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Theorising the potential of physical education and school sport to support the educational engagement, transitions and outcomes of care-experienced young people

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Abstract

Much research highlights the potential of physical education and school sport (PESS) to provide personal, social and educational benefits for young people. As such, it is suggested that PESS contexts could be particularly relevant to pupils who might be considered marginalised or 'at risk'—including care-experienced young people—affording opportunities to gain skills, connections and experiences to aid a positive educational trajectory. This paper presents findings from an empirical project that explored the role of sport/physical activity within the day-to-day lives of care-experienced young people in England. A participatory methodology, underpinned by a youth voice perspective, was employed to generate data via semi-structured, activity-based focus groups with care-experienced young people (aged 8–21 years) and via narrative interviews with care leavers (aged 23–32 years). Data were analysed using inductive and deductive procedures in a process also informed by the work of Bourdieu. Drawing on data related specifically to PESS contexts, this paper looks to theorise the potential of PESS to support the educational engagement, transitions and outcomes of care-experienced young people. It demonstrates how this context can support the acquisition of physical, social and cultural capital, which can both

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facilitate engagement and support personal outcomes. In addition, it documents how social support provided within/through PESS can be promotive of positive transitions into further and higher education contexts. As such, it can be recognised as a valuable site within the educational landscape for care-experienced young people.

KEYWORDS

capital, identity, relationships, transitions

Key insights**What is the main issue that the paper addresses?**

The paper explores the potential of physical education and school sport to contribute to the positive development of care-experienced young people. It examines the opportunities that care-experienced youth have to engage with such activities and considers how these can shape positive educational trajectories.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper demonstrates how physical education and school sport contexts can support care-experienced young people's acquisition of physical, social and cultural capital, which can both facilitate engagement and support personal outcomes. It highlights such contexts as valuable sites within the educational landscape for care-experienced youth.

INTRODUCTION

A significant body of research has pointed to the potential of physical education and school sport (PESS) to provide various personal, social and educational benefits for young people (e.g., Bailey et al., 2009). Often, such claims highlight the developmental capacity of PESS and reference its somewhat unique ability to enhance learning across the psychomotor, cognitive and affective domains (Green, 2020; Rossi & Jeanes, 2016). As such, it is perhaps not surprising that PESS contexts have been suggested as being particularly relevant for those pupils who might be considered marginalised or 'at risk' in education—including care-experienced young people—affording opportunities to gain valuable skills, connections and experiences that can aid a positive educational trajectory (e.g., O'Donnell et al., 2020; Sandford et al., 2021). Certainly, it has been suggested that PESS is a valuable site in which to promote social and emotional aspects of learning and socio-moral development, as well as to foreground values-based education (e.g., Hooper et al., 2020; McCuaig et al., 2015). Care-experienced young people—who can be defined broadly as those who are, for various reasons, placed for a period of time under the care of the state—are consistently identified as among the most disadvantaged groups in society (e.g., Mannay et al., 2017; Sebba et al., 2015). As such, this particular group of young people would seemingly have much to gain from engagement within PESS contexts. However, it is frequently reported that

these young people experience significant educational disruption (Harrison, 2020; Mannay et al., 2017) and that instability is a central feature of life for many in the care system (O'Donnell et al., 2020; Sebba et al., 2015). Thus, for many care-experienced young people, challenges with access, placement instability and frequent school moves could mean that the potential benefits afforded by PESS are not attained (Quarmby et al., 2018; Sandford et al., 2021).

While much has been written concerning the potential of education to support care-experienced young people's development and encourage positive transitions (Harrison, 2020; Sebba et al., 2015), there has been relatively little discussion focusing specifically on the role played by PESS. That said, a growing body of work is beginning to develop in this area (see O'Donnell et al., 2020; Quarmby et al., 2018, 2019, 2021; Sandford et al., 2021), though the focus has perhaps been more on the notion of sport and physical activity as a vehicle for personal development. Within this paper, therefore, we seek to focus on the potential of physical education as a curriculum subject—alongside the extra-curricular offer of school sport—to support care-experienced young people's educational trajectories. To do this, we look to share insights from our innovative work in the 'Right to Be Active' (R2BA) project, which focused on care-experienced young people's engagements with sport, physical activity (PA) and physical education (PE) in England (see Quarmby et al., 2021; Sandford et al., 2021). In doing so, we foreground the voices and narratives of our participants, drawing on these to help identify key factors that helped—or, at times, hindered—their engagements with these contexts and, in turn, influenced their educational journeys.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It has long been argued that participating in sport/PA can accrue developmental benefits for individuals, particularly for children and young people (Armour & Sandford, 2013; Rossi & Jeanes, 2016; Sandford et al., 2006). Indeed, the 'power of sport' to effect positive change is often espoused in discussions about youth development in and through sport/PA, with various skills, attributes or characteristics identified as potential outcomes (Holt, 2016). For example, sport/PA participation is seen to lead to positive health benefits (e.g., improved fitness, muscle development and bone strength), skill development (e.g., motor control, cognition and retention) and psychological outcomes (enhanced self-esteem, confidence and motivation), as well as promoting the development of key life skills (e.g., teamwork, cooperation, leadership and conflict resolution) (Eime et al., 2013; Hozhabri et al., 2022). In addition, there is also increasing evidence of the value of PA to improve academic performance in relation to enhancing cognitive functions and on-task behaviour (e.g., Daly-Smith et al., 2018; Norris et al., 2020). More recently, there has been a growing recognition of the social and emotional benefits of participating in such activities and the potential of sport/PA to contribute to an individual's socio-moral development and the establishment of good character (e.g., Armour & Sandford, 2013; Coalter, 2013; Hooper et al., 2020).

There is therefore much discussion about the developmental potential of sport, with an abundance of work looking to the contributions made by PESS as key contexts in which many young people engage with sport/PA. Given that young people often spend a great deal of their time within the school environment—and that PE is (in most cases) a compulsory component of the curriculum at primary and secondary levels—it is perhaps not surprising that PESS has been identified as particularly important in shaping young people's holistic development (see Bailey et al., 2009; Hooper et al., 2022; McEvoy et al., 2017b). Certainly, PESS is positioned as a somewhat unique educational context in that there is potential to enhance learning across the psychomotor, cognitive and affective domains (Green, 2020; Hooper et al., 2020; Rossi & Jeanes, 2016). It is not only lauded as a space in which to

gain physical skills but also 'life skills', with an increasing focus on values, socio-moral development and citizenship (McCuaig et al., 2015). The latter are often portrayed as being particularly valuable for those who are marginalised or 'at risk', as they offer opportunities to accumulate valued social capital and support individuals' transitions within and between social fields (Coalter, 2013; Rossi & Jeanes, 2016). Indeed, it is often the nature of activities and interactions promoted by PESS—opportunities for cooperation, collaboration and conflict resolution, for example—that are seen to afford such benefits, particularly within the realm of social and emotional learning (Hooper et al., 2020; McCuaig et al., 2015; Sandford et al., 2006). The social connections facilitated by such activities are also perceived to be important in fostering a sense of shared identity and belonging, particularly for marginalised youth (Spaij, 2015). It is for such reasons that PESS is increasingly being identified as having an important role to play in supporting the positive development of care-experienced young people within the educational context (e.g., Quarmby et al., 2021; Sandford et al., 2021). However, it is important to note that such outcomes do not simply occur by chance but reflect the careful and intentional efforts of staff to shape meaningful pedagogical encounters (McCuaig et al., 2015).

As noted above, care-experienced young people are often positioned as one of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in society, seen as being at risk of a range of adverse social, educational and health outcomes (Mannay et al., 2017, 2019). Indeed, within the United Kingdom and beyond, concerns abound regarding the systemic underachievement of this group and efforts have been directed at narrowing what has been referred to as an 'outcomes gap'—the difference in attainment (by various measures) between care-experienced young people and their non-cared-for peers (see McAuley & Davis, 2009; Sebba et al., 2015). Such differences are perhaps particularly evident within the educational field, where there is much focus on pupils gaining academic qualifications to facilitate positive trajectories—often via engagement in post-compulsory education (Howard & MacQuarrie, 2019; O'Higgins et al., 2015). However, research repeatedly identifies a disparity in educational attainment between care-experienced young people and their peers, with the latter regularly outperforming the former in achieving national benchmark standards. In the United Kingdom, for example, care-experienced young people are more likely than their peers to achieve below the national average (Department for Education, 2022; Howard & MacQuarrie, 2019). Within England, specifically, figures from the Department for Education (2022) indicate that the average Attainment 8¹ score for care-experienced young people (continuously looked after for at least 12 months) was less than half that for the overall pupil population. Indeed, only 12.6% of this cohort achieved GCSE² grade 5 or above in English and Maths, compared to 51.9% of the total population (Department for Education, 2022).

Similar findings of an achievement gap are repeated in wider contexts, with general agreement that care-experienced young people are often at an educational disadvantage when compared to their peers (e.g., Brady et al., 2019; Mannay et al., 2019). It should be noted, however, that challenging pre-care experiences are often a key factor here and that, for some, educational engagement and outcomes are improved by being moved into the public care system (O'Higgins et al., 2015). Moreover, negative educational outcomes are often impacted by intersectional disadvantage; which is significant given that many care-experienced young people also identified as having additional learning or support needs (Department for Education, 2022; Howard & MacQuarrie, 2019). Research has shown, too, that negative perceptions abound concerning care-experienced young people and that these are particularly prevalent within educational contexts, with individuals noting that they often feel stigmatised in school (by school leadership, teaching staff or peers) for their care status or face negative attitudes concerning their likely educational achievements (e.g., Ellis & Johnston, 2020; Mannay et al., 2019). There is clearly a need

to address such issues and, as noted above, activities that promote care-experienced young people's positive development within the school context—including PESS—can play an important role here.

However, research has documented that care-experienced youth often face a range of obstacles that impede their participation in both formal and informal sport and PA spaces, including PESS contexts (e.g., O'Donnell et al., 2020; Quarmby et al., 2018, 2019; Sandford et al., 2021). One of the common barriers noted is related to disrupted patterns of experience and the subsequent impact on individuals' engagements and transitions. Certainly, those in care often experience several placement moves (Shaw & Frost, 2013), and research has shown that this can limit the capacity to form stable relationships and result in problems with attachment and lack of resilience (Simkiss, 2013). For example, Mitchell (2018) noted that frequent moves between schools can result in a loss of community for many care-experienced young people. Similarly, in their study examining care-experienced pupils' (dis)engagement with physical education, Quarmby et al. (2018) have highlighted how disrupted placements can limit young people's capacity to accumulate social capital within this context. As they argued, 'reduced social capital, perhaps due to a recent placement move, is heightened in the field of physical education where friends interact and play with each other' (p. 724). Indeed, within wider analysis of our own R2BA data, we identified three interconnecting factors—people, places and activities—which seemingly play a significant role in impacting care-experienced young people's access to/experiences of sport/PA (Sandford et al., 2021). We argued that these factors configure in diverse ways within care-experienced young people's complex social landscapes and are mediated by the nature of the care context an individual finds themselves in. This, in turn, influences the structure of relationships/resources on offer and, ultimately, shapes the nature of young people's engagements with sport/PA in either positive or negative ways. Alignment between these factors creates optimum conditions for positive engagements and, thus, offers care-experienced young people the best opportunities to gain the potential benefits that are seen to accompany participation in such activities. However, the instability that is so endemic to many individuals' experiences within the care system globally (Green et al., 2022; O'Donnell et al., 2020) often means that there is a misalignment between these factors, and young people find themselves with patchy provision, piecemeal engagement or simply no opportunities at all. This is particularly noteworthy, perhaps, when we consider the school context and the disruption that many care-experienced youth face within their educational journeys (Mannay et al., 2017; Sebba et al., 2015), which has implications for their experiences with/in PESS. Indeed, with regard to PESS, school placement disruption and the consequent impact on building/sustaining relationships with teachers, peers and known activity contexts represents a significant challenge.

Nonetheless, it has been noted that, under the right conditions (i.e., where there is an alignment of key factors), schools—and specifically, PESS—can play an important role in supporting care-experienced young people's development and positive trajectories (O'Donnell et al., 2020; Quarmby et al., 2021; Sandford et al., 2021). Indeed, as seen above, research has begun to identify factors that can support such experiences, including establishing positive relationships, enhancing communication between key adults and agencies working with/for care-experienced youth, and promoting the knowledge/use of trauma-aware pedagogies/practices (e.g., Ellison et al., 2019; Quarmby et al., 2022; Walton-Fisette, 2020). However, there is undoubtedly more work to be done. In particular, we argue, it is important to examine more closely *how* positive change is facilitated and supported with regard to care-experienced young people's engagements, outcomes and transitions through PESS.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To explore how PESS can support care-experienced young people's educational journeys, we draw on the work of Pierre Bourdieu; particularly his concepts of habitus, field and capital (Bourdieu, 1985, 1986). According to Bourdieu (1977), habitus is a property of social agents that comprises a 'structured and structuring, structure'. To expand, habitus is *structured* by one's past and present circumstances (e.g., family upbringing) and is therefore the product of early childhood socialisation within the family and other social groups (e.g., schools, neighbourhoods). Moreover, it is *structuring* since habitus shapes present and future practices, and, finally, it is also a *structure* 'in that it is systematically ordered rather than random or un-patterned' (Maton, 2008, p. 51). This structure comprises a system of dispositions which generate perceptions, appreciations and, ultimately, practice. Central to how habitus works as an explanatory tool is the relationship between habitus and social space or, as Bourdieu (1977) terms it, *field*. Fields are defined as social arenas and intersecting sites of social interaction within which the struggle and contestation over resources (or capital) take place. *Field* is thus a relational concept in that it draws attention to the relationships between various social agents occupying different positions within a given field. Those who occupy the same field may share similar habitus and reproduce the culture of their shared social fields through practice. Fields are therefore key sites for the accrual and transmission of various forms of capital, which can be used to define an individual's position within a field and support access to/navigation through various others. Capital offers a perspective on the ways in which a person's resources are privileged, marginalised, traded or acquired within a given field (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu conceptualised capital in three fundamental types: economic, social and cultural. The former—economic capital—broadly refers to one's financial position, while social capital refers to an individual's stock of 'social connections' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 47). The latter—cultural capital—relates to all symbolic and material goods that might give an individual a higher status in society. Capital can therefore be considered as something that is owned, but also something that is embodied, and the amount of capital accumulated by an individual will make a significant contribution to the range of available choices within a specific field. Indeed, Shilling (1993) argues that the body itself can function as a form of physical capital, with greater value being afforded to those bodies that best meet the norms, ideals and expectations of a given field. This, we argue, is of particular relevance when discussing PESS, given that this is a context in which the body is so central to practice (Sandford et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This paper presents findings from a British Academy-funded project (Right to Be Active—R2BA) that explored the role and value of sport/PA within the day-to-day lives of care-experienced young people in England (see Hooper et al., 2021; Quarmby et al., 2022; Sandford et al., 2021). The main aim of the project was to examine the strategies in place to support care-experienced young people's engagements with sport/PA and to explore their lived experiences of these. Following ethical approval, the project was undertaken over a period of 34 months (between January 2016 and October 2018).

The broader project—consisting of four phases—involved reviewing policy documents (Phase 1) and distributing online surveys to both adults working with/for care-experienced young people and care-experienced youth themselves (Phase 2). However, the focus of this paper is on data generated via in-depth fieldwork undertaken in Phases 3 and 4 of the study (May 2017 and August 2018). Here, a participatory methodology underpinned by a youth voice perspective (Sandford et al., 2010) was employed to generate data via

semi-structured, activity-based focus groups. Research suggests that utilising participatory activities within focus group discussions can not only help to put young people at ease and build rapport with researchers (e.g., Alderson et al., 2018), but also facilitate their meaningful engagement in research and lead to more detailed, 'authentic' responses (see Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Within the R2BA study, drawing, writing and mapping activities (including time-space maps and ranking/debating quotes), as well as 'character creation' (creating pictorial representations of 'positive' and 'negative' experiences of accessing sport/PA as a care-experienced young person), were used to help engage the participants and stimulate discussion (see also Sandford et al., 2021). In total, 63 care-experienced young people (aged 8–21 years, 26 males and 37 females) from six different geographical contexts across England took part in the focus group discussions. Youth participants were recruited with the support of gatekeepers in the case study contexts, which were all organisations and agencies that the research team had some pre-established connections with (e.g., via previous research projects or shared contacts). Such approaches have been shown to facilitate access to 'hard to reach' groups (Kendrick et al., 2008), though care was also taken to ensure that the young people were not in effect a 'captive audience' and were aware of the voluntary nature of participation (McEvoy et al., 2017a). In addition, interviews were conducted with four care leavers (aged 23–32 years, 2 males and 2 females) to explore their reflective experiences and perspectives. These individuals were all recruited through the researchers' personal networks, which is perhaps reflected in the fact that all had accessed Higher Education contexts. Though not representative of the broader care leaver cohort (Harrison, 2020; Howard & MacQuarrie, 2019), the accounts of these individuals did offer valuable insights into key factors that shape care-experienced young people's educational journeys.

For the interviews, an unstructured approach was adopted to provide participants with control over the stories that were shared. This also offered opportunities for individuals to expand as needed on areas of perceived significance (see also Quarmby et al., 2021). That said, all interviews (which lasted between 1 and 2 hours and took place in a location negotiated between the researchers and participants) touched on broad concepts and issues that were seen to be central to young people's engagements with sport/PA (e.g., when they first engaged with sport/PA, who may have helped or hindered this process, what they think and feel when participating in such activities, and how they think they benefited (or not) from engaging in sport/PA). Narrative inquiry was adopted within the study as it focuses on the storied experiences of individuals and facilitates a deeper understanding of their lives within the social world (Smith & Caddick, 2012). As such, it was deemed to provide a valuable means by which to examine complex, subjective experiences, affording opportunities for individuals to share the kinds of personal understandings of their lived experience that can be lost when more traditional approaches are used (e.g., Lang & Pinder, 2017; Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

Both the focus group discussions and individual interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. All qualitative data generated within the study were analysed thematically, using inductive and deductive procedures (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). This involved the raw data being read and re-read by each of the researchers independently and codes being assigned to identify areas of interest and commonalities across the data sets before the research team met to compare analyses and identify and develop core themes. These themes were developed inductively (bottom-up, allowing the data to speak for itself) and deductively (top-down, informed by the work of Bourdieu). Influenced by the narrative approach of the care-leaver interviews and informed by the data generated through the task-based focus group discussions, this analysis served to highlight the stories shared by the participants of their own and others' lived experiences (see also Quarmby et al., 2021). As a final point, it is worth noting that both the focus group discussions and individual interviews resulted in the generation of rich, qualitative data. When considered together, it became evident that stories were an important way for individuals to articulate their engagements with sport/PA and so

we worked with participants—with the support of a graphic designer—to generate a series of ‘concept cartoons’ (Hooper, 2018) that might help to illustrate these stories and allow them to be shared (see also Hooper et al., 2021). Within the findings and discussion that follow, concept cartoons are included to highlight care-experienced young people’s engagements, transitions and outcomes as experienced in/via PESS contexts.

FINDINGS/DISCUSSION

We have outlined elsewhere how—when the conditions are right—engagement with sport/PA can enhance care-experienced young people’s outcomes in positive ways (see Quarmby et al., 2021; Sandford et al., 2021). Within the sections that follow, we look to focus specifically on the PESS context and draw on the voices and stories of care-experienced young people to demonstrate how PESS can support the development of valued capital that is transferrable to other contexts within the educational field.

Exploring the physical education and school sport landscape

People, places and activities

Participants’ discussions identified the school as a key place in which they engaged with sport/PA, primarily through the subject of PE. Although participants’ experiences of PE perhaps unsurprisingly varied within the study, there was a sense among many that PESS was somewhere that could support their positive engagement with school. In some respects, the PE space was perceived as a sub-field within the broader field of school; somewhere that shared features of the broader field (i.e., rules, regulations, processes, hierarchies, etc.) but that also had discernible differences (e.g., spaces, clothing, activities) that shaped different kinds of practices. The PE field was identified as a place in which to engage not only with peers but also with teachers (and thus accumulate social capital via enhanced social connections). It also offered opportunities to engage in activities that help to generate physical capital (skills, abilities), as well as promoting positive mental health:

It brings people together, (you can) gain skills like teamwork... it increases confidence and builds social skills. (Female, FG1³)

I love it, you get fit. I love to be fit and pull weights. (Male, FG3)

When I work out or exercise or play a sport, I just feel more relaxed after. It just makes me feel good if I’m stressed about something. (Male, FG2)

However, while there are noted opportunities to gain capital within PESS activities, it was also clear that the capital participants brought with them into this field (gained via their practice in other fields, such as the family) also played a role in shaping the nature of their experiences. Research has demonstrated that the PE field places particular value on physical capital (e.g., in the form of motor skills or fitness) and social capital (e.g., in the form of social confidence, leadership or communication skills) (see Bailey et al., 2009). However, these are forms of capital that many care-experienced young people may find difficult to accumulate beyond the school context and, thus, it is important to note that not all engagements with PESS were positive:

When you get put into teams if you don't talk a lot, you're not very sociable, you're just 'no'. It should help with your confidence and self-esteem, but it doesn't always. (Female, FG3)

In football, if you don't pass the ball and you pass it to the other team by accident, someone would say, 'You're really bad. You're blind' and stuff. (Male, FG3)

In PE, I don't know about anyone else, but I always feel really awkward. Everyone's running and I can't run because I get really tired. (Female, FG4)

The final quote highlights the pertinent issue of a lack of physical capital. Quarmby et al. (2019) have previously noted that due to disrupted sport/PA experiences outside of the school context, as well as in those early childhood years before an individual starts school, care-experienced young people often reach PESS contexts with a deficit in knowledge and experiences related to sport/PA. By virtue of these limited experiences, they are less likely to have developed physical capital (i.e., motor skills, fitness, etc.) to the same level as their non-cared-for peers.

Despite the potential deficits that may impact on their engagement in PESS, data from our study certainly seem to indicate that, as with the broader youth population (see Bailey et al., 2009; Beni et al., 2017), school is the main space within the educational landscape in which care-experienced young people engage with sport/PA. This is largely driven by a policy directive, with compulsory school attendance and a focus on education within care plans being overseen (often rigorously) by corporate parents (e.g., Local Authorities). However, it is also evident that while there is an official focus on ensuring engagement with education, PESS is not really prioritised within this agenda. Indeed, it was clear from our study that PE was often perceived as a subject within the curriculum that could be 'repurposed' for care-related meetings:

Once, at my primary school, I had a PEP meeting, and we were doing PE. I got taken out of PE and it was my favourite lesson because we were doing football, but I'd got to come for the meeting. (Male, FG3)

Such findings have also been identified in broader research (e.g., Mannay et al., 2019; O'Donnell et al., 2020) and perhaps reflect the relatively poor status of PE within the school curriculum (Harris, 2018). That said, the PESS field was one that repeatedly featured in participants' discussions of sport/PA engagement, and one that drew particular attention within the school landscape—often, though not always, for reasons relating to the capacity for doing and learning 'differently' in these educational spaces.

The PE field—which itself could be seen to incorporate different spaces or sub-fields, such as changing rooms, staff offices and sports halls/gyms—was identified by many as somewhat unique within the broader school landscape. Care-experienced youth often described this field as more 'relaxed' or 'informal', which helped to facilitate different types of interactions with peers and staff. Hence, it was for some a 'safe haven'—somewhere to go to when there was conflict in other places within school. A key factor here was the relationships that could be developed with PE teachers. For instance, while there was some discussion about PE teachers who were 'strict', 'lazy' or 'disinterested', there was also much talk of teachers who were 'nice', 'funny' or 'cool'. As one participant noted, 'I love my PE teacher a lot, they are my favourite teacher' (Male, FG3). Interestingly, there were also numerous references to PE teachers being among the most empathetic and caring school adults and individuals who care-experienced youth could go to for support:

I was naughty at school (and) none of the other teachers had time for me but when I got kicked out my classes my PE teacher would always say 'Come and sit in my office and do your work in my office and you can help me, you can do this and that'. So, I respected my PE teacher more cos they had the time of day for me. (Female, FG1)

Arguably, the (more) relational nature of PE is distinctive within the school curriculum and presents an opportunity to form relationships (or rather, build social capital) that are central to youth engagement. For young people who have experienced trauma—as many care-experienced youth have—the realisation that one adult is there for them can help to improve their ability to process and respond to stress, which may, in turn, help them be better prepared for learning and support sustained engagement (Ellison et al., 2019).

Alignment of key factors

The data presented above demonstrate that when there is a good alignment of people, place and activities, there is greater potential to facilitate positive experiences. This was illustrated succinctly in one of the focus groups via the 'character creation' task. In response to the question 'What would a care-experienced young person need to have a "good" experience with sport/PA?', the participants drew 'Sarah' (see Figure 1). Sarah was identified as a 14-year-old girl who 'loves sport and physical activity'. She is drawn with a big smile and is wearing 'her own football boots'. The text written around her includes references to 'supportive carers and friends', with direct links from this to 'school' and 'PE teachers'. When discussing Sarah's experiences, one of the focus group participants noted, 'She's positive and she gets support from school and home and PE teachers are like role models for her... She has loads of friends and she's a nice person... she has money (but) she spends it at the right time' (FG2).

Sarah's particular situation is thus facilitative of positive experiences, and there is potential—via the transfer of capital—for these experiences to support positive transitions within and beyond the PESS field (e.g., participating in extra-curricular activities) and, indeed, beyond the school (e.g., going to external sport clubs). The idea of alignment between people, places and activities shaping positive sport/PA journeys was one of those topics which came up repeatedly within focus groups across different contexts and, as such, it was used to generate a composite narrative which became the basis of a concept cartoon (see Figure 2). Entitled 'Looking Back', this cartoon is a reflective story or, as one participant put it, 'a circular narrative' that tells the story of a care-experienced young person who was introduced to sport at school, encouraged to develop her skills through a school club and who eventually achieved success in external sport contexts. The story that was co-constructed with the participants is shown alongside the images in the cartoon.

Like the points raised earlier, one teacher played a pivotal role here in supporting and encouraging the individual to engage in sport/PA. In so doing, winning a medal enhanced her stock of cultural and symbolic capital—something that is recognised as legitimate and/or valuable in a given field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). It was evident that these positive emotions helped to enhance the character's sense of self and formed an important part of their identity and shared connections with others. Longaretti (2020) has argued that engendering a sense of belonging in this way is key to supporting successful school transitions. As such, developing capital in PESS helps to affiliate an individual with the field, creating a sense of belonging that extends beyond PESS to the wider school field, which may prove beneficial in promoting/supporting young people's continued educational journeys.

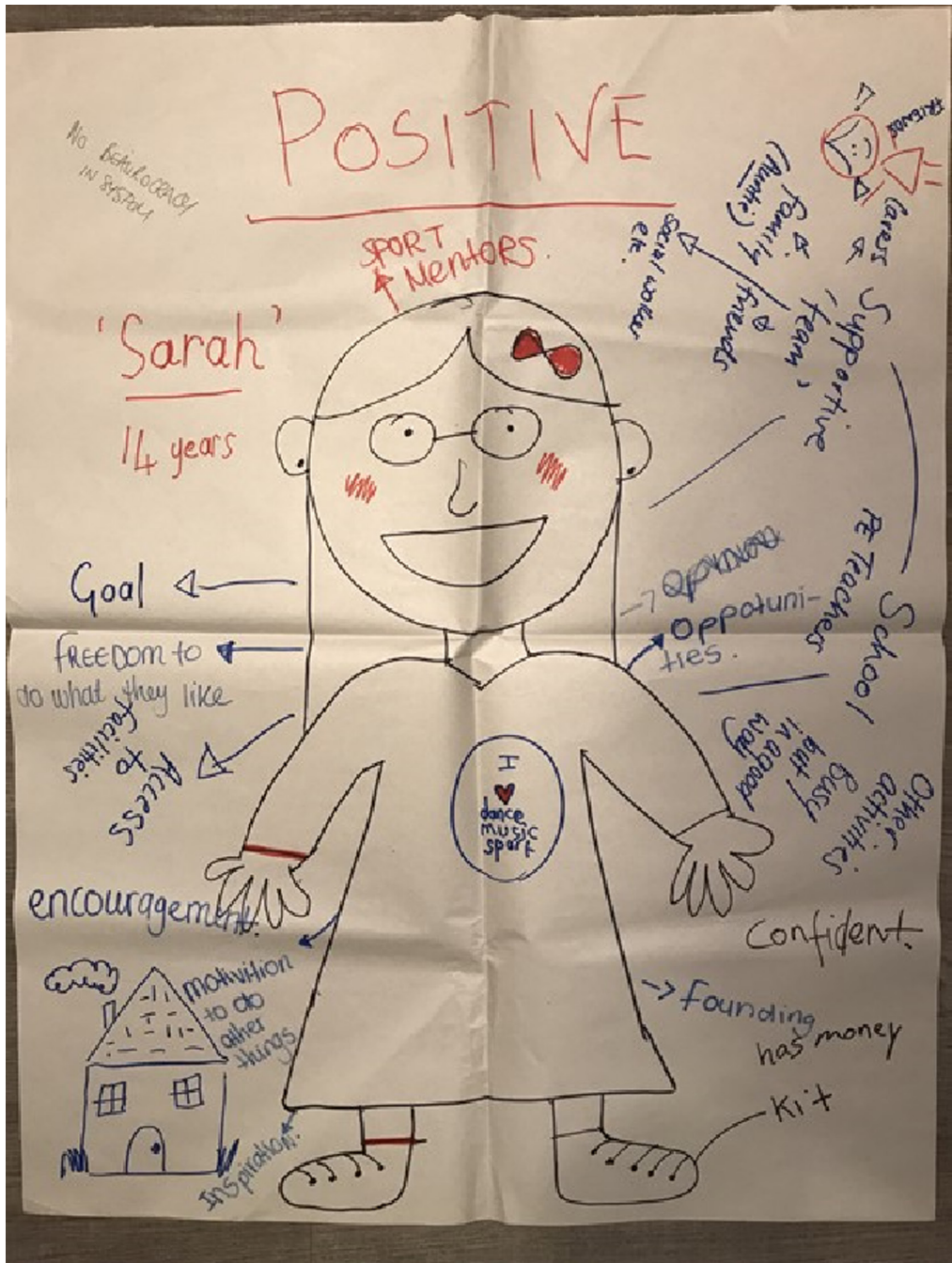


FIGURE 1 Character creation task showing a 'positive experience of sport/PA for a care-experienced young person'.

Supporting transitions to higher education

We have seen in the discussion above that engagements with PESS afforded opportunities for care-experienced youth to acquire, accumulate and transfer valued capital. In this section, we move on to look more specifically at how experiences in/of PESS worked, in some



FIGURE 2 This cartoon tells the story of a care-experienced girl who is looking back on a positive experience of sport. She is looking at a medal that she won in an athletics competition and is happy about the feelings this gives her. She remembers that when she was at school a helpful teacher pointed out that she seemed to be good at sport and might enjoy going to an after-school athletics club. This encouraged her to join the club and develop her skills in athletics, which led to success at school and county competitions. It is a happy memory.

cases, to support extended school engagement; ultimately, enabling positive transitions between stages of education and shaping individuals' educational journeys. Here, we draw on the data generated with care leavers to illustrate how PESS helped to positively shape their educational trajectories (see also Quarmby et al., 2021). As noted, it is important to acknowledge that the care leavers who participated in our study had all attended university, which makes them among a minority of care-experienced young people (Harrison, 2020; Howard & MacQuarrie, 2019). Moreover, all acknowledged sport/PA as having played an important role in their extended educational journeys. Within the discussions, factors of importance were, again, the people (e.g., PE teachers, coaches, carers), places (e.g., school, clubs, PA spaces) and activities (e.g., football, athletics, basketball, rugby) that had configured in varying ways within their broader social landscape to create conditions that were facilitative of positive experiences. However, of central importance were the opportunities afforded by sport/PA participation to accumulate valued capital, which in turn helped them to transition from one stage of education to the next.

This is not to suggest that there were no barriers to participation in sport/PA for these care leavers. Indeed, as with the younger participants, all care leavers spoke of experiencing significant instability while in care, which was hugely disruptive to their engagements with school. For example, Hayley (female, 23 years) noted 'I used to get moved every six weeks, so I didn't always know where I was going to be', while Meg (female, 25 years) commented 'before I was 4, I had 25 placement moves!'. However, for all participants there was a 'settling' of placement context over time and this stability facilitated more consistent engagements with school and, consequently, PESS. As Sam (male, 32 years) noted:

Although there was some structured sport and activity in school, I wasn't at school that often because of the nature of multiple moves... as I became more stable in the (foster care) placement and started to attend school on a more regular basis, I started to invest a bit more in sport.

Similarly, Hayley noted that maintaining contact with school became a 'non-negotiable' for her when there were discussions about moving placements, saying 'that was my compromise; move me anywhere you want, you're not moving my school'. While it was the connection with school in general that was deemed important here, it was also evident that maintaining her connections with the PESS context (including relationships with key teachers and opportunities to continue her sport leader role) was central to this decision. Interestingly, for the care-leaver participants, PESS was not always a space in which skills were developed or honed, but it clearly represented a significant place for early engagement in structured activities (e.g., through PE lessons, sports days or school teams). In most cases, it also offered an opportunity for individuals to engage in activities that they also found pleasure in outside of school, creating a connection between practices in different fields and shaping the development of a sporting habitus (see Sandford et al., 2021). For example:

One day, a basketball club came into my primary school and said, 'come to the club', so I did, and I've played it since. (Hayley)

I used to play football on the streets with neighbours (then) when I was 7 years old, I started playing football in primary school and I also started playing outside of school on a weekend... football really mattered to me. (Meg)

For Sam, PESS was also a means by which he was able to identify an unrecognised talent—running—and to be supported to develop this further by being directed to join an athletics club, with his PE teacher being central in aiding this transition. As he commented:

My entry into athletics was through the school's sports day. I ran the 800 metres in the school sports day [and] I won. As a result, I represented the school in the local athletics meetings... I had support from my PE teacher to say 'Actually, yeah, you were decent at sports day, and you were quite good at Leeds Schools, but there's a bit more to it than that, and you're actually a talented runner, [so] let's get you down to a club'.

For our participants, PESS was a valuable site for the initial acquisition of valued capital—both physical (skill, fitness) and social (positive relationships, sense of belonging)—which, in turn, helped to encourage more positive engagements with, and transitions through, school (see also Evangelou et al., 2008). Indeed, PESS activities were seen not only to contribute to the acquisition of skill to aid sporting performance, but also helped to develop skills that could be transferred to other contexts—both within and beyond school. As Sam commented:

Running has given me the tools to deal with life and the challenges that life presents... organisation, determination, [being] resilient, doing the things you don't want to do but knowing you have to do them [anyway]... When [I was] in Year 11, I thought, 'I don't want to revise for my GCSEs', but I know how to, because I'll apply the logic I apply to running.

In this respect, our data provides further support for the developmental potential of sport, PA and PE (see also Bailey et al., 2009; Holt, 2016; McCuaig et al., 2015). With regard to the concept of social capital, it was evident that PE teachers were significant adults within the educational journeys of these care leavers, offering support, encouragement and advice. Moreover, building positive relationships with PE staff through curricular and extra-curricular activities often led to further opportunities, such as leadership or volunteering activities. These, in turn, allowed for individuals to accumulate more capital and/or to exchange existing capital for other forms of capital (e.g., cultural capital). Hayley, for example, talked about being involved in leadership roles at school, which led both to part-time employment and her becoming a school ambassador within a national sport leaders programme. As she commented:

In school, I'd go down to the PE department to help out in free periods and at dinnertimes. I also used to work in the sports department after school (and) me and another girl went on to become School Ambassadors.

For Hayley, it was also clear that time spent with PESS staff outside of curriculum time afforded opportunities for conversations beyond the 'normal' (i.e., about lesson content), including discussion about school engagement and transitions into Further/Higher Education. Certainly, these kinds of informal conversations were seen to have supported the development of more meaningful relationships within the school context and allowed these care-experienced young people to be viewed through a more strengths-based perspective (Ellis & Johnston, 2019). Although referring more to the broader sport club context, Sam, too, noted the value of being able to meet with and learn from other adults, particularly those who could be seen as positive role models. Indeed, he felt that his own experiences in this respect had helped to support his educational journey through encouraging a focus on his studies and raising his aspirations:

I do think sport has given me so, so, so much... there are lots of things that you can't quantify, you know, relationships you've made, contacts you've made with people. When you think about social capital, I think that's a big thing... When would I, as a young man in foster care, ever get the chance to be friends with and be able to pull (as a contact) on a GP, a head teacher, a lawyer, a director or CEO of an energy provider? ... If you're around these people who have high aspirations... it's very difficult to fight against that. You can't help but want some of that!

Importantly, research has shown that positive relationships are central to creating positive pedagogical encounters, especially for pupils who have (or who experienced) difficult or challenging personal circumstances. Certainly, trauma-informed approaches within education (and PESS specifically) highlight the importance of educators who are empathetic and encouraging, and who take time to get to know and understand the young people they work with (e.g., Ellison et al., 2019; Quarmby et al., 2022; Walton-Fisette, 2020). Hence, educators play a key role in building relationships with care-experienced youth and providing an opportunity for them to accumulate capital that can be used to support positive educational trajectories.

CONCLUSION

Within this paper, we have drawn on data from the R2BA study to share insights into care-experienced young people's engagements within PESS contexts and how this supported their educational engagement, transitions and outcomes. Research indicates that positive experiences in sport/PA can support the acquisition of skills and characteristics that could, arguably, support further transitions within education (Holt, 2016; McCuaig et al., 2015). The work outlined in this paper would certainly reinforce such views and, moreover, identify PESS—a space located at the intersection of the broader fields of sport and education—as a valuable context for care-experienced young people in this respect. Moreover, our data would suggest that it is, to some extent, the structure of the field—and the nature of practice within it—that enable it to facilitate positive outcomes and trajectories.

Participants in our study certainly identified PESS as supporting the acquisition of transferable skills (e.g., communication, resilience, focus) that could be applied in other areas of school and enhance academic performance, as well as facilitating the acquisition of physical capital (e.g., motor skills, fitness) that could enhance sporting performance within and beyond school. However, it was also clear that the nature of social interactions facilitated within the PE field—regarded as being a distinctive aspect of the subject—were valuable in helping care-experienced young people to accumulate social capital. It has been suggested that, as a subject, PE has more potential to facilitate learning across domains than other areas of the curriculum, and that those working within the field are often more disposed to recognise and value social and emotional aspects of learning (Hooper et al., 2020). Certainly, our study provides evidence that positive, sustained relationships with caring PESS practitioners, in an environment that facilitates different types of interactions (peer-to-peer and pupil–teacher) and learning opportunities, can help to create a flexible context in which care-experienced young people can engage, belong and succeed. However, while there is potential for positive development through PESS, it is important to acknowledge that this is not always realised—often due to disrupted educational experiences. Moreover, the work of PESS cannot be done in isolation. There need to be connections within and between schools and with other aspects of care-experienced young people's social landscapes (Sandford et al., 2021). As Cameron et al. (2015) point out:

... for children to thrive and flourish, and realise their potential, and particularly where they have had very difficult early childhoods, they need to be cared for in school and educated at home. The integration of care and education in daily life is key. (p. 7)

We concur with this view but would also extend the discussion to say that all aspects of schooling—including PESS—are important to consider here. As noted, the data presented within this paper indicate that PESS contexts are well suited to supporting care-experienced young people's holistic development and can be particularly influential in shaping some individuals' transitions within education. The care-leaver data also highlights how support provided within/through the PESS field can be promotive of positive transitions into Further/Higher Education contexts. As such, we argue that PESS can—and often does—make valuable and significant contributions to care-experienced young people's education, affording valuable opportunities for positive engagements, transitions and outcomes. However, as noted, positive outcomes for care-experienced youth do not simply happen by chance but rely on the constructive actions of practitioners in shaping meaningful pedagogical encounters (e.g., McCuaig et al., 2015). In this way, we also contend that our research highlights important youth voice-informed lessons for PESS practice and can encourage PE teachers to reflect on their curriculum and pedagogies in light of the opportunities they afford for positive engagements, transitions and outcomes. It is our hope that this might subsequently enable them to take action and 'do better' for the care-experienced young people with whom they work.

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There are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The authors adhered to the BERA Ethical Guidelines (2018) and institutional ethical approval was secured from both partner institutions.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ 'Attainment 8' measures the average achievement of pupils in up to eight qualifications, with more weighting given to English and Maths.
- ² The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is a qualification in a specific subject typically taken by school students aged 14–16 years in the United Kingdom (except Scotland).
- ³ In order to preserve anonymity, the focus group contexts are not named here but are instead referred to by an allocated number, context 1 being FG1, context 2 being FG2, etc.

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