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Review

A systematic review of sport for development interventions across six global cities

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ABSTRACT

Recently published reviews have begun the process of synthesizing the knowledge within the growing Sport for Development (SfD) field, but there is a need to critically evaluate the research on which these findings are based. This systematic review is a critical appraisal of both quantitative and qualitative evidence in academic and grey literature in the SfD field. The strength and quality of the research is assessed to provide a more nuanced understanding of the reported evidence of SfD interventions in six global cities (Cape Town, Hong Kong, London, Mumbai, Nairobi, and New Orleans). The results include several key findings: (a) there is a limited number of academic and grey literature with enough methodological details for critical appraisal; (b) the quality of methods and evidence in individual studies is largely classified as weak; and (c) there is a need for more rigorous, systematic research and evaluation efforts that are openly shared and assessed. These findings provide a foundation from which to suggest 'next steps' for SfD organisations and researchers.

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1. Introduction

The Sport for Development (SfD) movement has gained momentum since the late 1990s, with the number of SfD organisations and interventions consistently increasing (Coalter, 2007, 2013a; Levermore & Beacom, 2009). Whereas early research in the SfD field focused on the evaluation of singular SfD interventions (Schulenkorf, Sherry, & Rowe, 2016),

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syntheses of the knowledge within the SfD field have been pursued in recently published reviews, including: (a) a qualitative meta-study of positive youth development through sport by Holt et al. (2017); (b) an integrative review of SfD literature by Schulenkorf et al. (2016); (c) an integrative review of sport-based youth development literature by Jones, Edwards, Bocarro, Bunds, and Smith (2017); (d) a systematic map of the evidence on SfD's efficacy in Africa by Langer (2015); (e) a systematic review of life skill development through sports programmes serving socially vulnerable youth by Hermens, Super, Verkooijen, and Koelen (2017); and (f) a systematic review of positive youth development in Aboriginal physical activity and sport settings by Bruner et al. (2016). These reviews provide a sense of the most common outcomes (e.g., positive identity, empowerment, academic competence, relationships, communication skills, self-regulation skills, leadership, social responsibility skills, enjoyment, resiliency, sport competence) from SfD and related programming. While Jones and colleagues noted the dominant focus on individual outcomes, often with an over-generalization to community and society-level outcomes (Coalter, 2010a), Schulenkorf et al. found that two thirds of the SfD studies in their integrated review focused on the community level of development. Additionally, Hermens et al., Holt et al., and Jones et al. explored the contextual and organisational features that may impact these outcomes, which addresses an aspect of SfD research that is often overlooked (Coakley, 2011; Haudenhuysse, Theeboom, & Skille, 2014).

Thus, researchers have synthesised SfD knowledge in meaningful ways, although there is not yet consensus on a comprehensive theory of change within SfD. Additionally, the use of theoretical approaches, models, and frameworks is far from consistent. While positive youth development, social capital theory, and the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility model are cited frequently, several other models and frameworks have been utilized within the research literature (e.g., ecological systems theory, self-determination theory, feminist theory, neoliberalism, symbolic interactionism, theory of planned behaviour; Holt et al., 2017; Schulenkorf et al., 2016). Despite this incongruence, previous reviews have suggested critical factors which appear to be common across many of the SfD studies, which inform a broader understanding of SfD practice. For example, Schulenkorf et al. (2016) identified key constructs and features critical for SfD interventions: (a) active engagement of a change agent or role model; (b) participatory approach to intervention design, implementation, and evaluation; (c) prolonged intervention engagement; (d) intentional integration of development activities into intervention; (e) cultivation of safe spaces for community engagement and development; and (f) empowerment process whereby local communities assume intervention oversight and ownership. Holt et al. (2017) developed a model of positive youth development through sport which identified central themes critical to SfD interventions: (a) positive youth development climate (e.g., adult relationships, peer relationships, parental involvement); and (b) life skills focus (e.g., life skill building activities, transfer activities). Overall, these reviews have helped bridge the gap between research and practice related to 'what works' and 'why.'

Despite the breadth of the aforementioned work, with few exceptions (Hermens et al., 2017; Holt et al., 2017; Langer, 2015), the dominant focus has been integrating and summarizing the research findings without specific consideration for the quality of the evidence. Therefore, the SfD knowledge has been synthesised but the rigour of the SfD studies included in these reviews may be vastly different. Considering that the SfD field is plagued with persistent questions about rigour and what constitutes sufficient evidence (Coalter, 2010b, 2013a; Nicholls, Giles, & Sethna, 2011), combined with the drive towards evidence-informed and evidence-based policies and programmes in other fields (e.g., international development, youth development; Langer & Stewart, 2014; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016), there is a need to address this challenge. The current systematic review responds to these concerns with a holistic, critical appraisal of both quantitative and qualitative evidence in the SfD field. The strength and quality of the research is assessed to provide a more nuanced understanding of the reported evidence of SfD interventions.

This systematic review provides a critical appraisal of SfD research in six global cities (Cape Town, Hong Kong, London, Mumbai, Nairobi, and New Orleans). A global non-profit organisation, the Laureus Sport for Good Foundation, and an inter-governmental agency, the Commonwealth Secretariat, both of whom are actively engaged in the SfD field, selected the cities for analysis. These bodies originally identified nine cities as part of a call for proposals to conduct this systematic review. The funders' priorities likely drove the identification of these cities, with Laureus-supported interventions operating in eight cities and six cities located in member countries of the Commonwealth. Although there are certainly concerns related to neo-colonialism or neo-liberalism when considering the engagement of international organisations and agencies (Coalter, 2013a; Lindsey, 2017), this call for proposals presented an opportunity to critically appraise research on SfD interventions operating in these cities, with the understanding that a global assessment and critical appraisal is still needed without this geographic restriction. Within the original nine cities, the research team selected six cities that offered a diverse cultural, social, political, developmental, and historical landscape (e.g., dominant religion, Global North vs. Global South). The investigative team was intentional in considering a broad and diverse spectrum of evidence in these six cities by removing restrictions on language and the expectation that papers have gone through a peer-review process. Given that both of these practices privilege the Global North and academic communities (Darnell, Chawansky, Marchesseault, Holmes, & Hayhurst, 2018; Spaaij, Schulenkorf, Jeanes, & Oxford, 2018), non-English language and grey literature were included in a search and screen process that exhausted all resources to locate and retrieve both published and unpublished documents in these six cities. Additionally, both quantitative and qualitative evidence were considered in this systematic review, acknowledging multiple and equally valid forms of evidence (Langer & Stewart, 2014).

In summary, the purpose of this systematic review was to conduct a critical examination of the reported evidence, of both academic and grey literature in qualitative and quantitative form, of youth-focused SfD interventions in six global cities: Cape Town, Hong Kong, London, Mumbai, Nairobi, and New Orleans.

2. Method

2.1. Search strategy

The search terms for SfD represented the concepts of youth, sports, and development, with the final search strategy for PsycINFO presented in Table 1. Databases were selected to encompass the range of subjects touching on this interdisciplinary study, including sports science, psychology, education, and health, with a pilot study conducted to determine the databases most responsive to the search strategy. The final databases were PsycINFO (Ovid), Embase (Ovid), SPORTDiscus (EBSCO), Education Source (EBSCO), Scopus, Web of Science's Science Citation Index Expanded, Social Sciences Citation Index, and Arts & Humanities Citation Index. The search was run on December 19, 2016. Since SfD journal publications did not begin significantly increasing until after 2000 (Schulenkorf & Adair, 2014), search results were limited to records published after 1994, and no limitation was placed on publication language.

A manual search of research published after 1994 was also completed in 20 relevant peer-reviewed journals, with the reference lists of included articles in 12 recent research reviews (either publicly shared or shared by the authors) also reviewed. In addition to the academic literature, extensive contact lists of SfD scholars and organisations in each city were developed to request published and unpublished documents. Fig. 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram of search results.

2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

For the purposes of this review, academic literature included empirical papers in peer-reviewed journals, dissertations, and theses. Grey literature included, but was not limited to, evaluation reports, annual reports, articles in non-peer-reviewed journals and other publication outlets, and conference posters.

Inclusion criteria included: (a) reporting of primary data; (b) data collected in one of the six global cities; (c) participants between the ages of 10 and 25 years old; and (d) evidence of a plus-sport or sport-plus intervention (Coalter, 2010a). Studies were excluded if they were: (a) focused only on sport development (i.e., sport improvement), which meet Coalter's (2010a) definition of traditional sport (even if they measure developmental outcomes, as there is an assumption that development can occur in these settings); (b) focused only on health (e.g., weight loss, fitness increase), which would not achieve the explicit developmental focus of plus-sport or sport-plus interventions; (c) educational or curriculum-based interventions in schools, which would conflate SfD interventions with school-based interventions; (d) mental health interventions specific to a targeted diagnosis (e.g., cognitive therapy for depression), which would redirect the focus to youth with diagnosed disorders; or (e) theoretical/non-empirical reports, which would not report primary data.

Following a title and abstract screen of academic articles, full text screening of 319 articles was completed by two independent investigators, resulting in 21 included articles ($k = 0.83$). In addition to the academic literature, all grey literature was initially screened by one investigator. The full texts of 161 SfD documents were then screened independently by two investigators, resulting in 29 SfD grey literature documents for inclusion. When disagreements on inclusion decisions

Table 1
PsycINFO search strategy.

1. child.ti,ab.	26. yoga/	50. role model?.ti,ab.
2. children.ti,ab.	27. sport?.ti,ab.	51. social change.ti,ab.
3. minor.ti,ab.	28. extracurricular?.ti,ab.	52. (sport? adj3
4. minors.ti,ab.	29. extra curricular?.ti,ab.	development*).ti,ab.
5. youth.ti,ab.	30. physical activit*.ti,ab.	53. (youth adj3 develop*).ti,ab.
6. youths.ti,ab.	31. physical fitness.ti,ab.	54. social* adj3
7. young.ti,ab.	32. athlet*.ti,ab.	develop*).ti,ab.
8. youngster?.ti,ab.	33. football.ti,ab.	55. (psychosocial* adj3
9. adolescent?.ti,ab.	34. soccer.ti,ab.	develop*).ti,ab.
10. preadolescent?.ti,ab.	35. tennis.ti,ab.	56. (econom* adj3
11. girl.ti,ab.	36. swimming.ti,ab.	develop*).ti,ab.
12. girls.ti,ab.	37. running.ti,ab.	57. (communit* adj3
13. boy.ti,ab.	38. cycling.ti,ab.	develop*).ti,ab.
14. boys.ti,ab.	39. basketball.ti,ab.	58. or/44-57
15. teen?.ti,ab.	40. baseball.ti,ab.	59. sport? for
16. teenage*.ti,ab.	41. martial art?.ti,ab.	development.ti,ab.
17. student?.ti,ab.	42. yoga.ti,ab.	60. sport? for youth.ti,ab.
18. juvenile?.ti,ab.	43. or/23-42	61. National Youth Sport
19. kid.ti,ab.	44. mentor/	Program.ti,ab.
20. kids.ti,ab.	45. role models/	62. 59 or 60 or 61
21. school age?.ti,ab.	46. social change/	63. 22 and 43 and 58
22. or/1-21	47. psychosocial	64. 62 or 63
23. exp sports/	development/	65. limit 64 to yr="1995-2018"
24. physical activity/	48. peace*.ti,ab.	66. (animal not human).po.
25. physical fitness/	49. mentor*.ti,ab.	67. 65 not 66

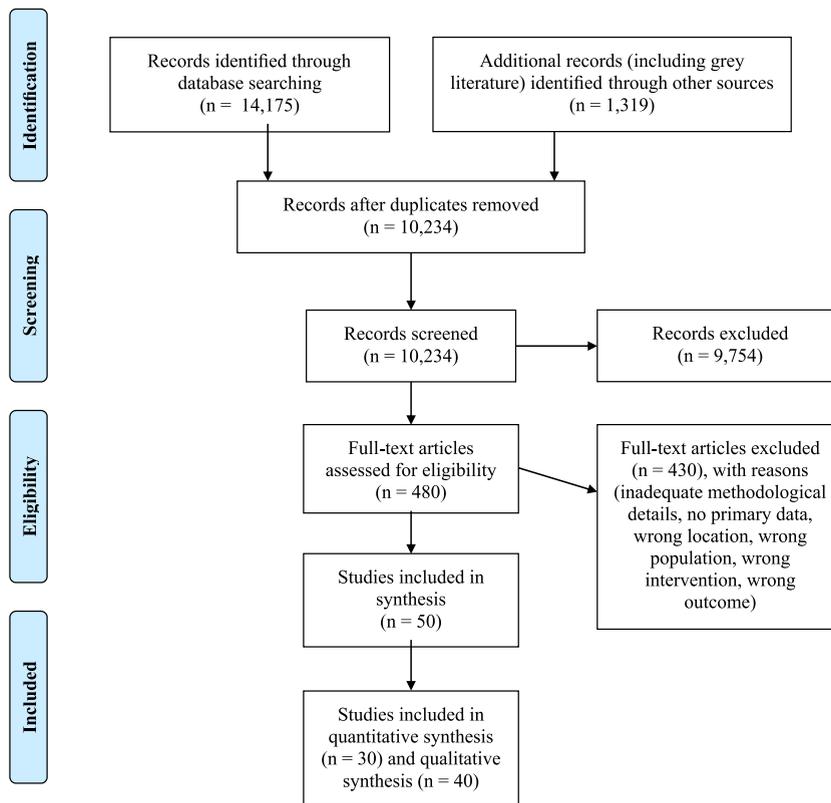


Fig. 1. PRISMA* flow diagram.

*Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman (2009).

occurred, the primary investigator facilitated a discussion between the two reviewers to come to a consensus decision. Disagreements mostly centred around the lack of details in the studies.

2.3. Assessment of methodological quality

To determine methodological quality, two investigators independently assessed and critically appraised the methods of each included study. The Quality Tool for Quantitative Studies (National Collaborating Centre for Methods and Tools, 2008) was used for all studies containing quantitative data (see Table 2). Criteria for methodological quality included: (a) selection bias, (b) allocation bias, (c) control of confounding variables, (d) blinding, (e) data collection methods, (f) follow-up rates, (g) statistical analyses, and (h) integrity of intervention. Each of these seven areas were identified as strong, moderate, or weak along with an overall assessment. If a paper was determined to be moderate or strong in each area, the paper was rated as strong evidence. If the paper received one weak classification, it was rated as moderate evidence. If the paper received two or more weak classifications, it was rated as weak evidence.

To examine the methodological quality of qualitative studies included in the review, a meta-theory and meta-method approach was taken (Frost, Garside, Cooper, & Britten, 2016; see Table 3). In doing so, the investigators examined the philosophical (i.e., ontology, epistemology) and theoretical underpinnings of the study to determine how the approach may have affected the results. Dong so allowed for a relativist approach in judging the quality of the included studies (Smith, 2009; Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Additionally, the methodology, methods, strategy for analysis, and criteria for assessing rigour were examined to determine the overall quality and trustworthiness of the results. For mixed methods studies, the quantitative and qualitative components of the methods were evaluated based on the approaches described above.

2.4. Data extraction and synthesis

The data extraction included: (a) number of participants; (b) age of participants; (c) special/contextual characteristics of participants (e.g., mental health status, poverty levels, environmental context); (d) political environment; (e) environmental context (e.g., historical, geographical, cultural); (f) instruments used; (g) outcomes assessed; (h) name of intervention; (i) type of intervention; (j) timing of intervention; (k) length of intervention; (l) who delivered the intervention; (m) key stakeholders; (n) timeline of data collection relevant to the intervention; (o) intervention fidelity; (p) statistical analyses used; (q) results; and (r) quality of evidence.

Table 2
Literature appraisal table: Quantitative data.

Authors (year)	Study Design	Selection Bias	Control for Confounding Variables	Blinding	Use of Valid and Reliable Tools	Fidelity Check	Overall Quality Classification
Amandla EduFootball (2012)	Cohort, One Group Pre-Post	Yes	No	Unclear	Unknown	No	Weak
Barkley, Warren, and Sanders (2016)	Cohort, One Group Pre-Post	No	No	Unclear	Reliable, Validity Unknown	No	Weak
Boxgirls South Africa (2015)	Randomised Control Trial	Yes	No	Unclear	Unknown	No	Weak
Burnett (2011)	Single Group Pre-Post Only	Yes	No	Unclear	Unknown	No	Weak
Burnett (2012)	Cohort, One Group Pre-Post	Likely	No	Unclear	Valid, Reliability Unknown	No	Weak
Burnett (2014)	Single Group Post-Test Only	Yes	No	Unclear	No	No	Weak
Burnett (2015)	Single Group Post-Test Only	Yes	No	Unclear	No	No	Weak
Butler & Leathem (2014)	Single Group Post-Test Only	Yes	No	Unclear	Unknown	No	Weak
Delva et al. (2010)	Cross-Sectional Two Group Comparison	Likely	Yes	Unclear	Valid, Reliability Unknown	No	Moderate
Fitzrovia Youth in Action (2016)	Single Group Pre-Post Only	Yes	No	No	Unknown	No	Weak
Fuller et al. (2010)	Randomised Control Trial	Likely	Yes	Assessors Yes, Participants Unclear	No	No	Moderate
Herrmann (2012)	Cohort, One Group Pre-Post	Yes	No	No	Reliable, No Validity	No	Weak
Hershow et al. (2015)	Cohort, One Group Pre-Post	Likely	No	Unclear	Unknown	No	Weak
Kaufman, Braunschweig, DeCelles, Nkosi, Delany-Moretlwe, & Ross (2011)	Cohort, One Group Pre-Post	Yes	No	Unclear	Unknown	No	Weak
Knight, Kavanagh, & Page (2013)	Single Group Post-Test Only	Likely	No	No	Unknown	No	Weak
Laidler, Fraser, Lau, Wu, and Li (2013)	Single Group Post-Test Only	Yes	No	Unclear	Unknown	No	Weak
Lamb (2009)	Single Group Post-Test Only	Yes	No	Unclear	Unknown	No	Weak
Louisiana Public Health Institute (2016)	Quasi-Experimental	Likely	Yes	Unclear	Yes	No	Moderate
Odera & Harknett (2016)	Cohort, One Group Pre-Post	Likely	No	Assessors No, Participants Yes	Unknown	No	Weak
Parker, et al. (2014)	Single Group Post-Test Only	Yes	No	Unclear	Unknown	No	Weak
Parker, Pitchford, Farooq, & Moreland (2018)	Single Group Post-Test Only	Yes	No	Unclear	Unknown	No	Weak
Praxis (2010)	Single Group Post-Test Only	Yes	No	Unclear	Unknown	No	Weak
Route Consultancy Limited (2014)	Single Group Post-Test Only	Yes	No	Unclear	Unknown	No	Weak
Sampson (2009)	Single Group Post-Test Only	Likely	No	Unclear	Unknown	No	Weak
Sampson (2015)	Single Group Post-Test Only	Yes	No	Unclear	Unknown	No	Weak
Sampson & Vilella (2012)	Single Group Post-Test Only	Yes	No	Unclear	No	No	Weak
Sampson & Vilella (2013)	Single Group Post-Test Only	Yes	No	Unclear	Reliable, Validity Unknown	No	Weak
Shuttleworth & Wan-Ka (1998)	Single Group Post-Test Only	Yes	No	Unclear	Unknown	No	Weak
Snelling (2015)	Randomised Control Trial	Likely	Yes	Assessors Yes, Participants No	Yes	Yes	Strong
Women Win (2015)	Cohort, One Group Pre-Post	Likely	No	No	Unknown	No	Weak

Table 3
Literature appraisal table: Qualitative data.

Authors (year)	Ontology	Epistemology	Methodology	Sampling Strategy	Data Collection Methods	Data Analysis Methods	Quality Assessment	Methodological Coherence
Allen, Rhind, & Koshy (2015)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Qualitative / Intervention	Purposeful	Interviews	Inductive Deductive Content Analysis	None Reported	No
Amanda EduFootball (2012)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Mixed Methods	Not Stated	Focus Groups, Interviews, Questionnaires, Observations	Not Stated	None Reported	No
Armour & Duncombe (2012)	Constructivist	Constructivist	Qualitative Evaluation and Case Study	Not Stated	Interviews, Baseline and End of Project Forms	Constructivist Grounded Theory, Thematic Analysis	None Reported	Yes
Armour & Sandford (2013)	Constructivist	Constructivist	Multi-Layered Evaluation Strategy	Not Stated	Field Notes, Observation, Focus Groups, Interviews, Reflective Journals, Open-Ended Surveys	Staged Grounded Theory Approach	None Reported	Yes
Armour et al. (2013)	Constructivist	Constructivist	Multi-Layered Evaluation Strategy	Not Stated	Pupil Profiles, Journals, Open-Ended Surveys, Interviews, Focus Groups	Staged Grounded Theory Approach	None Reported	Yes
Banciu, Barkley, and Sanders (2016)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Qualitative / Intervention	Not Stated	Interviews, Focus Groups, Observations, Field Notes	Not Stated	None Reported	No
Barkley et al. (2016)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Basic Qualitative	Not Stated	Interviews	Not Stated	None Reported	No
Bateman & Binns (2014)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Basic Qualitative	Snowball	Interviews, Focus Groups	Not Stated	None Reported	No
Burnett (2011)	Value Free Knowledge	Not Stated	Mixed Methods	Not Stated	Focus Groups, Interviews	Not Stated	Researcher Training, Piloting of Instruments	No
Burnett (2012)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Mixed Methods (Case Studies)	Purposeful	Focus Groups, Interviews, Surveys	Not Stated	Follow-Up Interviews, Triangulation	No
Burnett (2013)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Participatory Action Research	Purposeful, Representative	Interviews, Focus Groups	Not Stated	Triangulation	No
Burnett (2014)	Not Stated	Interpretivism	Mixed Methods	Purpose Quota Sampling	Interviews, Focus Groups, Observations	Interpretative Phenomenological Approach	Triangulation	Yes
Burnett (2015)	Interpretivism	Interpretivism	Mixed Methods	Purposeful	Interviews, Focus Groups, Observation	Interpretative Phenomenological Approach	Triangulation	Yes
Coalter (2013b)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Qualitative / Evaluation	Not Stated	Interviews	Thematic Analysis	None Reported	No
Crabbe (2000)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Intervention	Not Stated	Interviews, Observations	Not Stated	None Reported	No
Crabbe, Brown, Brown and Slater (2008)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Case Study	Not Stated	Interviews, Observations	Not Stated	None Reported	No
Crabbe, McGee, and Crosby (2013)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Case Studies in Each Location	Purposeful	Interviews, Observations	Not Stated	Rich Descriptions	No
Fitzrovia Youth in Action (2016)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Mixed Methods	Not Stated	Baseline and Exit Forms	Not Stated	None Reported	No
Global Networking Consultants (2018)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Basic Qualitative	Not Stated	Interviews, Focus Groups	Not Stated	None Reported	No

Hershov et al. (2015)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Mixed Methods	Purposeful	Focus Groups	Content Analysis	None Reported	No
Laidler et al. (2013)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Mixed Methods	Not Stated	Interviews, Observations	Not Stated	None Reported	No
Lamb (2009)	Symbolic Interactionism	Symbolic Interactionism	Mixed Methods	Purposeful	Interviews	Not Stated	None Reported	Yes
Laureus Foundation South Africa (2012)	Not Stated	Interpretivism	Basic Qualitative	Not Stated	Interviews	Thematic Content Analysis	None Reported	No
Louisiana Public Health Institute (2016)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Mixed Methods	Purposeful	Interviews, Focus Groups	Thematic Analysis	None Reported	No
Magee & Jeanes (2013)	Interpretivism	Interpretivism	Basic Qualitative	Not Stated	Interviews, Observations	Content Analysis	Prolonged Engagement	Yes
Meek & Lewis (2014)	Not Stated	Interpretivism	Basic Qualitative	Not Stated	Interviews, Focus Groups, Video Diaries, Written Participant Feedback	Content Analysis	None Reported	Yes
Murthy & Gupta (2016)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Qualitative / Participatory	Purposeful	Interviews, Photo Mapping, Body Mapping	Not Stated	None Reported	No
Odera & Harknett (2016)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Mixed Methods	Not Stated	Interviews, Focus Groups, School Tests, Game-Based Tools	Not Stated	None Reported	No
Parker, Meek, & Lewis (2014)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Basic Qualitative	Not Stated	Interviews, Observation, Field Journal, Document Analysis	Content Analysis	None Reported	No
Palmer & Micallef (2018)	Not Stated	Interpretivism	Basic Qualitative	Purposeful	Interviews, Questionnaires	Content/ Thematic Analysis	Immersion in Data	Yes
Parker et al. Farooq, & Moreland (2014)	Not Stated	Constructivist	Mixed Methods	Not Stated	Observations, Online Diaries, Interviews, Focus Groups, Document Analysis	Thematic and Axial Coding	None Reported	Yes
Parker, Pitchford et al. (2014)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Mixed Methods	Quota Sampling	Interviews, Focus Groups, Surveys	Thematic and Axial Coding	None Reported	No
Praxis (2010)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Mixed Methods	Purposeful	Interviews, Focus Groups	Not Stated	None Reported	No
Sampson (2015)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Mixed Methods	Not Stated	Interviews	Not Stated	None Reported	No
Sampson & Vilella (2012)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Mixed Methods	Not Stated	Interviews, Observations, Questionnaires	Not Stated	None Reported	No
Sampson & Vilella (2013)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Mixed Methods	Not Stated	Interviews, Observations	Not Stated	None Reported	No
Sandford, Duncombe, and Armour (2008)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Multi-Layered Evaluation Strategy	Not Stated	Interviews, Focus Groups	Not Stated	None Reported	No
Snelling (2015)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Randomised Control Trial, Mixed Methods	Purposeful (those who completed 100% of programme)	Interviews	Categorical Analysis	None Reported	No
Wamucii (2011)	Relativism	Interpretivism	Basic Qualitative	Not Stated	Interviews, Field Notes, Reflective Journal	Constant Comparison	None Reported	No
Women Win (2015)	Not Stated	Not Stated	Mixed Methods	Not Stated	Most Significant Change Stories	Not Stated	None Reported	No

Overall, there were high levels of heterogeneity in the designs, methods, interventions, and outcomes reported across the included studies. As such, quantitative meta-analysis and qualitative meta-synthesis were deemed unsuitable for analysing the outcomes. Instead, the following recommendations of Braun, Clarke, and Weate (2016) were utilised in data synthesis: (a) familiarization with the articles and documents; (b) extracting initial themes; (c) developing higher order themes; (d) refining themes; (e) defining and naming themes; and (f) writing up.

3. Results

Overall, 50 Sfd documents were independently assessed and critically appraised, with 10 quantitative studies, 20 qualitative studies, and 20 mixed methods studies.¹

3.1. Quality of evidence

Of the 30 quantitative/mixed methods Sfd studies, only three studies were rated as moderate evidence and one study was rated as strong evidence (see Table 2). Overall concerns with the quantitative methods were low quality designs (e.g., 16 studies were single group post-test only designs), lack of use of validated measures (or not reporting this information), and insufficient methodological details (e.g., blinding, enrolment rates, drop-out rates, control for confounding variables). As for the 40 Sfd studies with a qualitative component, the interpretations made from the findings were limited by a lack of philosophical, methodological, or theoretical underpinnings, or a combination thereof, to the studies (see Table 3). Only 15 studies reported their sampling procedures, only 18 studies reported the analytic approach, and only 8 studies discussed quality measures (e.g., triangulation, prolonged engagement, researcher training, instrument piloting). Overall, just 10 of the 40 studies were judged to be methodologically coherent, suggesting that their purpose, philosophy, methodology, and methods were aligned and appropriate.

3.2. Summary of reported intervention outcomes

Focusing specifically on data from the Sfd studies with rigorous assessments (quantitative) and methodological coherence (qualitative), there was weak to moderate evidence supporting changes in perceptions and knowledge about common youth development outcomes, although there was no evidence for actual behaviour change. Snelling (2015) examined a surf therapy programme in Cape Town, South Africa designed to engage children and adolescents at risk of social exclusion. This randomised control trial was conducted using valid and reliable tools, and showed that the intervention did not significantly improve the psychosocial well-being of the participants, nor did it decrease their (self-reported) antisocial behaviour. Similarly, Fuller, Junge, DeCelles, Donald, Jankelowitz, and Dvorak (2010) utilised a randomised control trial designed to assess an interactive football-based health education programme for grade 6–7 children in Khayelitsha Township, Cape Town, South Africa. The results demonstrated how children in the intervention group showed significant increases in health knowledge, as measured by individual health statements, with grade 6 children showing significant gains in knowledge for more of the health statements than the grade 7 children. However, given the lack of validated tools, in conjunction with no data examining actual health behaviour, these findings should be interpreted with caution. The Louisiana Public Health Institute (2016) employed a quasi-experimental design, using valid and reliable tools, to assess youth outcomes of Coach Across America programming in New Orleans, LA, USA. The results showed how the younger intervention participants expanded their nutritional knowledge and developed high impact attributes (i.e., well-being, discipline), while both the younger and older intervention participants enhanced their physical fitness. There were no changes, as measured quantitatively, in nutritional knowledge or high impact attributes among the older participants (grades 6–12). Finally, Delva et al. (2010) utilised a cross-sectional two group comparison to report on differences in sexual activity and condom use by individuals who had been exposed to the Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) programme in Kenya, and those who had not. Findings showed that despite a trend towards more sexual activity in the MYSA programme, those with exposure to MYSA were more likely to report using a condom during sexual activities. Unfortunately, when controlling for confounding variables, this effect was no longer significant, with data also showing a lack of a dose-response relationship between programme exposure and condom use. Thus, it remains unclear whether the MYSA programme, or various co-intervention effects, are more salient in the reported condom use differences.

The strongest qualitative support emerged from Armour and Duncombe (2012), Armour and Sandford (2013), Armour, Sandford, and Duncombe (2013), Burnett (2014, 2015), Magee and Jeanes (2013), Meek and Lewis (2014), Lamb (2009), Palmer and Micallef (2018), and Parker, Pitchford, Farooz, and Moreland (2014). The themes identified in these qualitative investigations as outcomes from participation in Sfd interventions included those connected to mental health and wellbeing (e.g., development of and belief in personal aspirations, improved resilience, increased confidence, increased self-esteem,

¹ A parallel systematic review was conducted on the reported evidence, of both academic and grey literature in qualitative and quantitative form, of non-sport youth development interventions, with 35 documents independently assessed and critically appraised. However, due to the low quality and high heterogeneity, these studies did not allow for a meaningful comparison. As such, only the reported evidence of Sfd interventions is presented in this paper; data from the other systematic review are available upon request.

feelings of failure, improved motivation, increased ability to manage emotions, improved self-control, improved health and fitness) and community development, social cohesion, and peacebuilding (e.g., more civic engagement, improved communication skills, reduced anti-social behaviour, improved relationships, enhanced conflict resolution skills, enhanced community cohesion). A limited number of themes were also identified for employment, access to educational opportunities, and life skill acquisition.

4. Discussion

With the SfD field steadily growing, the present review was performed to identify the limitations that still exist with research and evaluation, even in cities such as London and Cape Town, which have been leaders in the practice of SfD. First, there were very few SfD studies found in the academic and grey literature that had enough methodological details for critical appraisal. For the individual studies which were critically appraised, the quality of methods and evidence was largely classified as weak (based on the critical appraisal tools utilised in this review), limiting meaningful interpretations within the individual studies and comparative analyses within/across cities.

A number of recommendations can be made from this review that are relevant to SfD organisations and researchers specifically, along with broader youth development organisations and researchers. First, there is a need to openly share research and evaluation methods, even in cursory form in annual reports and/or with links or references to documents that provide more information about how specific results were obtained. Out of the 92 SfD documents identified in the grey literature, only 29 had enough methodological details for critical appraisal. Though the remaining documents met the rest of the inclusion criteria for this systematic review, the methods were not reported in sufficient detail (if at all) to allow the investigative team to evaluate their rigour, resulting in questions about the quality of the primary data presented in these documents. The lack of rigour matches concerns cited by [Coalter \(2010b, 2013a\)](#) related to the quality of SfD research. Though it is impractical to expect all publications shared by organisations to provide methodological details, especially at the level often present in academic literature, including information about where this could be found would be beneficial to the field – and to the organisations, as funders and other stakeholders will be able to understand the process by which reported results were obtained.

Organisations and researchers should also consider reporting null and negative findings, which rarely occurred in the articles and documents included in this review. This practice can certainly be viewed as risky ([Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2016](#)), but if funders can help create a funding climate where assessments can legitimately be framed to not only demonstrate what works but also what needs to improve, the entire SfD movement stands to benefit. This position supports the cultivation of a learning-focused environment, rather than solution-focused ([Sugden, 2010](#)), which promotes honest, critical reflection that will lead to meaningful programmatic change. Additionally, a learning-focused environment enhances the transparency of research and evaluation efforts, which can lead to the identification of best research and evaluation practices within/across contexts, the continuing development of the field's knowledge base with a stronger understanding of how this knowledge was produced, and identification of gaps and/or common barriers within/across contexts that must be explored in more depth. There is also a need for the identification, creation, and use of accessible and user-friendly public outlets for research publications ([Schulenkorf et al., 2016](#)). Researchers typically target peer-reviewed publications with paywalls which prevent all but the academic community from easily accessing this knowledge. Therefore, not only should peer-reviewed journals consider opening access to remove these restrictions (e.g., *Journal of Sport for Development*), but there is a need for public outlets beyond peer-reviewed journals (e.g., reports, newsletters, articles, blogs) which enable research findings to be presented in different formats that may be more accessible to certain audiences and/or to be presented in forums that are more widely read by those outside of the academic world.

Another recommendation for organisations and researchers is to outline, adopt, and test intervention theories (i.e., programme theories), rather than focusing predominantly on intervention outcomes and benchmarks. The use of intervention theories (e.g., theories of change, logic models) was not common in this systematic review, which supports previously cited critiques of SfD research and practice ([Coalter, 2015](#); [Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011](#)) and the findings of the integrative review of sport-based youth development literature by [Jones et al. \(2017\)](#). Intervention theories connect organisational inputs and processes to intended outcomes and impacts by considering the conditions and mechanisms at play ([Coalter, 2013](#); [Weiss, 1995](#)). Without intervention theories, organisations and researchers are often unable to clearly identify the conditions and mechanisms that explain why specific outcomes and impacts are reached. This prevents organisations from intentionally (and effectively) promoting specific outcomes and impacts. Organisations and researchers should also consider how to pursue longitudinal studies and integrate long-term data collection efforts into routine procedures ([Schulenkorf, 2017](#)). Doing so would allow for strategic, rigorous testing of intervention theories over time, along with the potential to measure change over time. Additionally, by openly sharing intervention theories and results from measurement, evaluation, and research efforts, the larger SfD field (and related fields) stand to benefit ([Weiss, 1995](#)), steadily advancing our theoretical and conceptual understanding of SfD.

We certainly recognise (and have experienced) the challenges inherent in conducting research in the SfD field, but this does not change the need for more rigorous studies focused on specific SfD interventions that utilise distinct time points, multiple groups, and validated measures. Similarly, more studies are needed that utilise multi-site and comparison designs to enable comparisons between singular SfD interventions as well as within/across geographical, cultural, social, political, developmental, and historical landscapes ([Giulianotti, 2011](#); [Massey, Whitley, Blom, & Gerstein, 2015](#); [Schulenkorf et al.,](#)

2016). Even for evaluations of singular SfD interventions, the research should be contextualised within the social and political climate. We see the potential for intervention theories which integrate organisational and contextual factors into the intervention design, implementation, and evaluation, along with research grounded in methodological and/or theoretical basis to ensure coherent, transparent, credible, and logical interpretations. For example, [Schulenkorf et al. \(2016\)](#) and [Holt et al. \(2017\)](#) identified theoretical approaches, models, and frameworks frequently (and infrequently) utilized within SfD research; it would be beneficial to consider these (and others) in parent disciplines (e.g., sociology, management, psychology, anthropology), along with the potential development of a standalone SfD theory and/or cross-disciplinary theory ([Schulenkorf et al., 2016](#); [Schulenkorf, 2017](#)).

For the qualitative studies in this review, the philosophical perspectives were rarely reported, matching the findings from the qualitative meta-study of positive youth development through sport by [Holt et al. \(2017\)](#). This is concerning, as these perspectives shape the study design and, ultimately, the knowledge that is produced ([Culver, Gilbert, & Sparkes, 2012](#)). It is critical, then, for researchers to explicitly address how their ontology and epistemology shape decisions related to theory, methodology, and methods. This allows the reader to assess if the tools and approaches used to collect, analyse, and interpret the data were coherent. Similarly, qualitative investigations must include detailed descriptions of the methodology and methodological procedures (i.e., how data were collected, how data were analysed, how decisions were made) to allow for a nuanced understanding and assessment of the research methods. This finding matches findings from [Holt et al. \(2017\)](#), where named qualitative methodologies were inconsistently reported, along with missing or insufficient detail related to sampling procedures, data analysis, and philosophical perspectives. To address this, peer-reviewed journals and other publication outlets should consider expanding their page/word limits for qualitative studies (as the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* has done) or allow for online appendices which enable researchers to share their full methodology, given the more detailed, nuanced results sections that often lead authors to abbreviating descriptions of methodology and methodological procedures.

Overall, many of the recommendations for researchers may be challenging in the current publishing and funding landscape, with many institutional climates rewarding researchers to a greater extent if they prioritise research and funding over service to the field (e.g., open access publications, executive reports to practitioners; [Fitzgerald, Allen, & Roberts, 2010](#)). The challenges are especially true when it comes to faculty promotion and reward, with service often receiving diminished attention and value ([Fitzgerald et al., 2010](#); [Glass & Fitzgerald, 2010](#)). Additionally, some of the recommendations for researchers related to rigour may lead to fewer publications (e.g., longitudinal studies) or challenges getting published or funded (e.g., reporting null/negative results, publication bias; [Brembs, Button, & Munafò, 2013](#)). Thus, researchers constantly face dilemmas (e.g., career progression, service to the field) influencing where and how they decide to allocate their time and effort, especially those working at institutions where reward structures are tied to external funding and publications in prestigious peer-reviewed journals. Additionally, the time needed for rigorous, longitudinal research conducted in field settings may contrast sharply with institutional expectations for faculty members to teach at regular intervals and serve the institution in various ways ([Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2016](#)). Therefore, in order for researchers to pursue more rigorous and accessible research, they must receive support from institutions through the faculty reward system and staff support. These challenges are not limited to institutional support, as researchers also need support from journals and funders to conduct and publish studies that may present unpalatable results. In concrete terms, this support could take the form of an initiative recently undertaken by the journal *BMC Psychology* to pilot a results-free peer-review process, “whereby editors and reviewers are blinded to the study’s results, initially assessing manuscripts on the scientific merits of the rationale and methods alone” ([Button, Bal, Clark, & Shipley, 2016](#), p.1). This initiative aims to improve the quality of published research by making editorial decisions solely on the rigour of the methods, thereby hopefully reducing the prevalence of occurrences where impressive ends justify poor means. There are also barriers to establishing and maintaining partnerships with SfD organisations that enable rigorous, longitudinal research, including: (a) challenging political and organisational landscapes (e.g., fear of negative results, questions about return on investment, lack of trust); (b) inequitable power relations (e.g., asymmetrical or exploitative relationships, neocolonial or neoliberal agendas); (c) limited resources (e.g., fiscal priorities minimising research, limited funding to invest in research); (d) divergent research and evaluation goals (e.g., demonstrating programme efficacy vs. critically assessing programme impact, leadership support for research vs. on-ground scepticism); and (e) longitudinal challenges (e.g., short-term projects, high participant and staff turnover, short-term funding streams; [Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2016](#); [Whitley, Forneris, & Barker, 2014](#)). These barriers to rigorous research in the SfD field should also be acknowledged and addressed, with creative solutions actively pursued (e.g., strategic partnerships, cultural competence, mutual understanding, collaborative research design, equitable power relations, shared trust, strong relationships; [Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2016](#); [Whitley et al., 2014](#)).

Finally, there is a need for organisations to prioritise the hiring and retention of qualified, experienced staff who are provided with financial incentives (i.e., enough to meet their living needs) that put them in positions whereby they can invest themselves fully, on a long-term basis, to ensuring intervention quality. Trained and experienced staff represent key figures in overseeing internal measurement and evaluation efforts and collaborating with external evaluators (e.g., through university and community partnerships) on their measurement, evaluation, and research efforts. The fundamental tenet remains that, in and beyond SfD, human resources are the crucial piece to the success of any organisation. However, we recognise that current precarious funding schemes within SfD significantly influence any serious attempts to consolidate staff retention practices. Funding may require a significant rethinking of how budgets are allocated and/or requests to current/future funders for support for these positions and efforts (e.g., financial, resources, capacity building). Another

approach may be to reconsider collaboration with other organisations in strategic ways. Many of the organisations featured in the research in this systematic review seem to have already taken this approach, with sport often integrated into comprehensive youth development interventions. This sport-plus approach has the potential to maximise the impact of youth-focused interventions (Jones et al., 2017), particularly when integrated programming targets holistic youth development through the use of diverse enrichment activities, wraparound programming, and strategic partnerships. This collaborative approach also allows SfD organisations to address the human, financial, and infrastructural resources that are not currently being fulfilled, with enhanced access to resources, knowledge, and expertise (Jones et al., 2017). For those SfD interventions still operating in isolation or utilising a single sport (e.g., football), it may be prudent to consider informal collaborations or formal partnerships with other community organisations, with ongoing consideration of mergers that may maximise the reach and impact of programmatic efforts. These types of inter-organisational partnerships enable research collaborations across organisations that maximise human, financial, and infrastructural resources (Welty Peachey, Cohen, Shin, & Fusaro, 2017), enabling organisations to actualise rigorous, meaningful research and evaluation efforts while also creating the potential to explore emerging questions about collective impact across organisations (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Another way for organisations to overcome the budgetary challenges related to hiring trained and experienced staff to oversee measurement, evaluation, and research is through research partnerships with universities (Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2016), which unlock the skills, experience, and expertise of SfD scholars.

4.1. Limitations

Limitations to this systematic review include the geographic restriction of six global cities, which precluded an exhaustive systematic review and comparative analysis of all SfD research findings. For example, the review does not address SfD research occurring in less populated areas (e.g., indigenous communities) or in the developing nations of the South Pacific and Middle East. Limiting the research in this way resulted in prominent and highly cited papers in the SfD field being omitted, which certainly limits the findings. Additionally, these six geographic locations were part of nine cities initially identified by the funders of this systematic review, so it is important to consider that the funders' priorities drove the identification of these cities. Given these limitations, there is certainly still a need for a global assessment and critical appraisal of the status of research on SfD interventions.

We addressed concerns about practices that privilege the Global North and academic communities by including non-academic evidence within the systematic review and accessing a network of practitioners and academic colleagues working within/outside of SfD. However, we all currently affiliate with institutions in the Global North and have varied experiences with the six global cities examined in this study. Despite our best intentions, this may have limited our acquisition of evidence and our cross-cultural analysis.

4.2. Conclusion

This systematic review responded to the need for critical appraisal of the existing research on SfD interventions (Langer, 2015). The limited number of academic and grey literature with enough methodological detail for critical appraisal, combined with the weak quality of methods and evidence in individual studies included in this review, highlight the need for more rigorous, systematic research and evaluation efforts that are openly shared and assessed. These findings enabled the investigative team to identify a series of recommendations for organisations and researchers that will help address these gaps and contribute to the ongoing growth and development of the SfD field.

Notes

- 1 This work was supported by the Laureus Sport for Good Foundation and the Commonwealth Secretariat.
- 2 Additional information about the search strategies are available from the corresponding author on request.
- 3 References marked with an asterisk indicate included studies.

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