Listening to young people’s experiences of place, active leisure and inequality in Swindon

A report by Annaleise Depper
Your Space, Your Say: reporting initial findings

This report is a summary of the preliminary findings from Annaleise Depper’s PhD research. Annaleise is a PhD Student in the Physical Culture, Sport and Health Research Group at the University of Bath.

Project aims
The aim of the project was to explore young people’s experiences of leisure, active mobility and inequality in Swindon. This project identifies the complexities of active living and the everyday challenges faced by young people.

What do we currently know?
In Swindon, recent reports show that the majority of children and young people, aged 5-15, fail to achieve recommended levels of physical activity, and the results are worse for families living in areas of higher deprivation.

To get everybody active, everyday day. Swindon Borough Council highlight the need to encourage young people to make “positive choices to lead healthier lifestyles”. While Public Health England call upon local governments to deliver “healthy behaviour change campaigns”.

However, in the context of growing disparity, changing behaviours to be more active is still not an easy choice for many young people living in Swindon, and actually accessing the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity each day is becoming increasingly challenging.

Previous research highlights a range of structural, cultural and social inequalities that young people have to negotiate in their everyday lives. This complicates the individual empowerment and freedom of choice rhetoric we see across policy approaches to inactivity.

A social action approach
In response to rising health inequalities amongst young people in the UK, there is a need to listen to young people’s voices and experiences of active living.

Social action projects provide great possibilities for individuals to work creatively together and voice local insights in response to community issues.

Between January - September 2017, Annaleise facilitated 3 social action projects with young people, aged 10-17. A total of 12 young people, from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, were recruited through services and charities that support young people living in Swindon.

Over the course of the projects, young people put together a range of creative outputs, such as films, collages, and other visual methods, to voice leisure and lifestyles.

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Thinking about active leisure through young people’s experiences

Peers and family life
- A key finding from the project was that enjoying active leisure is all about people and relationships. Young people need social support from friendship groups to feel confident when engaging in leisure activities. For some young people, spending time with family members/careers is more occasional, as they feel embarrassed to be seen with family in public spaces, such as going for a walk round the local park or shops.

- Negative experiences with peers, such as conflict or hate-speech for “being different”, can negatively impact on young people’s self-worth, self-confidence, mental wellbeing and happiness.

- Both boys and girls can be apprehensive about joining new leisure activities on their own, as they feel self-conscious about their body, appearance or ability.

- At times, family life poses significant difficulties for young people being able to spend time for leisure, for reasons such as; bereavements, loss of employment, divorce, experiencing foster care, or being a young carer.

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References

Your Say:

“Yeah and with a carer, you are very responsible for that person… so you might not be able to go out and do other things”
Megan, aged 16

“What if you show up not the fittest person in the world?”
Will, aged 14

“I know a few people who have been bullied… it’s gonna affect them mentally and internally, how can you face yourself in public without trying to duck away from other people’s voices?”
Louise, aged 13

“Some people left [Squash club] cause they don’t feel welcome, there’s no community kind of feeling”
Louise, aged 13

“Oh I hate, that’s the most embarrassing thing ever going to the park… if it’s anywhere near where you live. I’m alright with the family thing but if it’s so close then I’m like no”
Megan, aged 16
The need for informal, alternative forms of active living

- Young people can often feel disengaged in Physical Education lessons, where they have a lack of autonomy on lesson options that are pre-determined and often reliant gendered assumptions about boys’ and girls’ sports.
- In contrast, young people value non-traditional activities such as ice skating, trampoline parks, bike rides, American football, outdoor and indoor skate parks, outdoor adventure parks, walking through the shops and going to parks with ponds, nature and woodland areas.
- Still, young people are critical about the lack of accessible opportunities for these alternative activities. Many young people turn to playing indoors on games consoles or mobile phones, as social media and technology plays a central role in their everyday lives.
- We can see that ‘physical activity’ has many different meanings for young people. To fully appreciate all of young people’s experiences, the term “embodied mobility” can help us think about physical activity in not just a traditional sense, but relating to both active and inactive bodies, leisure, play, social activities, education, and commuting practices.

Feeling unsafe and fearing crime in Swindon

- The perception of risk in Swindon often constrains young people’s independent mobility around community spaces. For some young people, parents restrict when and where they are allowed to spend time for leisure.
- Feeling intimidated by “gangs” or other teenagers can also make young people feel nervous venturing into certain “risky” areas associated with crime.
- Young people are also critical of how many adults have a negative opinion of teenagers in groups, even when they are not always being disruptive or antisocial, as this makes them feel less welcome walking around public spaces.

Cost, transport and accessing leisure

- Where young people live, interact and engage with the environment has significant implications on health inequalities.
- Young people navigate an array of structural factors in their everyday lives, including; not having the sufficient means to travel to places of leisure due to cost, distance, or parents not having access to means of transport. As a result of financial difficulties at home, some young people are also seeking part time jobs as they feel anxious about future job security or high University fees.
- Young people are also critical of the shift towards privatised leisure facilities in Swindon, as they feel these companies do not have young people in their best interests.

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- Young people are also critical of the shift towards privatised leisure facilities in Swindon, as they feel these companies do not have young people in their best interests.
Affective leisure spaces: busy streets to peaceful parks

- When we think about leisure space, it is often thought of as a static construct that young people may or may not occupy for leisure.
- However, it is important to consider young people’s affective experiences of places and their journeys to get to leisure spaces. Young people each have very different embodied experiences of travelling through and negotiating community spaces.
- Young people at times welcome the more tranquil spaces of parks with lakes, trees and open nature spaces. There is a desire to slow down their experiences of active mobility and escape from the uncertainties and business of certain places where they feel watched or under surveillance of adults.

“Because it’s [the park is] calm and chilled and there’s no traffic, like constant traffic. And it’s a place where you can just sit and relax. It’s like even if you’re in your favourite shop, you’re all constantly like watched”
Megan, aged 16

“But when you’re in parks like this, with like you know you’ve got your birds... it’s all calm, it’s just nice to sit and chill”
Megan, aged 16

What can we learn from young people’s insights?

Supporting young people

- Further support from charities and the council is needed to help families and young people facing inequalities
- More job centres and flexible opportunities to work for families with children
- Charities and groups to continue to help young people with disabilities
- Young people value services that support a more holistic approach to mental, physical and emotional health, and would like be more aware of different services outside of school
- Additional staff training in all services that work with young people is needed to reduce stigma around mental health and to help young people feel better talking about mental health

More exciting opportunities for active living

- Young people would like more opportunities for outside, informal and fun activities e.g. ice skating, trampoline parks, bike rides, American football, outdoor and indoor skate parks, outdoor adventure parks, maintaining parks with ponds, nature and woodland areas
- The views of young people need to be incorporated into physical activity and health strategies

Concluding thoughts

When we listen to the young people’s voices, we can hear the complexities in each of their experiences of active leisure; a complexity that is often neglected in government approaches to promoting ‘healthy behaviours’. Their stories speak to a much more complex picture of leisure practices. We need to move beyond policies that individualise health behaviours, and challenge the structural, material, social, cultural inequalities that young people negotiate in their everyday lives.

What is clear is that every young person is different; there is no single, clear solution to encouraging young people to engage in active leisure. With rising concerns for young people’s social exclusion and health inequalities, there is a demand for a better understanding of young people’s diverse needs and to incorporate young people’s voices into health policy. Young people’s in-depth affective experiences of active leisure are often lost in adult-centred concerns about changing young people’s health behaviours. Rather than one-off consultancy groups, social action projects offer a unique, creative way to engage with young people’s voices. Additional funding is needed to help councils, services and charities to think more creatively about how we can engage in young people’s democratic voices. To see improvements on the health of the nation, we must invest in the future, holistic wellbeing of generations to come.

This is an ongoing research project that will conclude in September 2018, and there will be future publications sharing the overall findings to come.

Stay up to date with how the project progresses through Annaleise’s blog: www.annaleisephd.wordpress.com

Peers and social groups

- Young people value more positive environments in schools that prevent conflict, hate-speech and sexism in their everyday lives, in order to help young people feel better about themselves
- They want alternative ways to seek help and support outside of school
- Additional staff training is needed in all services that interact with young people, to help and support young people who have experienced bullying

Improve communities

- Free/ discounted public transport for young people to improve accessibility to leisure provision
- Prioritise young people at local leisure centres and provide special offers/ loyalty cards

Social action approaches

- Creative approaches are highly valued by young people, e.g. advisory panels, youth councils, young inspectors, digital and visual methods, social media engagement to ensure services are meeting the needs of young people
Feedback from the field:
What did young people think about the project?

“This experience has been an opportunity of a lifetime.”

“It has helped us build our confidence and how to understand more about day-to-day life and how to deal with different situations about life.”

“I’ve learned to have fun and you’ll achieve great things in life.”

“My favourite part of this project is filming and planning and creative designing.”

“I am going to miss the most is the friends I’ve made and all the activities I’ve done.”

“I feel more confident about meeting new people and walking through Swindon with more confidence.”

“I liked meeting new people I hadn’t met before.”

“I felt happy that the film could tell more people about these opportunities and get more people being active.”

“Thanks to University of Bath and Annaleise.”

With thanks to…
The services, charities and young people who committed their time and creative energy to making this a success.

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