Title: Conceptualising Landscapes of Learning in the United Kingdom's Volunteer Football Sector

Abstract:

From grassroots to mega-event level, the sport sector has long-relied on volunteers to function effectively. While the nature of sport volunteering varies, scholars have identified that volunteerism is built around characteristics (e.g., altruism, civic participation, acquisition of social capital, personal and professional development) that draw individuals together and contribute to a sense of community (Eley & Kirk, 2002; Griffiths & Armour, 2014). In providing sites for life-skills training, mentoring, coaching, and/or leadership, volunteer communities in sport are also informal and formal learning environments. Notwithstanding research examining learning opportunities within individual volunteer experiences (Bartle & Craig, 2017; Misener, Doherty & Hamm-Kerwin, 2010), work remains on articulating the ideological, structural and experiential complexities of volunteering as pedagogical terrain. To illuminate some of these educational nuances, this paper interrogates the experiences of a cohort of regional football volunteers in the United Kingdom. Drawing on spatial theory, we utilise a holistic framework comprising thought, production and action space to understand volunteer communities and opportunities for learning therein. We draw data from questionnaires, and focus groups undertaken with volunteers working in one of the UK's largest provinces. We contend that football volunteerism comprises a potentially rich context in which an array of learning opportunities exist that can be nurtured and enacted upon over volunteers' life courses. Educational characteristics of volunteering, or the creation of effective learning communities in the sector are not, however, always guaranteed. Rather, individual and collective investments may be required by both volunteers and supporting organisations.

Furthering recent criticisms of the wider sport sector, and beyond affording greater appreciation of volunteer learning, we advocate for a rethink of organisation's ethical responsibilities and resourcing vis-à-vis educational duties of care and sustainability.

Key words:

Football, Football Association, Kent, spatial theory, learning horizons

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Introduction

Around the world, community sport participation is largely sustained by the efforts of volunteers. As scholars have previously noted (Eley & Kirk, 2002; Griffiths & Armour, 2014), people are drawn to the sector for various reasons, including love of the sport, fraternity offered by sport communities, social and/or altruistic desires, professional and personal development opportunities, and educational attainment. Community sport – which has been characterised by economic precarities, resource provision inequities, human resource challenges, and entrepreneurialism (Kiernan & Porter, 2014; Parnell, May, Widdop, Cope & Bailey, 2019) - is a context that affords valuable opportunities for 'becoming' and 'being' a volunteer. While volunteer experiences within sport are varied, it is evident that possibilities for education and training may sustain individuals' involvement. The creation and development of enriching educational spaces in community sport cannot, however, be guaranteed and depends upon volunteers' agency, goodwill, collective understanding, and organisational priorities and investments. Accordingly, and noting extant work on volunteer education (Cox, 2002; Sandford, Armour & Stanton, 2010), there remains need to understand volunteer spaces, experiences, and pedagogical opportunities therein. Not unlike other countries, in the United Kingdom (UK) football is among the most popular sport settings for volunteerism, and as such provides a key site in which to explore volunteers' educational development. Specifically, we investigate how regional and community football cultures in the UK comprise distinct educational landscapes in which to think, be and develop as a volunteer.

Our interrogations draw on Henri Lefebvre's (1991, 2003) conceptualisations of space, and the emphasis placed on the interconnected components of thought, production and action, to critically examine some of the complexities of the Football Association (FA) community football as an educational context of/for socially transformative volunteerism. Reflecting Lefebvre's interest in connectivity and disjuncture between ideological regimes, production

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and consumption modes and individual/collective enactments, we focus on prevailing ideas and value systems within football volunteering, the production of learning opportunities, and how capacities for educational development, leadership and social transformation may be advanced. Such a spatial analysis enables us to transcend current articulations of sport and football related volunteerism that have largely focused on motivations, barriers, experiences, and legacies. Moreover, in doing so we contribute to broader holistic understandings of volunteerism that both encapsulate complexities of a specific volunteer setting and aid understanding of the importance of sports' cultural, social, and political landscape for enabling (or inhibiting) learning opportunities and educational attainment. We take interest here in not primarily who volunteers are or how they come into the sector, but what ideas and values they share and hold vis-à-vis learning in and through the sport, professional and personal development, and educational skill acquisition, and how such aspirations may be mobilised, valued and sustained. The article commences by first situating FA volunteerism in relation to extant literature on volunteerism, the sustainability of volunteerism, and sport volunteerism as an educational space. Subsequently, we introduce the theoretical spatial framework and methodological approach. Drawing on empirical qualitative data taken from questionnaires and focus groups with volunteer stakeholders working within one of the UK Football Association's largest regional organisations, we discuss how volunteer thought, production and action contour a distinct educational landscape.

Sport and football volunteerism: Mapping a field of play

Creating conditions for educational enrichment

In the UK, sport accounts for 26% of the total volunteering activity (Sport England, 2018). Faced with continued austerity and scarcity of resources, volunteers remain among sport clubs' most invaluable resources (Eley & Kirk, 2003; Parnell et. al. 2019). The most positive aspects

of sport volunteering, scholars argue, is its ability to contribute to social capital development and social mobility (Koutrou & Downward, 2016; Morgan, 2013). Moreover, it has been found that community sport volunteering is a space for individuals to engage for the love of sport, to help relatives or significant others to participate in sport, maintain club affiliations or sustain the club's activities after their playing career has ended (Koutrou & Downward, 2016). These motivations, Morgan (2013) notes, differentiate sport organisations from other volunteer associations. However, notions of social capital also help understand how organisations and their members may be unwilling to positively respond to external forces that call them out to adapt their culture, be more welcoming to outsiders, and modernise their operational processes to improve and develop their paid and volunteer workforce (Morgan, 2013).

Yet, as noted in other sectors, volunteer motives can also vary by gender, length and type of volunteer experience, and life-stage. Moreover, Appe, Rubai & Stamp (2017) suggest that volunteer satisfaction is ensured when organisations align activities with individuals' expectations and motivation. To this end, grassroots football in the UK is indicative of informal volunteer recruitment in that volunteer positions are being filled by individuals who are willing to contribute but, invariably, may lack professional training to undertake roles effectively (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006). Herein lies the value of interrogating sport volunteerism as a learning space.

Progressing and sustaining volunteer learning cultures in sport

Pursuant to supporting and sustaining more robust volunteer cultures, many sport organisations and networks have invested in formal and informal educational development for volunteers. Such investment varies widely depending on context, resource, extant provision and structures, and political imperatives. However, degrees of consensus have emerged with regards to standardising and professionalising educational pathways at all levels (for example, with

regards to coach, referee, administrator, support-staff training), utilising education opportunities as a means of volunteer promotion and retention, and appreciating the value and accrual of informal and life-long learning (Allen & Bartle, 2014; Griffiths & Armour, 2012).[1] Organisational efforts here have emphasised the positive social transformation aspect of volunteering, possibilities for professional (e.g., administrative or managerial) skill acquisition, and development of social and political capital (frequently configured as 'networking').

In and beyond the UK, further research has drawn attention to the complexities of volunteer cultures and the possibilities therein for learning and life-long skill development (e.g., Coghlan & Gooch, 2011; Duguid, Mündel & Schugurensky, 2007). Notwithstanding varied contextual settings, scholars have recognised that while volunteer participation comprises substantive learning opportunities, such learning may not occur organically, be meaningful, relevant or be sustained. Moreover, while in some situations (for example, in education and community work) frameworks may be established to formalise learning via official recognition, accreditation and qualification pathways, perception of incentives varies among volunteers and may not positively correlate with recruitment or retention (Cox, 2002; Duguid, Mündel & Schugurensky, 2007). Whether volunteers see participation as a means and ends to educational enrichment, or whether individuals conceptualise volunteering as educational enterprise, however, may be moot points. Invariably what matters, scholars note, are cultural and social shifts occurring that underscore: 1) the volunteer sector as a valuable educational space (particularly when formal structures of education are under-resourced, eroded or absent); 2) the roles and responsibilities organisations have to educational duties of care toward volunteers;

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[1] The European Observatoire for Sport Employment (EOSE), for example, has constructed more robust transnational formal systems and processes for sport workers' professional training and development (https://eose.org/). EOSE has implemented various regional projects to develop grassroots sport and enhance the regions' volunteer cultures (particularly for youth and female participants).

and, 3) the need to recognise and resource learning and training pathways (Appe et al., 2017; Teissen, 2017).

Similar arguments have been put forth in sport. Most notably in the community sport, sport-(for)-development, sport management and coaching sectors. Research here has echoed the debates above regarding the economic, political and intangible value volunteerism has, the complex relationship between informal and formal education opportunities, and the roles of structural and agential factors enabling, inhibiting and/or sustaining learning (Benson, & Wise, 2017, Eley & Kirk, 2002). Scholars generally concur with regards to the importance of learning provision within certain areas of sport volunteerism, including coaching, officiating and administrating (Misener et al., 2010; Livingston, Forbes, Wattie & Cunningham, 2020). However, debate highlights that volunteer experiences, motivations and educational priorities fluctuate within and across clubs, sports, communities, and individuals (Bartle & Craig, 2017; Sandford et al., 2010).

Specifically, we acknowledge the obvious differences between upper leagues and tiers of the sport where organisations are more financially resourced, and the quality of provision for volunteer learning resources is generally better. Furthermore, outside of football, volunteer provision and experiences are also influenced by the performance-based State funding structures in which some sports have only enough resource to fund the practical and administrative aspects and cannot invest in or sustain volunteer education and training. Consequently, minority sports may have to rely on smaller volunteer pools, and/or they may defer to the NGB or outside of sport (for example, to the existing International Olympic Committee or other relevant International Federation leadership and volunteering schemes). Moreover, abilities to resource volunteering may also depend on the specific historical and cultural evolution of different sports (women's rugby in the UK, for example, has strong University origins and draws many of its volunteers from this space). Overall, volunteer

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practices vary across and between sports, and each sport's approach may be heavily contingent upon funding allocations and prevailing attitudes within the National Governing Body to support the club structure. In the UK, there appears a preference for a single sport and tiered approach where clubs take on primary responsibility to resource volunteering and decentralised approaches to volunteer training. In contradistinction, elsewhere in Europe, many countries adopt a multisport and/or integrated approach where sport and volunteer provision are centralised at local and/or regional levels, leading to sharing of resources and volunteer participants (Coalter, 2007; Koutrou & Downward, 2016; Morgan, 2013; May et al., 2013).

Volunteering football cultures in the United Kingdom

As a setting for volunteering, the UK football sector comprises inherent tensions and contradictions that both draw individuals to the sport, but also create inequalities of experience and opportunity across clubs and league levels. On one end, English Premier League clubs are primarily market-driven and corporatised, while at the other end of the spectrum, community football clubs operate with limited resources and rely on volunteers for survival (Kiernan & Porter, 2014). As Kiernan and Porter (2014) note, at a fundamental level there is an assumption that football clubs can effectively act as the glue that binds communities together through providing youth development and employment opportunities. FC United, a community football club in Manchester, for example offers volunteers a mentorship scheme and the ability to acquire a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ). Formed in 2005 by supporters protesting the takeover of Manchester United by American businessman Malcolm Glazer, the club is underpinned by a clear commitment to local communities; specifically, to democratising the game by making participation, fan engagement, sponsorship, coach and youth development more inclusive. In response to entrenched inequalities and deprivation within the local community, one of FC United schemes is focused on young NEET (Not in Education, Employment and Training) males. Participants have opportunities to receive mentorship,

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training and skill development to enhance their career and employment prospect. In addition to producing a new cohort of trained young coaches and administrators, the scheme enables participants to build social bonds, a sense of belonging to their surroundings, and ability to see how their contribution are valued within the community. In addition, participants also are taught the significance of volunteering. Here, while the formal acquisition of a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) was appreciated, participants drew meaning for the informal opportunities to experience a sense of belonging, pride and self-esteem through wearing the club's official kit in public and receiving the kudos of being associated with a respected socially responsible and authentically community-oriented organisation. As recognised in other sport areas (Giulianotti, 2015; Kohe & Collison, 2019; Parker et al., 2019), herein lies the paradox between the socially transformative potential within football volunteering and the necessity of balancing corporate investment with ethical social responsibility objectives.

Notwithstanding the wealth of community projects being undertaken in football, however, such initiatives do not naturally produce conditions amiable for learning (Griffiths & Armour, 2013; 2014; Kiernan & Porter, 2014). Yet, this concern rests uneasily with collective assumption the clubs' innate educational capacities to producing meaningful learning prospects that link to socially transformative actions for individuals and communities. The FA, to note, are already doing significant work in supporting grassroots coach education, youth player development initiatives, and reducing inequalities of participation (Parker et al., 2019). Nonetheless, as noted in extant research and this paper, there remains a disconnect between the FA's offerings, what some communities and their members feel is needed, how financial and practical resources are leveraged in aid of educational agendas, and what efficacy and authority clubs have to deliver initiatives and instigate cultural changes in the ways they desire.

Toward a spatial framework of grassroots football volunteering

There has been longstanding recognition for sport's value as an educational domain, and space for leadership, volunteerism and social transformation. Scholarly attention here has, variously, focused on learning in and through sport (Holt, 2016), virtues and morality instruction (Quennerstedt, 2019), participatory and collective communities of practices (Meir & Fletcher, 2019), and experiential learning (Benson & Wise, 2017). Such work has confirmed sport as a diverse educational terrain in which opportunities for skill development, career progression, social participation and mobility, and horizon expansion can be found. Yet, educational attainment in sport do not, necessarily, occur innately, nor can they be sustained without considerable thought, investment, and agency.

Building on work that has advanced philosophical and holistic articulations of space (Shields, 1999; Studdert & Walkerdine, 2016), our genesis is in configuring sport space initially as a site of meaning-making; precipitated by human thought that then becomes temporally and physically grounded (in this case, around certain forms of praxis, e.g., football or volunteer participation). Conceived in this way, it is thus possible to understand sport volunteering as borne out of collective ideals that endorse and inhibit forms of practical enactment and educational development. Here, we employ a theoretical spatial framework derived from Henri Lefebvre and associated scholars (Lefebvre, 1991; 2003; Lefebvre & Réguiler, 1986/2004; Sheilds, 1999). Lefebvre argued for the need to go beyond the fixed physical and temporal renderings of space (or *L'space*) and offered that the notion could be approached metaphysically. Lefebvre, however, understood the difficulties of metaphysical understandings of space and acknowledged that spatial complexities warranted critical intersectional and interdisciplinary interpretations. Such interpretations might reveal socio-cultural, historical and political forces (in our case, for example, ideas regarding economic austerity, sport fraternity, and civic altruism), structural modes of production (e.g. football clubs structures, formal and

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informal educational opportunities), power relations (e.g., volunteer and sport administration hierarchies), and, processes of spatial reproduction/consumption (for instance, continued attraction to football volunteerism, and regurgitation of prevailing community ideals). In terms of formal education forces shaping volunteer and participation space, for example, the FA have developed a new framework for operations entitled *The Whole Game* (https://wholegame.thefa.com/Account/Login?ReturnUrl=%2F). While the initiative focuses on administrative and logistical aspects of the game, it also provides some clarity and consistency with regards to developing, complementing and sustaining volunteering training and engagement. These activities augment informal interactions between volunteers at the club levels whereby they might exchange volunteer ideas and experiences. In additional, political context, forces and issues that manifest at the club level and between clubs and the FA can also mean that investments in volunteer education are not always prioritised, or prioritised to the same extent across clubs, leading again to disparities in the sector spaces. The notion of *L'Space* is, therefore, of value in examining volunteerism as an ideological construct within grassroots football communities.

Lefebvre considered the notion of *thought* central to examining connections between productions and actions of *L'Space*. Accordingly, we focus on some notable ideas/ideological systems that have emerged within the UK grassroot football setting. These include, though are not limited to, affection for the sport and its communities, networking, socialisation, educational development aspirations, leadership motivations, and altruism. Evidencing thought space, Lefebvre acknowledged, was difficult, but he advocated that it could effectively be sensed in distinct and discernible social behaviours and (inter)actions. For example, in intellectual and knowledge exchange, social networks, structural characteristics, organisational decision-making, and tangible practices. Within the FA context, thought manifests in what individuals/groups say and do not say about the game, its culture, practices and constituents,

or more specifically, what values are endorsed (e.g., humanitarian/sport ethos, safe space creation, duties of care) or condemned (e.g., violence and abuse, inequitable decision-making, non-inclusive and repressive leadership forms).

The existence of football volunteerism thought space is not fixed or static, but rather requires the ongoing production and, relatedly, the active consumption and perpetuation of ideologies by members. With regards to the regional FA in the UK, *production* space comprises diverse stakeholders, including the national and provincial FA entities, domestic clubs, community organisations and philanthropists, local governments, families and supporters, and a mixed pool of full-time, part-time and volunteer coaches, referees, players, administrators. All of these stakeholders contribute to what the space 'looks' like, and what educational/learning opportunities may be produced therein. Production and consumption are not benign processes but political and politicised acts, and there exist opportunities for individuals and groups to resist or transform production modes.

Consideration of spatial *action* is therefore necessary. Here, we consider how thought and production manifest within individuals', groups', and communities' experiences of the regional FA culture *in situ.* For this analysis, action comprises how volunteers engage with education in and through the sport, opportunities participants have in challenging or changing educational provision, and efforts made toward structural alteration (e.g., creating inclusive and safer spaces). Action in this sense synergises with Lefebvre's conceptualisation of the 'third space'; essentially, spaces configured toward transformative and social change/justice. We appreciate here the intersections and revisions by Edward Soja (1996; 1998) and others' (e.g. Bhabha & Rutherford, 2006; Chatziefstathiou, Iliopoulou & Magkou, 2019; Gannon, 2010) related work on the political, socio-cultural and emancipatory potential of the third space. While articulations of the third space vary, we draw on the points of coherence with regards to: tangible and intangible dimensions of space; the nuanced connections and hybridity between

ideals, practices and actions; and, the processes of new knowledge and (re)presentation (particularly with regards to education and learning) that emerge in and through spatial interactions over time. Ultimately, the spatial framework provides a means not only to interrogate football volunteering as an educational space, but seek ways ideas, structures and practices may be challenged and reconfigured toward more empowering and socially-just ends (Alhadeff-Jones, 2016; Ford, 2016).

Method

Commissioned by the regional Football Association (Kent FA), and congruent with the interpretivist nature of the study, the research utilised a mixed method case study approach. Initial scoping research was conducted to identify the nature of grassroots football provision in the UK, and relevant themes identified to articulate the case study's contextual characteristics. Scoping activities included, organisational overviews of the regions' clubs and leagues, physical mapping research to identify the scope of clubs and their volunteer activities, reviews of FA volunteer documents and related club resources, and informal consultation with the regional FA management. Subsequently, an open-ended online survey was developed, targeting Kent FA community stakeholders. The survey comprised five sections: 1) general football and sport engagement;2) satisfaction with local football structure and level of provision; 3) perceived barriers to football participation; 4) recommendations to improve the sport's appeal; and 5) socio-demographic information.

To complement the survey data, two focus groups were conducted with grassroots football volunteer stakeholders who offered more detailed accounts of the complexities surrounding volunteering and participation. Focus groups were considered appropriate means to enhance participants' willingness to share information and diminish the sense of individual scrutiny (Kitzinger, 1995). Separate email invitations to participate in the survey and focus groups were

sent out by Kent FA to their network. This process resulted in 468 survey and 15 focus group respondents.

For both focus groups, initial themes guided discussion. The focus group and open-ended survey guide was developed collaboratively by the research team and included feedback from Kent FA representatives. The first focus group was attended by 5 participants (1 male, 4 females) who were primarily active in women's football as participants and/or coaches. The second focus group included 10 participants (1 female and 9 males) from various grassroots football backgrounds (e.g., volunteer administrators, coaches, general volunteers, referees). The age range of participants was 18-73 years. Focus groups lasted approximately 1-1.5 hours, were digitally audio-recorded and later transcribed. Transcriptions were inductively analysed for emerging themes and their relevance to the study's conceptual focus. Survey and focus group responses were then triangulated to allow for relevant themes to emerge that accurately captured broader sentiments in relation to the spatial theoretical framework. Four key analytical steps were followed (Draper and Coalter, 2016; Ringuet-Riot, Cuskelly, Auld, and Zakus, 2014) which included: 1) grouping data by questions; 2) identifying independently and collaboratively response segments that highlighted the thought, production and action aspects of the spatial framework; 3) blending segments into broader themes including 'sustainability', 'love of community', or 'formal training'; and, finally 4) theme reduction and identification of the most relevant material (which we present below).

(Re)configuring football volunteering: A trialectic spatial analysis

Volunteer thought

Love of community

Congruent with the spatial framework, there were an array of beliefs, values and motivations that emerged in the Kent FA volunteer landscape. Although intangible, the ideologies

manifested across participants in a distinct 'feeling' about the sport, community and volunteer cultures and practices, and were borne out in participants' language and meaning-making. Participants' involvements were, foremost, precipitated by strong emotive connections to both their communities and the sport. These affections were a clear feature of participants' identities that fuelled volunteerism, sustained involvement and, for some, aided in mediating discontent when adversities were encountered. As one volunteer noted, 'Canterbury and district now run a Vets league which I set up. It took a lot of blood sweat and tears to get people to agree to it, but now that it is up and running, it is thriving.' (Volunteer coach – Focus Group). In some cases, the emotional conviction toward volunteerism was down to individual agency whereby particular people went beyond what might be expected of their roles. Several participants, for example, commented on the work of specific volunteers.

> …(he's) a great guy that's always looked after us, management-wise. Him and his wife basically, sometimes paying out of their own pocket for different things like fines or subs or completely bent over backwards to try and make sure that we've got eleven players for that game… (Female coach – Focus group).

As another noted of his charity, 'He brings his own urn. Tea and coffee, stuff like that…He just brings...It's all out of his own pocket...he's fantastic…From his point of view, it's really rewarding though. You get a lot out of doing it.' (Female administrator – Focus group).

Volunteer actions illustrate strong motivations to the role and a caring capacity to communities that echoes common altruistic orientations in volunteer cultures. Here, however, it is evident that such commitment also entails substantial personal resource (e.g., personal time, money and energy), and some volunteers feel strong expectations to perform duties to degrees of excess. While this altruism may be warranted, the extensive nature of individual's contributions

potentially limits pursuit of additional training and education opportunities. As one participated reflected,

> I think he does enjoy it because I don't think he would've put up with us for this long if he didn't. He's got to have something there. Last year I didn't think he was going to continue to do it, because it's a big commitment, he works a real job as well. (Volunteer coach – Focus group).

Volunteer dedications to their roles are demonstrative of a strong moral ethos at the heart of the sport community. Nonetheless, reading these experiences critically, it is evident that the allure of sport can veil a myopicism that masques uncomfortable aspects. For example, volunteers appear to believe their contributions cultivate a valuable collective spirit and accept the informality of volunteering. Yet, volunteers' thoughts here are borne out of accepting both certain organisational inadequacies and behaviours (e.g., that in the FA there is resource inequity, lack of volunteer investment, and bureaucratic managerialism), and a personal 'cost' to their involvement.

Latent leadership and educational development opportunities

An additional factor drawing individuals into football volunteering is the potential for personal and professional skill development. However, as some participants note, volunteering in community sport does not always guarantee training opportunities or learning beyond the immediate logistics of running the club. As participants noted, volunteering evidently required substantive effort. 'I had a career as a referee and that was hard work', one participant said, 'but Jesus, running the league. It's like having a full-time job. You do 3, 4 hours a night every night' (Development Officer – Focus Group). Such comments were echoed by others, and it was clear many volunteers saw opportunities to advance their skills sets, engage in leadership and advance professional development. Yet, the take-up of skill development opportunities, or even

seeing sport volunteering as an educational space, was not universal. As one participant suggested, 'there is a lack of people with the right skills and desire to run clubs, without these people there are no clubs and as such not enough teams for people to join.' Concerns about volunteerism and skills training were also exacerbated by perceptions that certain positions, or work needed within the club are not perceived as attractive to younger participants. 'When we talk about young volunteers', another participant articulated, 'the most attractive elements to youngsters are coaching, managing, refereeing. How do we get the next generation of administrators, or are we targeting the wrong generation to be the administrators?' (Volunteer administrator – Focus Group).

As the data above attests, these are some of the prevailing ideological schemas around which individuals unify and orientate participation and engagement. These schemas appeared to be conceptualised and manufactured at the foundation levels of the game and, evidently, formed a discernible vernacular for articulating how and why constituents volunteered. This is not to say that there are not tensions in how these ideas are manifest, interpreted and resolved *in situ* (for example, variances in understanding volunteerism, tensions between the community ethos and professional needs of the sport, and personal opinions held among individuals). Participants evidently believed, however, that educational opportunities did exist, there was also recognition that at present the culture and ethos of some clubs prevents educational investment from being a priority, and from participants realising training potentialities. As one participant suggested,

> There is too much fighting between leagues who all think each league is trying to
> screw the other league, when really we should be all working together...I think that's
> probably both across leagues in terms of an age category, so adult leagues working

together to get more people playing the game, but also going the other way through

youth leagues (Volunteer coach and manager – Focus Group).

In addition to political tensions, participants felt that economic, class, and social factors limited the sport's ability to be a meaningful space to pursue personal and professional development. As volunteers variously noted, 'it all depends on what level you would like to play at. I enjoy it as it's sociable, but very competitive at my level. However, if you don't have a job it would be hard to afford this week in, week out, as some clubs do charge a lot of money' (Male Administrator – Survey).

We acknowledge here that the presence of certain ideologies may be contemporaneous and spatially distinct. Furthermore, that it is difficult to discern the influence of external and other forces on ideological development. For example, the roles of the FA in contributing to prevailing hegemonies, and the place corporate stakeholders have in perpetuating volunteerism as corporate social responsibility. Nonetheless, data reveals that it is not just that there are predominant beliefs held within Kent FA's volunteer spaces, but also ideological systems that construct a certain culture and social understanding of the game and the types of activities and interactions manifest in the production space.

Volunteer production

Structural criticism of FA production

Although volunteers have agency to pursue educational attainment, from the outset of discussion it became evident participants felt that the responsibilities of provision fell strongly on the Football Association. Moreover, while the national and regional organisation had provided necessities for the game, investments in volunteer training (and more broadly with initiatives that might sustain volunteering) were lacking. As one volunteer expressed,

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…What's the FA's ever done that makes the job of the club volunteer any easier. Because frankly, I cannot think of anything they have done, whether it be minimum size of the referee's shower room, or whatever it happens to be...More regulations simply make people's lives harder. And the harder you make people's lives, the fewer volunteers you get (Volunteer Manager – Focus Group).

Such comments were demonstrative of other discussants' perceptions that the FA have not created a supportive culture and sustainable working environment in which all members feel valued and see opportunities to further their contributions. Here, it is possible to see how some volunteers acknowledge the existence of spatial and political hierarchies between themselves, the club, and the FA. Specifically, – and recalling the inherent tensions in spatial practices and in creating spaces of change - there is evident recognition that, in some situations, individuals do not (yet) have the power to advance their education development. Volunteer assertions here also link back to a default position iobserved in community/grassroots sport spaces whereby the organisation is often deemed responsible for everything, and thus easy to blame when things go wrong and/or when there is a lack of resources (e.g., Renfree & Kohe, 2019; Ringuet-Riot et. al., 2014).

As participants noted, the qualities of the volunteering space were not always perceived to promote a positive learning environment. There were, for instance, consistent comments regarding poor administrative structure and facilities, and support for female participants, brought about by disproportionate investment from the FA across the club system. As one individual noted, 'subs keep rising so financially is main reason along with shocking faculties and playing conditions' (Female Coach-Survey). Although such issues are well noted among grassroots football, the point here is that participants' feelings about the deterioration of the physical space seems to manifest at a psychological level in how they value their volunteering more holistically. The experiences affirm that an array of ideals (thoughts) manifest in the

interactions in the production space, that these are not always positive, and extant tensions require careful negotiation. For some participants, football volunteering is simply not perceived to be a fertile ground that produces worthwhile opportunities. Moreover, for some, the deterioration of clubs' physical spaces negatively impacted upon their beliefs about the sport and volunteering. These feelings translated into ambivalence about and reluctance toward volunteering, and, importantly, a reluctance to challenge the status quo. Participants often opined 'this is just how it is', 'this is just how it's done around here', or 'it's always gonna be like this'. Overcoming such resignation among members presents, invariably, one of the key challenges to produce differently in the space.

Prevailing concerns about the financial factors effecting football's ability to be a space of educational production cannot be understated. Here, participants spoke strongly about the overwhelming economic commitments required by individuals, families, and clubs just to sustain the sport.

> Finance is a huge one. Just running one adult team, our annual club outgoings are over £3,100...We are finding the costs and commitment is just too big now, players struggle to commit and either need to save money, or spend time with their new families. Football has almost become an inconvenience, as opposed to a luxury or something to look forward to (Volunteer Administrator, Focus Group).

In harmony, another participant articulated that the FA had failed to create an attractive educational environment that sensitively reflected young peoples' economic capital and priorities.

> 'There are a number of reasons for the lack of interest in young people. 1. Commitment. If young people are lucky enough to get a job, they are now expected to have to work weekends. 2. Other activities. This includes live football on T.V instead

of playing. 3. Cost. My club charges £10 Membership and £3 per week subs, and even that is a struggle to extract that from some lads. 4. There is also the fear of injury that could mean them being off work (if they are lucky to have a job). The compulsory insurance hardly covers medical costs' (Male Administrator-Survey).

The comment also was indicative of a general sentiment in the group that the sports' current set-up and FA's approach to attracting participants did not best reflect or respond to youth cultures. Notably, there is resonance in participants' experiences here to the privileging of particular ideals and modes of production within the space (or what might conceptually be understood as a hegemony of spatial production and reproduction). For example, that certain types of volunteering are prioritised and valued above others. An issue with such hegemony and tension is that it has the potential to become self-fulfilling and exclusionary (e.g., more active volunteers in one form of volunteering may make that area seem more vibrant, visible and dynamic space in which to volunteer). While clubs could have some resources and potential for valuable educational and learning opportunities, for instance, current approaches focus on promoting traditional forms of participation (e.g., playing, coaching or referring), rather than innovative solutions that might attract wider interest (for example, administrative roles, leadership training, marketing opportunities, or community/social responsibility initiatives). As one participant sighed, young people 'would rather go drinking than volunteer and play in a league so badly run' (Chairman-Survey).

Training schemes, qualifications and certifications

In addition to participants recognising deficiencies in production structures, there was a general sense that there was a lack consistency and quality in formal education opportunities (beyond that of coach roles). There was acknowledgement that a more 'structured' approach to training (either initiated by the club, club networks or FA) would be beneficial for volunteer retention.

Here, structure was conceptualised in terms of formal job descriptions, qualifications and certifications that provided a tangible sense of legitimacy to participants' work. Formalised frameworks that provide 'official' validation of professional development were perceived as valuable, meaningful and help individuals quantify their career progression. As one participant echoed, there was a need to make qualification routes appealing.

> …if you were 14-24 and part of the football future program, why would you volunteer…what is the draw to become an administrator, or should we be looking at the players that have stopped playing?...(there is a need to promote these opportunities as something to) put on their CV(Volunteer Manager – Focus Group).

However, selling formal qualifications as a means of recruitment and retention appears to be a more complex issue. As one participant articulated,

> …The cost of the courses. It's quite expensive. And clubs, players, individuals are not able to afford that, with some courses it's the length of time…you just can't afford the time to do it. If you condense it down and shorten it and make it easier, you're diluting it down so your standard of referees that qualify is not up to the previous standard (Volunteer referee – Focus Group).

The concerns over quantity versus the quality of educational production are not unfounded. Rather, inconsistencies in formal(ising) volunteer training in sport have been well noted (Benson & Wise, 2017). In the efforts to fulfil participation imperatives and follow National Governing Body directives, clubs have promoted training development schemes that are also not always reflective of clubs' needs or context. To note, clubs' decision making here may be, in part, a feature of the overarching power relations and structures that shape relations (and, importantly, also strategy and resourcing) between the FA, the regions, and their clubs. Nonetheless, emerging through participants' experiences is a sense of the value of two-way

As the participant above continued,

> Do we want to keep qualifying new referees, and you put them out there and they're actually not up to the standard? Or do we want to keep them longer in the training room until they're ready to go out there and get sworn at and abused. We'll do it with referees. We'll send them on a course, we'll pay, you referee for two years. Yet, people don't stay. I don't want to do this until the day I die, so eventually we need young coaches sitting on the table as managers…That's the sort of model we need to work out for the administrators. What can we offer them that will be the sticking point for them to stay? (Volunteer referee – Focus Group).

The comments here generally reflected shared sentiments among participants that the provision of formal qualifications was advantageous to attracting and sustaining involvement, but that there were no guarantees. Rather, and congruent with research on volunteer education pathways (Livingston et al., 2020; Misener et al., 2010), any provision needed to have wider relevance to individuals' lives beyond and after sport.

> It could be a qualification…that's another thing we are trying…some sort of formal qualification. That's useful actually during their working life as well…perhaps there needs to be like credits attached towards it that go towards university of things like that (Volunteer coach – Focus Group).

From the conversations it is evident that spaces of formal education are needed and desired among the football community, and that there were opportunities to develop football volunteer education in ways that would transfer individuals' life skills. Importantly, participants did feel formal routes were available in some areas (e.g., refereeing), yet provision in others (e.g.,

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administration and management) was lacking. As the concerns over production have illustrated, ideological congruence may provide a 'blueprint' to work toward, yet this may not easily be mapped onto the tangible landscape. While amiable conditions exist in some clubs for improved volunteer pathways, structural production does not always translate to individual's pursuit of educational goals. Yet, as evidenced in the proceeding section, there are examples of clubs and volunteers being proactive in the face of adversity.

Volunteer Action

Toward transformative futures(?)

As is well established (Bartle & Craig, 2017; Kiernan & Porter, 2014), volunteer experiences in football provide some participants with skills and attributes that may help them in their immediate lives and beyond. However, while clubs may provide some ideal educational activities and avenues for volunteers, the prioritisation of educational opportunities varies across the space. Firstly, and synergising with Lefebvre's emphasis on the emancipatory potential of the third space (Lefebvre, 1991; Sheilds, 1999), some volunteers felt there is a willingness for clubs to be hearts of community development and fulfil educational roles. Yet, volunteers noted there remained areas of resistance, conservatism, apathy, and a generation divide on changing the status quo. As one participant remarked about trying to take positive actions within their club, 'we went to him last committee meeting and said, we're thinking of doing some change…(he replied)…'Oh no, we've done it this way for the last 25 years. I've been doing it. I'm not changing how I do it. I'm the secretary, I'll do it.' (Volunteer administrator and manager – Focus Group). Such frustrations were not universal, and it was acknowledged the utilisation of new and old talent within the club was difficult to get 'right'.

> …it's getting that balance between your experienced people, who've been there, seen
> it, done it, know all the tricks in the book' to the new ones. I am not sure that the

administration is something that the younger generation really want to do. (Volunteer Coach – Focus Group).

Participants were also forthcoming with progressive action to establish better education provision, although there were concerns regarding how to ensure future sustainability. As one volunteer noted, other strategies could be pursued, 'By cutting the need for major red tape involved in registering and setting up a club every season, by looking at the quality of grounds and services' (Male, Manager/Administrator-Survey).

Cutting bureaucracy was one route to change, however, some participants felt Kent FA needed to better support and empower clubs to provide opportunities for their members. Rather than dilute the resources supporting new growth, energies needed to be directed to galvanising the volunteer opportunities of existing clubs. As one participant exclaimed:

It's no good offering financial support for new teams, when already established clubs and their players are struggling to make ends meet season after season…We are fortunate to have a sponsor who gives us £500 a season…Although appreciated, getting 5 balls through the Charter Standard Scheme is nowhere near enough, or a season's worth of free line-marking paint! (Male Coach/Manager/Administrator-Survey).

Participants offered other suggestions. 'County football across the UK should be helping to develop local leagues', one volunteer suggested, 'like developing web sites to help to increase income for local leagues with advertising to boost the awareness of grassroots football and the availability' (Male Administrator-Survey). Or, 'Just offer it [volunteer training] up to a club and say, "Have you got someone interested?". If they are, give them a kit. Give the club something back. Pay for their pitch hire.' (Female Volunteer Administrator – Focus Groups).

With it be coaching, refereeing, officiating or administrating, participants also believed existing systems were not working and changes were needed. While enhancing professional skills mattered, instilling in volunteers more holistic qualities such as mutual respect, social cohesion, (educational) aspiration, and care for the sport's communities were as desirable. As participants variously noted:

> Gaining a level one coaching badge is too easy so coaches tend to think they understand the game already just by gaining it. If it was harder or more intense it would help them and the game as there would be a few better qualified coaches (Male Coach/Manager-Survey).

> Improving coaching would make a big difference. As with the FA Youth Modules, a specific amateur adult coaching course would be ideal - short course, 4 days like the youth modules, I think would appeal. The commitment on a level 2 (14-16 days) is just not workable (Male Referee/Coach/Manager-Survey).

As another participant opined that, '[We need] better referee training and communication. More like rugby to install a degree of mutual respect from grassroots level' (Male Manager/Administrator-Survey).

Cohering with work on club affectations that drive individuals' commitments (e.g., Livingston et al., 2020), there were desires to transform grassroots volunteering into positive spaces. Yet, participants acknowledged that to make education pathways appealing members needed tangible and intangible benefits to feel valued and see ways that could transcend their immediate involvement. As one participant added, 'I love it, but it would be great to have more recognition for the hard work that gets put in by people on a voluntary basis' (Male Manager/Administrator-Survey). While this may not be needed or desired by all participants, it was felt that clubs should find ways (within existing resources and capacities) that such

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recognition and 'added-value' to volunteering might be promoted. Provide 'Incentives for people to give up their own time to run clubs', one participant suggested, to:

> Help to educate others of what is involved so they appreciate what you do and may then offer to help. Better clubhouses/ facilities for council run pitches. More referees - most are treated poorly by players and should be offered more incentives to do what they do. (Male Manager-Survey).

To bring about transformative educational futures for volunteers, it is evident that greater attention must be afforded to not just individuals' experiences, but also the ideals and values that they believe should exist in sport and in sport volunteering. Ultimately, transformative space creation would entail providing opportunities for individuals to have greater voice and political advocacy in shaping their volunteer environments, *and* involve working in concert with their clubs and regional/national organisations on educational interventions that better speak to their local contexts that *all* can take ownership of and accountability for. Here, FA volunteer managers and participants could look for inspiration in other community sport settings. For example, the UK's *Sportivate* progamme (a nation-wide sport initiate to promote sustainable local participation and sport cultures) follows a bottom-up approach whereby there is clear investment in the value of volunteer human resources, their involvement in decision-making and training, and in the delivery and development of sport projects that are responsive to local community needs (Johnson et al 2004;LivingSport, 2013). An outcome of which is provide meaningful volunteer experiences that might be sustained overtime.

The call to enact empathetic and safe spaces

Desires for volunteer recognition were also matched with shared opinions that clubs needed to make both their internal cultures and external community perception more appealing, safe, and caring. There was consensus that clubs had not always created the best learning environment.

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'I think that the deterioration of behaviour standards create a huge barrier', one participant opined, 'coupled with the inability of the local League's to deal with problems [there was the] weakness of the referees and leagues to stamp out teams with a history of bad behaviour' (Volunteer coach – Focus Group). Another echoed, clubs need to be 'more inclusive towards all family members and reduce the bad language and overt aggression' (Male Coach/General Volunteer-Survey). Opinions here reiterate participants' feelings that clubs need to accept duties of care they have to their members. 'That's the challenge', one participant suggested:

> I think a work programme for volunteer administrators…I don't know where to start…they've got to be looked after haven't they…It's the environment that's got to be welcoming. Whether you're a 16-year-old player or administrator. You've still got to make these youngsters feel valued and welcome (Volunteer administrator/ coach – Focus Group).

Although participants agreed the creation of safe spaces for volunteers was a fundamental condition of change, there was tension in where responsibilities for action lay.

> You want to stop all the abuse in professional football? Every referee needs to have the same procedure in terms of what they accept from players in a match…Referees need to say to players at the start of the game that swearing will be cut. Someone tells the referee to fu*k off? (Male General Volunteer-Survey).

'Stop managers encouraging their team to play a dirty match', another participant responded, 'then you would find more teams would be willing to play' (Male Manager/General Volunteer-Survey). 'Overhaul the discipline system', one participant further contended, 'if clubs get charged and they are in truth 100% innocent, we still get hit with a massive fine, and appeals are never successful…the system is simply NOT FAIR. We are not trusted, and without a fair system the game is not worth volunteering in' (Male Coach/Manager/Administrator-Survey).

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Action space tension may not be surprising given breadth of stakeholders in the sport, the varied motivations and priorities of paid and volunteer workers, and the emotive connections individuals feel for their club and sport. The strength of opinions also accords with research noting action, advocacy and activism in both education and sport spaces rarely comprises one voice or direction. Rather, action necessitates co-constructive, democratic, diplomatic, and respectful negotiation of individual and collective needs and desires (Lee & Cunningham, 2019; Long, Fletcher & Watson, 2017).

Conclusion

The Kent football workforce delivers a wide variety of roles to support the game's continuity and vibrancy. Notwithstanding pressures, limited resources, negative experiences and concerns over organisation support, there remains evident passion and dedication by constituents, a sense of camaraderie, and a duty of care toward developing community spaces and ensuring its future success. Notably, and evidenced elsewhere in sport (Livingston et al., 2020), the educational opportunities provided within Kent's grassroots football space hold appeal for many members, and contribute to positive experiences, community identity, enjoyable working environments, and personal and professional development opportunities. To make sport volunteer educational benefits known and valued, however, our findings indicate more work is needed to understand what brings volunteers together, what structures might enable learning, and what support there is to make learning opportunities meaningful and sustainable.

In examining this landscape, the spatial framework we utilised has been valuable in revealing an ideological consensus between volunteers, participants and clubs around what they want the sport/club to be, what values/beliefs and ideals within the space are encouraged, what formal or informal educational activities they desire, or whether or not they see volunteering as educationally fruitful. At the production level, clubs need support to think beyond the

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immediate practicalities and logistics of day-to-day affairs, with or in lieu of substantial and sustained financial resourcing. Yet, at witnessed in the action space, among volunteers there are well-placed, educated individuals who have capacity, desire and motivation to enact positive social change. While volunteers noted some good work within the sector (e.g., the FA's *Whole Game* initiative designed to enable clubs to work more effectively, **https://wholegame.thefa.com/Account/Login?ReturnUrl=%2F**), the sustainability of measures is predicated on the influence contextual forces (e.g., sport policy change, decreased community and sport funding, Covid-19) that may lay outside control of community organisations.

Therefore, beyond just financial and human resourcing, continued effort toward cultural and political modernisation needs to be made; namely, in supporting and developing organisational structures, educational pathways, and systematic endeavour to upskill the workforce as, where, and when clubs and their members need or desire. Achieving such transformation is complicated as inequalities remain across the sector, and clubs are not always best equipped to satisfy members' needs. Ultimately, however, we advocate for continued conversation about the nature and expectations of club-volunteer partnership that is underpinned by each party realising that the sport's sustainability depends on a spirit of mutual understanding and cooperation.

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