were established early through a diversified range of formal participation in various sports, including goalball, athletics, and volleyball during primary school. Increased sporting capital highlighted transferability to different teams and environments to help manage and sustain participation in blind football. Sporting capital is increased by a varied sport offer, empathetic and skilled teachers and

coaches, opportunities to develop independence and a strong peer network, for example, through having access to specialist equipment. Taken together, accumulated capital empowered players to surmount a range of barriers, helping them to sustain participation.

Implications: Findings will help stakeholders, including national blind sport federations, National Governing Bodies, National Paralympic Committees, educational institutions and blind football teams, among others, to develop management structures and educational programmes to help increase youth blind football players' sporting capital and identify and manage negative incidents that might affect lifelong participation in blind football.

Keywords: Blind football, Disability, Sporting capital, Visual impairment, Zimbabwe

Introduction

The benefits of sports participation are suggested to be significantly higher for people with disabilities than those without (Brian et al., 2019). These benefits include improved self-esteem, physical abilities, and relationships with others (Labbé et al., 2019; Martin, 2013). In terms of adapted sport, blind football is one of the most popular Paralympic sports amongst people with visual impairments worldwide (Finocchietti et al., 2019). At the elite level of blind football, 40 nations competed in the five regional blind football championships held by the International Blind Sports Federation (IBSA) in 2019, significantly increasing the number of participating nations by 9% from 2017, 42% from 2015, and 90% from 2013 (IBSA, 2020a). However, despite the growing participation in blind football, and several other Paralympic sports, research examining the role of players' attributes, socio-cultural environment, and socialisation processes in helping manage and sustain lifelong participation is missing. Sociological studies of blind football are scant, barring the work of De Haan et al. (2014) and Varsky (2012). Notions of capital (social, human and economic) have been variously examined

in the context of sport management, in relation to event bidding (Finch et al., 2020), sports clubs and community identity (Collins & Heere, 2018), fans and social media (Fenton et al., 2021) and diversity in sport governance (Wicker et al., 2020) to name but a few. Rarely however, have studies adopted Rowe's (2015) theory of sporting capital.

Sporting capital is a composition of an individual's psychological, social and physiological domains that influence their sporting behaviour, current participation and probability of future participation (Rowe, 2015). It incorporates aspects of cultural, social and physical capital which function in the social field of sport with all its associated rules, regulations, and power relationships (Rowe, 2018a). In this paper we use sporting capital as a theoretical lens to examine blind football players' experiences of blind football in Zimbabwe. This study responds to Rowe's call to analyse how sporting capital is formed at a young age, who are the key 'influencers' of sport participation, and how these 'influencers' vary as young people move into and through their adolescence. This is the first study examining blind football in Zimbabwe through the lens of sporting capital.

Using data from semi-structured interviews, participant observations, photos, and Sporting Capital Index questionnaire, this paper critically examines the sporting capital development of 14 active Zimbabwean youth blind football players from nine of Zimbabwe's ten provinces, and its influence in managing and sustaining their participation in blind football. The definition of 'youth' adopted in this paper is consistent with the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) which is a person from the ages of 15 to 35. Findings will help blind football teams, educational institutions with visually impaired students, National Paralympic Committees, coaches, non-government organisations, and national blind sports federations to develop management structures and programmes to help increase youth blind football players' sporting capital and

identify potentially negative incidents that can affect lifelong participation in blind football. In doing so, we address three questions:

1. What socialisation processes contribute towards Zimbabwean youth blind football players' sporting capital development?
2. What blind football participation experiences increase sporting capital, how do they help manage and negotiate participation, and to what extent is sporting capital transferrable?
3. To what extent do Zimbabwean youth blind football players' sporting capital levels support their current and future participation experiences?

The next section provides a critical review of the literature, focusing on the development of disability sport and blind football in Zimbabwe, and contextualising sporting capital to this study.

Literature review

Disability sport in Zimbabwe

The emergence of disability sport in Zimbabwe can be strongly attributed to primary school education during the late twentieth century (Rugoho, 2020). Physical Education (PE) in Zimbabwean primary schools was neglected and trivialised by teachers before and immediately after national independence in 1980 (Mudekunye & Sithole, 2012). To bolster the position of PE at primary school level, the Zimbabwean government developed the National Sport and Recreation Policy (1996, revised in 2006) in alignment with United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (1978) International Charter of Physical Education and Sport to declare PE as a basic human right. Further, the former Ministry of Education, Sports,

Arts, and Culture Secretary's policy circular number 2 (1994) and circular number 5 (2005) stipulated both PE and sport as compulsory in all primary and secondary schools in Zimbabwe. Based on these policies and wider inclusive education policies (e.g., Zimbabwe's Education Act), students with disabilities should fully participate in PE and sport throughout their school years. However, implementation of the inclusive education policy regarding sport and PE for students with disabilities in schools across all provinces in Zimbabwe highlight significant flaws, including: lack of government intervention to impart human capital and inclusive pedagogical approaches amongst teachers; low expectations from teachers and students without disabilities; and no workshops on policy implementation, consequently leading to students with disabilities being excluded. Mudyahoto (2016), for example, noted that teachers feared that students with disabilities would get injured or disturb the rhythm of games, while Mudyahoto and Dakwa (2012) revealed that students with disabilities were stymied from fully participating in sport due to a lack of trained teacher/coaches, scarcity of audible balls, and discrimination.

To obviate some of these problems, and replace the Zimbabwe Association of Sport for People with Disabilities, the Zimbabwe National Paralympic Committee (ZNPC) was founded. Its remit was to oversee the country's development of disability sports from grassroots to elite level and take responsibility for Zimbabwe's participation at the Africa Union Sports Council Region 5 Games and Paralympic Games (IPC, 2012). The ZNPC are affiliate members to a range of international sports federations. Like other National Paralympic Committees in Africa, positions within the ZNPC are voluntary and the organisation does not receive any government subsidies. The ZNPC has developed a wide range of sports for people with disabilities, namely: para-athletics, judo, sitting volleyball, boccia, wheelchair tennis, goalball, wheelchair racing,

and wheelchair basketball (Choruma, 2007). Annual disability sport competitions include the Zimbabwe National Paralympic Games and Danhiko Paralympic Games.

Blind football

There are two formats of football for people with visual impairments: blind football and partially sighted futsal. Blind football is a derivative game of futsal for people who are totally blind. As a Paralympic sport, it follows the traditional futsal rules of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA, 2014), such as time outs, number of players, no offsides, and replacement of sent-off players. However, there are some modifications to enable people with visual impairments to fully participate (Velten et al., 2014). The ball—weighing between 510 grams to 540 grams—is adapted with six capsules with steel balls inside, glued between the leather and air chamber, ensuring that any move emits a rattling sound (Lima, 2019). When seeking, searching, or tackling for the ball, players must clearly say the Spanish word 'Voy' ('I go' in English) to avoid colliding with others (FIFA, 2006). According to the IBSA (2022) Blind Football Rulebook, teams consist of four outfield players who are classified as totally blind in the B1 category and a goalkeeper who is either sighted or classified as partially sighted in the B2/B3 category. However, in many countries, such as Hungary, Ivory Coast and Japan, individuals classified in the B2 category are allowed to participate as outfield players in domestic competitions (Goué, 2021; Japan Blind Football Association, 2022). This is due to either the low number of totally blind players, or when players' sight loss prevents them from playing in partially sighted football but also makes them ineligible for international blind football competitions (Gombás, 2013; The Football Association, 2022). All outfield players must wear blindfolds with eye patches to disallow any player from using any small light perception they may have to gain an unfair advantage (Abogado, 2009).

The sport is played on a rectangular pitch of 40m x 20m—either on artificial turf or an indoor court—with kickboards covering the whole length of the two touchlines to support orientation and ensure dynamism (IBSA, 2022). The pitch is divided into thirds by broken lines: defensive third, middle third, and attacking third (IPC, 2016). Three sighted guides play an important role in orientating the outfield players in their respective thirds. First, the goalkeeper—restricted to stay inside a 5.82m x 2m area—acts as a coach on the field by guiding players in their defensive third. Second, the head coach (positioned in the technical area by the kickboard) can only convey instructions to players in the middle third of the pitch. Third, the guide (positioned behind the opposition's goal) signals the location of the goal and provides offensive information to players in the attacking third. Competitive matches consist of two 15-minute intervals.

Blind football became an IBSA sport in 1996 following the creation of a Football Subcommittee to administer and promote the sport internationally. The inaugural IBSA European Championships were held in Barcelona, Spain, and the first IBSA American Championships took place in the Paraguayan capital city of Asuncion (1997). Crucial benchmarks in blind football international development were the organisation of the first IBSA Blind Football World Championships in Campinhas, Brazil (1998) and its debut as a Paralympic sport in Athens, Greece (2004). Although a women's competition is yet to feature at the Paralympic Games, women's blind football is well established in several countries such as Argentina, Austria, Colombia, India, Japan, Mexico, and Nigeria (IPC, 2017).

Blind football is referred to by different terms based upon native language, such as 'futbol-5' (football-5) in Spanish speaking countries (Paralimpicos, 2022) and 'cecifoot' (blind football) in French speaking countries (Cécifoot France, 2022). In Zimbabwe, blind football is called

'bhora revasingaoni' in Shona ('football for the blind' in English). It is also known as 'B1 football' or 'football 5-a-side' (The Football Association, 2022); however, institutional efforts are being made to globally recognise 'blind football' as the politically correct term worldwide. While IBSA have been committed to the term 'blind football', the IPC hitherto used the term 'football 5-a-side'. The latter term—albeit indicates the number of players per team—lacks distinction from the small sided version of football played by sighted players - 'five-a-side football'. It is also ambiguous in distinguishing blind football from partially sighted futsal as both formats have five players per team. These factors, alongside several others, supported the IPC's decision to begin using the term 'blind football' after the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games (IPC, 2021).

Blind football in Zimbabwe

Blind football in Zimbabwe was formalised in 2018 through a pilot project established by the first author (Richardson) and the ZNPC. A one-day workshop was organised by the ZNPC and facilitated by Richardson at the University of Zimbabwe to introduce the sport to the University's visually impaired students, as well as specialist teachers from Bulawayo, Masvingo, Murehwa, and Mutare (IBSA, 2018). Women with visual impairments started participating in blind football in late 2018 at Murewa High School after one partially sighted female student and one female teacher were selected to represent Zimbabwe at the 2019 IBSA Blind Football Women's Training Camp and Games in Tokyo (Kumuterera, 2018). Thereafter, two-day coaching clinics were held in various educational institutions across different provinces to train students and teachers in blind football and provide audible balls and blindfolds (IBSA, 2019b). In August 2019 the ZNPC, in partnership with IBSA, hosted a five-day national blind football coaching clinic at the FIFA Football for Hope Centre in Luveve township in Bulawayo for 16 coaches and 21 players representing educational institutions and

local disability sport clubs from six provinces (IBSA, 2019c). The coaching clinic featured a 'train the trainers' course for coaches and a training camp for players. At the end of the coaching clinic, each player received an audible ball and blindfold. Blind football was successfully implemented in all ten provinces of Zimbabwe in various settlement areas and educational institutions following a country-wide trip by Richardson and the ZNPC in early 2020 (IBSA, 2020b).

Sporting capital

Rowe (2018a) suggested that because sport is a socio-cultural construct with unique social norms, participation and progression in sport requires an individual to possess what he refers to as sporting capital. He defines sporting capital as "the stock of physical, social and psychological attributes and competencies that support and motivate an individual to participate in sport and to sustain that participation over time" (Rowe, 2015, p.45). Drawn together, these three domains interact with and combine an individual's overall level of sporting capital. Sporting capital can appreciate and depreciate, but is more durable than participation alone, which is characterised by high levels of flux. The theoretical model of sporting capital (see Figure 1) posits that an individual with positive scores on the three domains will have a high probability of current and future participation, while someone with low(er) scores will have a low(er) probability. In other words, people with high levels (score of 8-10) or moderate levels (score of 4-7) are much more likely to participate than their peers with low levels (score of 1-3) of sporting capital.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Sporting capital is a product of our socialisation experiences. It is also influenced by prevailing socio-cultural norms set by the family, peers, teachers/coaches, and the media. Individuals with congenital impairments are subject to an intermittent sport socialisation process, typically in special schools and disability sport competitions, while individuals with acquired impairments would have been subjected to different socialisation processes for varying periods depending on the age of acquiring their impairment (Williams, 1994). Therefore, similar to other impairment groups, individuals with visual impairments may experience long hiatuses in their participation based on available opportunities; socialising agents' knowledge of adapted sports (and how they are played); and the types of attitudes held towards disability. Rowe (2018b) proposed that increasing levels of sporting capital come with increasing levels of resilience to circumvent barriers and constraints. However, for any individual, their decision to participate will be mediated by the available opportunities, coupled with the barriers and constraints that impact on those opportunities.

Rowe (2018a) conceptualised barriers and constraints to participation in three forms: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. Intrapersonal barriers are embedded within the individual in the form of psychological or physiological factors, while interpersonal barriers are those relating to an individual's social environment and the people whom they engage with. Structural, or external barriers, are those separate from the individual and can exist in numerous forms, such as physical (e.g., assistive technology, adapted equipment, or facilities' accessibility), to the economic environment, including cost (both actual and opportunity attached to other demands on time), and social-cultural in terms of family responsibility. External barriers are invariably characterised by a lack of control or influence, real or perceived, by the individual over the nature and extent of the barrier. However, an individual's perception of barriers is known to ultimately play the decisive role in continuing or

discontinuing participation (Balaska et al., 2012). Sporting capital engages with barriers in nuanced ways through influencing personal management and negotiation strategies positively for people with high levels of sporting capital and negatively for those with low levels. For example, what appears as an insurmountable barrier to participation for someone with low levels of sporting capital may be perceived as a small inconvenience by someone with high levels of sporting capital.

Sporting capital is related to human, cultural and social capital in subtle and different ways but is not the same as these. Positive participation experiences are expected to increase sporting capital which, given the right conditions, can impact positively on wider social benefits, such as increased human, social and cultural capital (Rowe, 2018a). Conversely, sporting capital can also be decreased by negative experiences and inactivity with dropout over time. The *potential* 'transferability of capital' is an important aspect of sporting capital. For example, the sporting capital domains can also increase cultural capital through the status and social recognition accompanying sporting achievement and the physical qualities associated with it. Similarly, it can be envisaged how sporting capital can be translated into economic capital – e.g., through sponsorship. Rowe (2018a) asserted that increased sporting capital can also lead to increased social capital – i.e., social connectedness through sport. He advocated that social connectedness is not just a potential product of sporting capital, but rather an integral aspect or domain within it (Richardson & Fletcher, 2020; Greenwood & Fletcher, 2021).

Bourdieu (1984) previously envisaged a process by which one form of capital can be transformed or converted into another. If we accept Rowe's premise that sporting capital is a form of capital (analogous to human capital) it is not unreasonable to envisage the same would apply. For Rowe (2018a: 35):

> "attributes that make up sporting capital can also increase cultural capital through the status and social recognition that accompanies sporting achievement and the physical qualities associated with it."

This does not mean, however, that sporting capital is the same thing as cultural capital and that acquiring sporting capital automatically increases cultural capital or vice versa. Thus, realising the potential of sporting capital to transfer into other capitals is conditional upon the nature of the experience and context in which that sporting capital is developed and sustained. This is consistent with Bourdieu's idea of mobilising into particular spaces effectively.

Rowe does accept, however, that sporting capital is a formative theory and, like all theories requires others to test its usefulness and applicability. For Rowe (2018a: 1), "Theories evolve and are there to be tested and challenged in the real world". Sporting capital is described as:

> "a theory very much in its infancy insofar as it has yet to undergo road testing; but all theories have to start somewhere, and those putting them forward must, with an open mind, be prepared to take some bumps and bruises along the way. As we go down that road I anticipate healthy and constructive criticism but am optimistic that sporting capital will emerge as a theory whose time has come." (p.1)

Rowe goes on to advocate for others to test and develop the applicability of sporting capital through their empirical work. In the case of this paper, Rowe (2018a) contended that sporting capital is internationally transferable and applicable across high-income countries, but the relationship between sporting capital and participation experiences among people from lower-middle income countries, especially amongst people with visual impairments is hitherto unknown. This paper goes some way towards addressing this.

Methods

This paper draws on data from interviews, participant observation, questionnaires and personal photographs collected during Richardson's delivery of 14 blind football coaching clinics across Zimbabwe between February 2020 and March 2020. The study received ethical approval from both the University of Tsukuba and the Zimbabwe National Paralympic Committee. Richardson is the blind football project co-founder and coach developer who facilitated many players' socialisation into blind football since the project's inception. His 'insider' status in this environment provided a greater understanding of players' different backgrounds and relationships with key socialising agents. We are also cognisant of critiques of being an insider from a qualitative research perspective, though unfortunately, space does not allow us to explore these here (see Fletcher, 2014). While the nationwide blind football project is still on-going, this research focuses on experiences between October 2018 and March 2020, which involved coaches situated in and players living and/or studying in nine provinces: Bulawayo, Harare, Manicaland, Mashonaland East, Mashonaland West, Masvingo, Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South, and Midlands.

At the end of the coaching clinics all participants were invited to fill out the Sporting Capital Index questionnaire, and participate in follow-up one-to-one interviews. To measure players' sporting capital levels and illustrate a (positive or negative) correlation with both their interview responses and (current and future) participation), Rowe's (2015) SCI questionnaire was used to produce 10-point SCI scores, with 1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest. The results of the statistical procedures gave a relative weighting for the question items (in the construction of the three domains) between 7% and 32%. The psychological and physiological domains had the highest weighted impact on the overall SCI score (36% and 35% respectively), with the social domain having a weighting of 29%. For the sake of the questionnaire, participation in blind football was defined as taking part for at least one occasion a week (four

times in the previous four weeks) for at least 75 minutes duration and of at least vigorous intensity (see WHO, 2011).

Interviews followed the survey with the intention of collecting in-depth responses from participants pertaining to their experiences of the project. While sport management research on blind football is finite, other Paralympic sport studies (Hague et al., 2020; Vrdoljak, 2017) have used both focus groups and semi-structured interviews to capture the reflections and meanings people with disabilities attach to their sport participation experiences (Stride and Fitzgerald, 2017). Data were collected from 2 focus group interviews at two coaching clinics and 17 one-to-one semi-structured interviews at the remaining four coaching clinics. Nineteen people were involved in data collection: 7 active male players, 7 active female players, 2 male coaches, 2 female coaches, and the ZNPC President. Interviews revolved around three distinct interview guides that were cognisant of each research participant's background. All interviews were face-to-face except that with the ZNPC President which was conducted through email. Interviews ranged from 25 minutes to 104 minutes. They were digitally recorded, transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data were analysed thematically to provide rich, detailed, and nuanced accounts of the qualitative dataset. Initially, Richardson read and re-read interview transcripts and fieldwork entries, noting interesting features. Next, initial codes were generated through systematically coding the entire dataset and subsequently organising codes into 10 potential themes. These were reviewed by both authors to ensure they were a good reflection of the larger dataset. Finally, these themes were abridged into three more over-arching areas, namely: 1) developing sporting capital during early socialisation; 2) the transferability of sporting capital through blind football; and 3) sporting capital and sustained participation. For the purposes of this paper

these areas help us to understand the influence of sporting capital on entry into sport, sustaining participation, and how sporting capital might contribute to developing other forms of capital, which extend outside of sport. The following section will present the findings, contextualised against the participants' SCI scores presented in Table 1. Although the current paper relies solely on the qualitative data, we have included the SCI scores of each of the participants for illustration purposes.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Findings

Developing sporting capital during early socialisation

Important components of sporting capital, such as physical competency and self-efficacy are developed through socialisation from a very young age. Earlier research by Sherril et al. (1986) and Tepfer (2004) highlights the school environment, family, organisations for the blind (sport-related and non-sport related), and friends (sighted or visually impaired) as key socialising agents for people with visual impairments. Our findings support this, with each agent playing a role (to a greater or lesser extent) in building the players' sporting capital during their formative years. All except one of the 14 players experienced sport socialisation in primary school settings. Players with acquired impairments were initially socialised into association football, volleyball, or netball, and athletics or goalball after losing their sight. Conversely, players with congenital visual impairments experienced disability sport socialisation into athletics or goalball.

A growing number of studies have identified parental influence in their children's acquisition of sporting capital and their predisposition towards sport participation (Fletcher, 2020, 2021; Tinson et al., 2017). In this study, however, the influence of parents was minimal as, in most cases, parents lacked knowledge of what para-sports were and their accessibility. Data showed that youth players' acquisition, development and management of sporting capital was contingent on their teachers' knowledge and experience of coaching different sports, including para-sport. Participants such as Zira, who is totally blind and attends a mainstream secondary school, recognised teachers as a key socialising agent, recalling her introduction to goalball at primary school as being the result of "one of the specialist teachers". Further, style of coaching was critical to help players overcome intrapersonal psychological barriers. This was evident in Takudzwa's narrative. Takudzwa is a player with acquired blindness. He spoke of feeling afraid to race against his classmates in intra-athletics competitions during his primary years at a mainstream school before losing his sight:

> Sometimes the athletic runners who I ran with were a lot faster than me. I was very embarrassed when people laughed at me when I came in last place. Some teachers supported me, and I began to have more confidence to run…I was later selected to compete at district level.

In this case, the empathy shown from Takudzwa's teacher(s) helped increase the psychological domain of sporting capital, helping him to reach district representation in athletics, and further developing his self-confidence. Inevitably, not all players were exposed to this quality of coaching at school. As in other international contexts, the status of sport in Zimbabwe varies from one school to another, with a low status in some schools and high status in others; often signified by whether it features on the timetable. Thus, opportunities for high-quality socialisation that builds sporting capital may be unevenly distributed across schools based on teachers' attitudes towards disability, geographical location, human resources, and adapted

equipment. For example, Jaya, who is congenitally blind recounted her experience of not participating in sport during her primary education at a mainstream school:

> At primary I did not do any sport…They [referring to the teachers] could not take care of people with disabilities. They brought a ball for us from the Zimbabwe Council for the Blind. We used to play with the ball, but we did not know what to do with it…They just left us to play.

Jaya's experience is broadly reflective of other people with disabilities and other marginalised groups who do not experience adequate or positive support. Although Jaya would be considered to have a 'sporting capital deficit' during her primary school years (Rowe, 2015), the cause of this deficit cannot be attributed to her. Primary teachers at Jaya's school appeared to be unaware of what sports were available based on her impairment, and similarly lacked knowledge of how to make those sports accessible. Therefore, it is fair to say that the quality and style of teachers can either mediate or negate the socialisation process and development of sporting capital. Thus, training teachers (as sport coaches) is critical to building an individual's interest in sport and in helping overcome any sporting capital 'deficits' (Meir & Fletcher, 2019; Richardson & Fletcher, 2020; Fletcher et al., 2021).

Findings also showed how establishing peer relationships through 'sampling' different sports and separate engagement in sport competitions enhanced players' motivation to participate in sport, as well as increasing their self-confidence and social networks (Richardson & Fletcher, 2020; Greenwood & Fletcher, 2021). For example, when reflecting on his socialisation into athletics by representing his special school for the blind at the 2013 Danhiko Paralympic Games, Gwinyai, who lost his sight three years prior, observed:

> We had training before the competition for about one week. At first, I could not believe that I could run. But when I saw others who were blind running at

> Danhiko, then I saw also I could run, and I started joining them. I had never seen someone who was blind doing athletics.

Clearly, meeting other students with visual impairments had enhanced Gwinyai's sporting capital; specifically, self-belief in his ability (i.e., psychological domain) and peer relationships (i.e., social domain). Similar sentiments were shared by Shamiso, a peer of Gwinyai, who also attended the event. Although she did not compete due to being under-age, attending the event developed her ambition to play goalball competitively:

> I went there to enjoy myself. The event was social. I really enjoyed socialising with others like Tawana. We kept on practising goalball after that. We had matches in 2014. We scooped first position.

In both these examples, a peer network and opportunities to compete against others were important for improving competency in their abilities, self-determination, and ultimately sporting success. Competing at sports events was fundamental for maintaining participation among participants in this study; primarily because competition promotes social interaction and frequent contact with others (Misener, 2015). However, it would be remiss to assume that sport competitions have a desirable effect on every player's sporting capital development. According to the SCI questionnaire, Gwinyai and Shamiso both possess high levels of sporting capital. Thus, they were able to handle the psychological pressure and physical demands of competitive sport environments. This may not necessarily be the case for those with low(er) levels of sporting capital.

Participants consistently spoke about the importance of school settings to the development of their three sporting capital domains. In particular, the need for a varied sport offer, empathetic and skilled teachers, and opportunities to develop a strong peer network. Following on from this, the next section focuses on the transferability of sporting capital into other forms of capital.

The 'transferability of capitals' through blind football

Currently very little is understood about the type of experiences that increase players' sporting capital in the context of blind football, or the transferability of that capital. Rowe (2018a) viewed this 'transferability of capitals' as an important aspect of sporting capital. For example, the sporting capital domains can increase cultural capital through the status and social recognition accompanying sporting achievement and the physical qualities associated with it. Rumbidzai, a congenital partially sighted player from a special school for the blind, was one of 21 players invited to a training camp at a national blind football coaching clinic in Luveve, Bulawayo, in 2019. She reflected on how the clinic had afforded her opportunities to develop her playing experience (cultural capital), leadership skills (human capital) and relationship with youth blind football players from other provinces (social capital). Taken together these experiences particularly increased the psychological domain of her sporting capital. As she explained during a focus group interview with peers Chiedza and Tonderai:

> When I was not really into blind football, I was then called to Bulawayo…The ground was good, and I became interested because I thought if there is a ground like this, maybe we could go somewhere if we play football…I found out that Tawana went to Japan [for blind football]. So, we said we must have our own team [at school] and go outside Zimbabwe. That is when I got interested in playing against others…Who knows, you might be a Zimbabwean national team player for blind football.

Rumbidzai's positive experience and accumulation of several forms of capital at the national coaching clinic reinforces Rowe's (2018a) contention that positive participation experiences can produce a bidirectional relationship between increased sporting capital and other forms of capital. In Rumbidzai's case, the 'transferability of capitals' served to augment the

psychological domain of her sporting capital. Other players - e.g., Gwinyai, Garai and Chiedza – also developed positive psychological capital through the clinic. As a result, they too expressed the desire to represent Zimbabwe in blind football.

Players frequently attributed these positive experiences to enhanced resilience. For example, Zira and Tawana referred to feeling empowered to bounce back from the adverse challenges of developing the physical capital necessary to participate in blind football:

> My mobility skills were very poor. When I wanted to attack against partially sighted players, I could not manage. But now I am in the same group with those who are partially sighted. (Zira)

> Dribbling the ball was very difficult…but because of the training I am doing here I am getting better. My confidence has improved. (Tawana)

These articulations of resilience and overcoming intrapersonal barriers extended beyond individuals. A recurring narrative related to the acquisition of resilience and other forms of capital through developing interpersonal relationships with teachers and sighted students. These relationships supported players to accumulate different forms of capital; enabling them to overcome intrapersonal barriers. For example:

> The coaches train us very well. They understand that teaching blind football needs someone who is very hearted and does not give up very easily. They take their time. (Jaya)

> The coaches are very patient when training us because we are blind. When they are instructing us, if we cannot catch up, they are patient until we are now able. They know how to coach us. (Chiedza)

The consensus throughout previous studies on disability sport in Zimbabwe and across the world is that there is a perennial lack of coaches with knowledge of para-sports, adequate qualifications, and genuine interest to coach people with disabilities (Brittain, 2016; English et al., 2020). In this study, teachers developed blind football-specific human capital - e.g., knowledge of the game, communication style and tactile cues through their coaching experience in other sports and attending bespoke blind football coaching clinics held by the ZNPC (IBSA, 2020b). The coaches were able to create an environment for players to increase their sporting (and other) capital to overcome the technical challenges of blind football. For example, Figure 2 shows a teacher demonstrating to a player how to control the ball by using a tactile cue by applying pressure on his left leg with her hand as an indication to bend both knees and angle his right foot outwardly to control the ball with both feet.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Crucially, while increased levels of sporting capital helped players develop personal negotiation strategies to overcome intrapersonal barriers, they had less control over others, such as stigmatisation. For example, the Tonga ethnic group view disability as a form of witchcraft (‘kuloyiwa’ in Tonga), an ancestor’s sorrow or anger (‘mizimu’ in Tonga), or a punishment from God (Muderedzi et al., 2017). Richardson experienced the manifestation of these beliefs first-hand during a blind football coaching clinic he facilitated in February 2020. Late afternoon on the first day of the coaching clinic, over a hundred spectators rushed to the local field (see Figure 3) to “find out whether people with visual impairments can play soccer” (Pakarai). According to Pakarai, “some of them were laughing at our mistakes”. Clearly, any attempt to ridicule another (impaired or non-impaired) players’ capabilities is unacceptable. Where one has low self-esteem already, in part the result of possessing negative self-images about the

capabilities of their own bodies learned through numerous interactions with 'able-bodied' members of society, this feeling can be further exacerbated (Turconi & Shaw, 2021). However, Pakarai did not allow this experience to dissuade him from participating in the coaching clinic. Quite the contrary; Pakarai's high sporting capital levels (almost 8) and positive experiences from the clinic served to override the negative experience of being publicly ridiculed:

> I practise four times a week and ever since I started playing blind football, I equate myself to others who have no disability…No matter the disability we can still play soccer...When we finished today's session I wanted more.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

These experiences of blind football increased the youth players' pre-existing sporting capital levels and other forms of capital, namely: physical capital, positive psychological capital, social capital, cultural capital, and human capital. Comprised together, this wealth of capital empowered players to surmount a range of barriers, helping them to sustain participation.

Sporting capital and sustained participation in blind football

Rowe's (2018a) sporting capital theory proposes that increased sporting capital leads to more frequent and sustained participation over time. The context of player experiences articulated throughout this paper supports Rowe's supposition in emphasising an interdependence between sporting capital levels, available opportunities, appropriate positive experiences, and sustained participation. Tonderai is (congenitally) partially sighted. His narrative of moving from primary school to secondary school presents a good example of how sporting capital is more durable than life circumstances alone. Having played goalball and athletics at a mainstream primary school, Tonderai was briefly introduced to blind football. Although his experience of

blind football was limited, his high sporting capital levels, pre-existing social connections with the coaches (i.e., social domain), alongside his mobility (i.e., physiological domain), and self-confidence (i.e., psychological domain) helped him gain entry to the blind football team at his new secondary school; a school for the blind. Moreover, Tonderai's decision and ability to sustain his participation at secondary school was clearly mediated by the existence of an established blind football team, as well as experienced coaches. Taken together, these factors increased his desire to play by providing enjoyable experiences to learn and grow. He explains:

> When I was there [referring to primary school] the time was very short. We were trained in dribbling. But here [at secondary school] there are more experienced coaches and so many guys that are playing blind football as compared to primary school…I took their advice and now I am improving.

Not all participants in this study had access to the kinds of formal opportunities Tonderai describes. Where these opportunities were limited, players were able to sustain their participation by utilising their high sporting (and other) capital levels to create informal participation opportunities for themselves. Informal participation allowed the players to increase their autonomy through self-organising games and offering flexibility over the level of commitment needed/expected (Hylton et al., 2015; Rowe, 2018a). Takudzwa explained how he and Gwinyai self-managed their participation at school:

> The coaching part was lacking, so we were just enjoying playing by ourselves. We organised things by ourselves. Some of the coaches were not always available. Some of the new skills are from you [Richardson] from when you came in June 2019, such as dribbling the ball; going past your opponent; and maintaining your position. Afterwards, we kept on practising…Socially it is creating wonders as we are one team together.

Takudzwa is suggesting that his higher levels of sporting capital enabled himself, Gwinyai and some other players to overcome a dependence on formal socialising agents, such as teachers and coaches.

Positive experiences, while crucial, are however, not always enough. For participants in this study who attended the national coaching clinic in Luveve, being presented with their own audible ball and blindfold had been truly transformative. Having their own ball in particular, meant that most participants felt able to participate outside of school and specialist clinics. Moreover, having specialist equipment of their own meant they could socialise others (including sighted peers) into blind football. Already equipped with a strong knowledge of the rules of blind football, having the audible football gave players greater agency to use their experience (i.e., cultural capital), and their motivation/leadership (i.e., human capital) to provide fun experiences for others. As Chiedza articulated:

> I had that ball when I came from Bulawayo and I took it home. My mother was interested to see how I was playing, so I had to teach her first. Then from there, she called others saying: 'come and see that my blind child can play football'…They were saying 'she is blind how can she do that?'. They came and I started showing them some skills.

These examples from Takudzwa and Chiedza show how players were able to use their accumulated capital to become active socialising agents in utilising their friends who play football outside of school to manage their own participation.

Our findings show how sporting capital can be transferred to different teams and environments, and this can help sustain participation in blind football. Moreover, participants have also alluded to how the enrichment of other forms of capital can empower players, as socialising

agents themselves, to self-manage their participation through informal opportunities and, moreover, socialising peers into blind football.

Conclusion

This paper has explored whether the participation experiences of 14 Zimbabwean youth blind football players can help sustain participation in blind football through the acquisition and development of sporting capital. We have shown that through certain environments and participation experiences, both formal and informal, different domains of sporting capital can be increased throughout a player's life-course, helping to sustain their participation in blind football. The perspectives presented in this paper show that the players' sporting capital domains were developed early and involved formal participation in a range of sports during primary school. Teachers (especially those trained as sport coaches) were influential agents in enhancing their human capital. This finding reaffirms the importance of coaches, not just to PE and sport programme delivery, but in the physical, psychological, and social development of youth sport (Richardson & Fletcher, 2020; Greenwood & Fletcher, 2021). It was also shown that fun and enjoyable experiences in a social environment, involving shared experiences with peers and/or visually impaired sport participants (with similar or higher sporting capital levels), positively impacted players' sporting capital domains. These experiences significantly increased players' self-confidence (i.e., psychological domain), peer relationships and networks (i.e., social domain), and their overall positive attitude towards sport, which ascended into young adulthood.

Participants also described how their high(er) levels of sporting capital could be augmented and mobilised into other forms of capital, including human, cultural, and positive psychological capital. Taken together, these facilitated the development of a deep(er) sense of agency to create

strategies for negotiating and managing their current and future participation. Indeed, as Rowe (2018a) suggests, increased sporting capital leads to increased resilience. This resilience, coupled with high levels of self-confidence and strong relationships with coaches and other players, helped to support participants when they were faced with barriers outside of their control, stigma for example. As there is no existing literature on the reflections and experiences of blind football players' management strategies, this is a key finding, particularly as literature on disability sport has overwhelmingly focused on the barriers to participation rather than personal strategies to surmount barriers and enable participation. Among these strategies were attempts by many to lead the development of blind football among their family and peers. For example, receiving their own adapted equipment (audible balls and blindfolds), alongside their existing knowledge of the rules, self-confidence, leadership skills, physical skills, and network of peers, enabled players to organise informal games within their school settings and local communities. The ability to lead the development of blind football further enhanced their motivation to participate, not to mention their sporting capital domains. This is a significant finding and further supports arguments connecting enhanced sporting capital with individual agency. These are all important findings and add to rather than diminish the theoretical explanatory strength of sporting capital. However, notwithstanding the originality of these findings, there are more of Rowe's propositions surrounding sporting capital that require further exploration.

As this study was exploratory, and in acknowledging Rowe's (2018a) supposition that in adopting sporting capital as a theoretical lens there will be "bumps and bruises along the way" (p.1), we offer some recommendations for future development. First, conducting additional interviews with players' peers, coaches, and other socialising agents would have enhanced our understanding of their contribution to the players' participation experiences and sporting

capital levels. Second, recruiting inactive players would have provided further evidence to support and/or contest the assertions within Rowe's (2015) sporting capital theory, particularly concerning low levels of sporting capital and inactivity. Third, as with much qualitative research, data for this paper represents participants' views at a particular point in time. A longitudinal study akin to that of Kjønniksen et al. (2009) would provide a greater depiction of sporting capital as a development process. Fourth, we have not accounted for the perspectives of sport organisations, sport managers and/or sport coaches. To facilitate opportunities and create better experiences among visually impaired blind football players, it will be useful to understand the perspectives of those who oversee and manage those opportunities. Fifth, the SCI scores (Table 1) show that those who are totally blind with acquired impairments have higher SCI scores than those who were born totally blind. A deeper analysis is needed into the respective socialisation processes between congenitally totally blind players and players who acquired their blindness and its influence on their sporting capital scores. For example, as our findings attest, the latter group are often exposed to a range of sports (both mainstream and disability sport). Indeed, as Rowe (2018a: 161) has advocated, "Methodological research could also be extended to develop and test measures of sporting capital as they might apply to people with a disability." Sixth, and developing this point, Rowe does refer to the measurement challenges of applying the theory to people with disabilities – and in so doing acknowledges the possible limitations in the application of the 'standard' Sporting Capital Index measures used in this study. For example, question 33 in the physiological domain of the questionnaire asks respondents to rate their abilities and skills in comparison to people of their own age and gender. There is no reference to disability as a comparative personal characteristic. Further, the fifth sub-question of question 33 asks to rate hand-eye coordination, which would not be an appropriate question for someone who is totally blind. Future research might reasonably adapt the current measures to be more cognisant of disability as both a personal characteristic

and theoretical lens, or develop new measures that are related to people with a disability, or indeed, specific impairment groups such as people with cerebral palsy. Seventh, research could attempt to work with each respondent to map their experiences at transitional/defining points, such as set-backs, progressions, times of drop out, times of growth and development, among other things. For Rowe, developing resilience is key, and thus levels and times of fragility are important. Finally, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that this research was undertaken before the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to a sharp decline in leisure-time sport and exercise levels amongst nearly every sub-group worldwide. With many teams, particularly in the Western world, moving their sporting sessions online in reaction to COVID-19 related lockdowns, this inevitably created a digital divide between the 'haves' and 'have nots' of accessing the internet as an emerging socialising agent. Thus, further research is required on blind football players' sporting capital levels and their resilience to negotiate their participation amid the pandemic.

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List of Tables and Figures

Table 1. Sporting Capital Index Scores

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Location	Social Domain	Psychological Domain	Physiological Domain	SCI Score
Tichaona	35	Male	Bulawayo Province	3(10)	2.8 (8)	3 (10)	8.8 (9)
Gwinyai	19	Male	Masvingo Province	3 (10)	2.61 (8)	3 (10)	8.61 (9)
Rumbidzai	16	Female	Mashonaland West Province	2.62 (8)	2.6 (8)	2.87 (9)	8.09 (8)
Tonderai	20	Male	Manicaland Province (Homestead) and Mashonaland West Province (School)	2.62 (8)	2.8 (9)	2.55(8)	7.97 (8)
Tawana	23	Female	Harare Province (Homestead) and Mashonaland East Province (School)	2.62 (9)	2.63 (8)	2.65 (8)	7.9 (8)
Tsitsi	15	Female	Mashonaland West Province (Homestead) and Masvingo Province (School)	3 (10)	2.24 (6)	2.65 (8)	7.89 (8)
Shamiso	19	Female	Harare Province (Homestead) and Masvingo Province (School)	2.35 (8)	2.41 (7)	3 (10)	7.76 (8)
Pakarai	43	Male	Matabeleland North Province	2.79 (9)	2.38 (7)	2.57 (8)	7.74 (8)
Simba	24	Male	Matabeleland North Province	2.72 (9)	2.58 (8)	2.4 (7)	7.7 (8)

Takudzwa	18	Male	Midlands Province (Homestead) and Masvingo Province (School)	2.44 (8)	2.45 (7)	2.7 (9)	7.59 (8)
Jaya	17	Female	Matabeleland North Province (Homestead) and Matabeleland South Province (School)	2.34 (8)	2.3 (7)	2.74 (9)	7.38 (7)
Zira	21	Female	Mashonaland East Province	2.62 (8)	2.49 (7)	2.23 (7)	7.34 (7)
Garai	16	Male	Mashonaland East Province	2.53 (8)	2.67 (9)	2.08 (6)	7.28 (7)
Chiedza	17	Female	Mashonaland West Province	1.98 (5)	2.49 (8)	2.63 (8)	7.1 (7)

Figure 1. Theoretical Model of Sporting Capital (Rowe, 2018a)

Figure 2. Teacher demonstrating how to control the ball using tactile cues (personal photograph)

Figure 3. Pakarai takes a shot at the goal with a sea of focused spectators beside him.