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Exploring Critical Alternatives for Youth Development through Lifestyle Sport: Surfing and Community Development in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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Abstract: While competition-based team sports remain dominant in community and sport-for-development programs, researchers are exploring the value of alternative, less “sportized” activities such as lifestyle/action sports. In this paper, we explore the ways in which surfing is being used in development programs in Aotearoa/New Zealand, examining the perceived social benefits and impact. Our methods involved: (a) mapping the range of surfing projects; and (b) 8 in-depth interviews with program personnel. Widespread conviction in the positive developmental benefits of surfing was evident, and that surfing had a “special” capacity to reform or heal those who participate in it. However, the ways in which individuals’ self-developments were promoted appear to be following the traditional sport/youth development path. They focus on policies aimed at improved life chances, equipping youth with the tools for self-improvement and self-management, inculcating self-governance and self-reliance. However, a counter narrative co-existed, highlighting surfing as a freeing experience, which, rather than restoring social order, works to instigate a personal transformation or awakening. Despite the range of challenges presented by surfing as a tool for positive development, surfing presents a potentially “critical alternative” which if sport-for-development programs are to be a form of social change, we should remain open to exploring.

Keywords: surfing; youth development; sport for development; action sport; lifestyle sport; blue space; New Zealand

1. Introduction

It has long been argued that sport, physical activity and movement cultures have the capacity for social, political and personal good, particularly in youth sport. These assumptions have a powerful influence on the decisions of communities and individuals including regarding support for sport programs locally and nationally [1,2]. However, as scholars are increasingly advocating, sport, does not “have a fundamentally positive and pure essence”, nor that “positive changes” will befall “those who engage in” it [3] (pp. 306–307). In an important paper, Coakley questions what counts as “positive development”, highlighting how uncritical narratives are used to “justify the creation of sport programs” particularly for populations lacking opportunities or facing challenges for example, caused by “poverty or oppression” [4] (p. 307).

Coakley’s remarks reflect an emerging body of research taking a more critical approach to understanding the power of sport for sustainable forms of personal and community development, both in youth contexts, and within the wider sport-for development arena [1,3–5]. While traditional institutionalized “achievement” sports contexts such as participation in team games have dominated

practice and research, research dedicated to more informal lifestyle or action sports such as parkour and skateboarding is emerging [6–10]. Furthermore, while the perceived development benefits of adventure in nature-based activities has an established history in the outdoor education context [11], exploring more informal nature-based lifestyle sporting contexts such as mountain biking [12] and surfing participation [13,14] are also gaining momentum.

This article contributes to this developing area of research. Our case study, located in Aotearoa/New Zealand, examines the evidence, perceived impact and social benefits, generated by one activity; surfing. The narrative of a physical activity or sport as having a “fundamentally positive and pure essence” [1] (pp. 306–307) is widespread among surfers. Captured in the famous Billabong surf-brand slogan, “Only a surfer knows the feeling”, surfers position surfing as unique in its capacity for personal experience and development, and communion with nature. Surfing advocates often romanticize the activity, and promote an almost “evangelical belief” [2] in the “power of surfing” to reform, protect or heal those who participate in it, and for them to be able to transcend all boundaries and constraints [15].

Surfing is a particularly interesting case study. Informal lifestyle sports, including surfing, are attracting an ever-increasing body of participants, outpacing the expansion of many traditional sports in many Western nations [8,16–18], with untapped potential to inform youth, social or sport policy [7,9,19]. In New Zealand specifically, national surveys suggest participation in sport and outdoor recreation play an important role in community life, and water-based informal activities including surfing, and body boarding are popular [20,21]. Furthermore, ideas about Aotearoa’s pristine natural environment are important in national discourses about kiwis as outdoor people who enjoy connecting with, and being custodians of “nature”. The educative or pedagogical possibilities of lifestyle sports are also increasingly being recognized and explored, both within and outside of school settings [22–24]. Recognizing the increasingly central role that informal lifestyle sport and leisure plays in the construction of identity, citizenship, community, health and the economy, Sport New Zealand—the national body governing community sport and recreation—showcased lifestyle sports at their 2015 National Conference, inviting academics and leaders in lifestyle sport organizations to discuss action sport and their potential for engaging youth [25].

Furthermore, and highly relevant to surfing, is the notion of “blue space” and how it relates to personal, community and environmental well-being and sustainability, which is currently grabbing the attention of researchers across disciplinary fields [26–28]. A recent review of evidence published by Natural England demonstrates that time spent in natural environments—such as the ocean—has a positive impact on a multitude of factors including connection with nature, mental health, physiological well-being, learning, obesity, and physical activity [29]. It has been suggested that while proximity to water has particular benefits, immersion activities such as surfing have unique psychological benefits. Research also suggests that immersive nature-based activities such as surfing also have benefits for nature as well, with immersion in the sea inciting ecological sensibilities and an activist care for sustaining place and space [23,30–34]. While it is not our intention here to evaluate the evidence for these claims, we are interested in how broader conceptions about blue spaces as sites of adventure, sustainability and wellbeing are impacting on and driving the narrative of surfing for social good.

2. Sport, and (Youth) Development

Regardless of the actual demographic of surfing participants, surfing has widely been seen, and represented across popular culture, as youth-focused [10]. Many organizations and programs, including the ones we focus on here, work with children, teenagers and young adults. However, as Spaaij and Thorpe each assert, youth programs often work in “deficit mode” [35] that “assumes youth are victims needing ‘our’ versions of sport for their empowerment” [9] (p. 111). The Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework [36] offers one of the more productive models in the area of “sport-for-development” (see also [32]). Rather than using sport to tackle existing problems, PYD programs focus on youth development as a beneficial, productive process [36] (p. 20). We make

use of the PYD framework here as a means of thinking through what surfing might offer in the way of “positive development” or social good, as opposed to exploring the specific effectiveness of surfing as a solution to problem behaviors or social problems. As Lerner et al. [37] argue, when physically, socially, psychologically, emotionally, and intellectually healthy youth develop into adults, they will choose to contribute or “give back” to civil society, and in doing so, be promoting the positive development of the next generation of youth [36] (p. 23). Following Spaaij [35] and Thorpe [9], we would further add an aspect of diversity and accessibility to who these programs are aimed at and effective for, ensuring the benefits of social good impacts across communities.

The complexity of the aims and effects of sport for development programs are highlighted by Fraser-Thomas, Cote and Deakin [36] (p. 26), who caution that “many sport programs designed to foster positive youth development are in fact doing just the opposite”, particularly in terms of physical, and emotional development. Furthermore, programs also rely on the continued support, funding contacts and ethics of one or two key individuals, with the continuation of “successful” programs dependent on these specific individual’s continued leadership or participation, even if this is not the intention when they envisioned the continued life of the program [38]. Furthermore, the “formal and structural features” of the competitive nature of sports tend to produce boundaries and separations rather than enable social mixing that negatively impacts social development [39] (p. 99). Sterchele has highlighted the tendency for development programs to “de-sportize” sports in an attempt to curb potentially negative impacts of competition [39]. These strategies include mixing teams (for example across talent, gender, age), downplaying competition, overlapping players and spectators and putting on various events in the same space. Academic research on activities including parkour [40–42], skateboarding [41,42] mountain-biking [12] and surfing [13,38] has demonstrated the potential of more informal, non-competitive and youth-led activities to engage those young people disenfranchised by traditional competitive team sports. In the UK, Hignett, et al. [13] recently published work that found significant benefits in engaging in a surfing program among vulnerable school aged children, at risk of being excluded from school (see also [43]).

Despite these criticisms, mainstream and often competition-based sports continue to be the over-whelming popular choice for sport-for-development programs [39]. It is this observation that has led researchers of sport to examine the appropriateness of alternative—less “sportized”—activities such as lifestyle or action sports [8,39].

3. Lifestyle Sport “for Development”

Paralleling the critical trend towards questioning the usefulness of sport for development, there has been a growing scholarly interest in lifestyle and action “sport-for-development” [7–9,24,44–46]. Holly Thorpe’s work has been pivotal in drawing attention to the “potential” of action sports for making a valuable contribution to the sport for development and peace (SDP) movement”, which she terms Action Sport for Development and Peace (ASDP). She writes that “those working in the field of sport for youth development would do well to critically consider the alternative value systems in action sports”, and to recognize their potential for “youth agency and creativity” [9] (p. 91). Thorpe emphasizes the vital ways in which action sports can offer different opportunities for PYD from the more traditional mainstream approaches. For instance, in their dominant recreational forms, action sports do not rely on competition and allow for a sense of accomplishment based on individual skill development [10]. They offer opportunities for individual empowerment through both skill mastery and the development of social skills. They are also largely self-regulating and allow for a (sometimes communal) celebration of play, creativity and self-expression. Such characteristics provide numerous avenues for personal enjoyment, growth and development through participation in physical and movement activities, without some of the deleterious aspect inherent to more mainstream (competitive) sport forms [9,10,47].

The social and historical context of many, but not all, lifestyle and action sport cultures has also developed very differently in terms of social power dynamics. For instance, the process of skill development often involves peer-support, encouragement and co-operative learning [8,9,22].

Observations, tips and ideas will often come through communications with other participants (in lived, media and online contexts), as opposed to a coach. Although male-ness, heteronormativity and whiteness remain over-whelming characteristics of most action sport cultures and spaces [10], the sporting terrain itself can be open to all and occupied by a range of ages, abilities, genders/sexualities, nationalities and ethnicities. This is not to suggest that the nature-based spaces of informal lifestyle and action sports—the beach, the surf, mountains, rock walls—exist outside culture. Blue, green and urban spaces are shaped by cultural understandings, and thus the power relations that shape how various people are able to gain access. For example, outside of organized lifestyle sporting experiences such as surf schools, women who surf recreationally are often subject to heteronormative and male-dominated histories and cultures that continue to define and value surfing performances and access to waves for people who do not adhere to these values [48–50]. Despite these issues, Thorpe suggests that “when critically developed and appropriately supported” [9] (p. 102) the particular characteristics of lifestyle and action sports make these activities more conducive to the positive developmental outcomes desired of “sport-for-development” programs, negating a number of the key concerns leveled at more traditional forms of sport. Importantly they “can develop a different set of physical and social skills” among children from different genders and cultural locations [9] (p. 102).

Although research is limited, there is some evidence to suggest that lifestyle/action sport projects, particularly in parkour and skateboarding, are successfully engaging young people and beginning to address issues of community-engagement, creativity and healthy lifestyles in new meaningful ways [7,13,19,24,41,44,45,51]. Over the last decade, surfing has emerged as a lifestyle and action sport context in which a range of initiatives have been piloted [13,38,52–55], addressing issues from mental health [54], active ageing [55], at risk young people [13,43], the well-being of indigenous populations [14], and the inclusion of women and girls [22,56]. Indeed, as Thorpe and Chawansky note, the focus on women and girls has been particularly noticeable, often founded by women who are lifestyle and action sport participants themselves and who are “passionate about the potential of their activities to create change in other women’s [and girls’] lives” [45] (p. 135). There are also initiatives that have been running, often without recognition, for much longer; in 2016, the Disabled Surfers Association (Australia and New Zealand) celebrated its 30-year anniversary.

Yet, despite these promising examples, lifestyle sports have yet to garner significant attention from the broader sport for development community [9], and programs continue to rely on mainstream sports, particularly competitive team sports [39,57]. Consequently, one intention for this paper is to bolster the evidence base on which these emerging discussions on “action sport for development” are based. Central to the discussion is the question, first raised by Thorpe [9], of whether, in the context of sport-for-development, there is something significantly different and fundamentally positive about action and lifestyle sports. In this discussion, we consider surfing in particular, and whether and how, surfing programs, and the immersive nature of being in the sea, offer specific benefits for positive youth development and thus, social good. To explore this question, we look into some of the ways in which surfing is being used a platform for social change/benefit in Aotearoa, New Zealand. We also include a small number of international projects in order to provide a wider contextual perspective.

4. Methodology

Our methodological approach is grounded in interpretivism [58], and the predominant mode of data collection semi-structured interviewing. Elements of ethnographic research were also used; for example, participant observation contributed to the contextual grounding, both in terms of our long-term involvement in surfing cultures and author 1’s involvement in the Surfing + Social Good Summit [59], and related events. Informal documentary analysis (mass and digital niche medias) and autoethnographic reflections [58] also feed into our understandings of the research context.

The process of data collection initially involved a mapping of the various surfing projects, companies, clubs and initiatives, in Aotearoa/New Zealand, that were driven to a significant degree by one or more social concerns. A couple of Australian and international initiatives were included

that were linked to NZ, and to provide some context. We explored various projects using online web searches, word of mouth, as well as drawing on networking at the Surfing Social Hui (2016). We categorized the projects by location, key aims and activities, and type of funding. Following this initial stage, a handful of case studies were selected for detailed study, guided by a desire to gain a varied “sample”, but was also opportunistic in terms of our existing network of contacts in the field. The aim was to engage with projects that prioritized a range of social issues; which included projects aimed at engaging low-income groups, Maori populations, female participation, raising awareness of mental health, environmental issues, nurturing the development of young surfers and providing opportunities for disabled participants. In addition, we aimed to include a mix of voluntary, non-profit, commercial and government funded initiatives.

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted. Two of these were carried out in person, six were conducted via Skype, and one via email. The research protocol was approved by the University of Waikato Faculty of Education Ethics Committee and informed consent was gained from each participant prior to interview. While most interviewees did not choose to be anonymous, we have removed most identifiers of the individual. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that a general interview guide was planned in advance, often with follow up questions, to ensure that the desired topics were discussed [60]. However, because of the somewhat exploratory nature of the research, interviewees were encouraged to expand on their answers where they wished, and secondary questions followed the flow of the conversation.

The interviewers aimed to establish a comfortable rapport with participants. We recognize the significance of interviewees as “co-producers” of research, and are genuinely interested in hearing their stories. This approach is not just about interview technique, but forms part of a prescriptive feminist ethics we all share, where “reciprocity, honesty, accountability, responsibility, equality” are made a central aspect of the research approach [61] (p. 433).

The interviews formed the core of our data for analysis. Despite our efforts to engage with a range of surfing for social good practitioners, we recognize that our interviews only include those who are advocates for surfing for social good, and that this is a key limitation of this, and other research about the potential of action sport for development and peace. As with the majority of projects about sport for social good, the voices of those for whom the programs did not work are not present, leaving us with reflections from the strongest advocates for the sports. These limitations do not diminish the findings, but they do specify them as focused on the potential and productive capacities of surfing in these cultural contexts. However, to address this, we have drawn attention to our previous research projects in Australia and England, to highlight where and how sustainable participation outside structured programs might offer specific cultural challenges such as sexism, racism and homophobia—challenges that some participants in these interviews did not engage with. While this does not fill the gap in our research that the non-successful participants are needed to fill, we hope it points to the kinds of challenges that are common for independent participation.

In the following discussion, we present the findings in two sections. First, we briefly introduce the projects that we explored as case studies. We do not review the effectiveness of each program. Our intention is to give a sense of the different contexts in which, in NZ, surfing has been adopted in various “surfing for development” initiatives spanning education, health and wellbeing, and targeting different populations including girls and Maori youth, and those with mobility issues. Then we present the thematic analysis of the interviews. We will present some of the key themes that emerged from these interviews in understanding surfing’s role in ASDP [9], and the particular development benefits surfing is believed to enable.

5. Results

5.1. The Projects

The *Disabled Surfers Association* [DSA] was founded in Australia in 1986; it has 16 branches, one of which is based in Auckland. Initially aimed at facilitating the physically injured and disabled, the organization quickly expanded its remit to cater to all classes of disabilities. Several “Have-a-go” days each year provide people with disabilities to experience surfing in a safe and well-supported environment. The organization operates as a Registered Charity; a “total voluntary registered Public Benevolent Institution”, so relies heavily on donations, fund-raising initiatives and “the odd small government grant” (disabledsurfers.org).

Two representatives from *Surfing New Zealand* were interviewed. Rep1 their development officer was also a long-standing and involved member of a Board Rider club that was actively involved with their youth development. Rep2 was involved in the Wave Warriors program, which funded by Regional Sports Trusts, targeted at low-decile (low socio-economic status) and kaupapa kura (Maori language schools). The overall objective is to increase the number of schools offering surfing, however, this aim is dependent on school funding and therefore the main involvement for Surfing NZ is on one-off “have-a-go” days where children experience a surf lesson and learn about surf safety.

One of the founders of the non-profit organization *Waves of Freedom* (WoF) was interviewed both for her work with WoF, and as a representative for the Surfing + Social Good Summit. These projects were included in this research because they represent two of the only international collectives that aim to utilize surfing as a “medium to empower those who are most vulnerable in society” (Waves of Freedom Facebook page).

Walking on Water (WoW) surf school is a private business based in a coastal town on the North Island. The founder of is interested in “social entrepreneurship” and using the profits from the business to enable her to “encourage children, adults and the physically and mentally challenged in our community to try surfing” (Walking on Waves website).

OneWave is all it takes is a “non-profit surf community raising awareness for mental health” (OneWave website) that aims to tackle mental health issues “with a simple recipe ... saltwater, surfing, good mates and Fluro Fridays” (Facebook page). Two representatives from OneWave were interviewed, a volunteer in Australia and the OneWave founder. The organization has two key strands. “Fluro Fridays” is a weekly event held across locations on Australia’s coastlines, and monthly events in Wellington, NZ, at which people (with and without mental health issues) are encouraged to go surfing wearing bright or “fluro” costume. A more structured program also exists where surfing lessons are coupled with mental health workshops run by mental health professionals. OneWave relies on fund-raising initiatives, crowd-funding campaigns and donations in order to run its more structured programs. Fluro Fridays were the main focus for the interviews. Also present at our interview with the OneWave organizer was Fred (pseudonym) who was a participant in Fluro Fridays but had set up his own life coaching business, which uses surfing as a tool for facilitating open dialogue with clients, and “opening their eyes” to different experiences.

Saltwater Eco is a surf school on the North Island that aims to incorporate environmental awareness and connectedness into the surfing sessions they run. As well as prioritizing environmental sustainability, the Saltwater Eco team claim to be “huge supporters of women’s surfing” (Saltwater Eco website). They run a monthly women’s only commercially-driven surf event named Girls on Curls which involves surf instruction from female surf instructors, and facilitates a free weekly women’s only surf meet-up and Facebook group called Salty Sisters.

Lastly, an email correspondence was conducted with a newly formed group, *Ahipara Surf Groms* (ASG), which was set up by a local mother whose boys had tried surfing and wanted to surf more with friends. She put together a group on Facebook, and was amazed at the interest generated. The group is voluntary and self-funded with weekly meetings. The founder put herself through the ISA Level 1 surf instructors course with the intention of providing more structured tuition.

5.2. Surfing as Saviour: The “Special” Nature of Surfing for Development

A recurring theme that emerged across a number of the interviews was the strong belief held by those involved in the initiatives that surfing had a “special” capacity to reform, protect or heal those who participate in it. For most this stemmed from a personal narrative of having discovered the sea and surfing in their own lives. Some of the project initiators were lifelong and elite surfers, however the majority were non-elite recreational surfers, but who had experienced some sort of personal awakening through surfing:

I remember one day catching this wave and I was out with my dad, it was the first time I'd smiled in so long and hadn't felt numb and that was how the one wave is all it takes message came from—sometimes all it takes is one wave to give you hope and get you smiling again. When I was struggling, it was the one thing that kept me getting out of bed (interviewee A).

I find surfing an incredibly humbling situation, where you're in this unpredictable element [...] It takes you out of the man-made and into the God-made, for me, and that's something special and humbling [...] I hear of different things where the ocean has something special for people (interviewee B).

These two interviewees provided the most prominent examples of this almost “evangelical” investment in the ability of surfing to heal, help and teach; “saltwater therapy” as Onewave termed it. It was quite evident that this personal belief in the special significance of surfing fed directly into the intentions and aims of the initiatives:

There are many valuable lessons that surfing teaches that are applicable to all aspects of life. Through surfing we want to bring encouragement, facilitate perseverance, help people to overcome fears and share a sense of community (Project website, emphasis original).

Sometimes, as interviewee A explained, this experience is strongly tied up with the act (and associated feeling) of actually riding a wave. Most often, though, the “something special” was related to surfing as a more all-encompassing experience. Important aspects of this included; a sense of community or camaraderie gained through surfing with others, overcoming challenges of getting to the beach space, learning new skills, learning about water safety, connecting with nature, being in the ocean, and negotiating an unpredictable and uncontrollable environment.

As people we spend so much time in this world that man [sic] created—these buildings, this culture, these things, these ways—but this takes us out of that and into an environment where we're not in control [...] It's not like soccer where you learn to kick the ball and the playing field's always the same (interviewee C).

The importance of connection with, challenges of and immersion in nature has been highlighted by researchers exploring the impact of both “green space” and especially “blue space” on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities [29,34,62]. Previous research on interventions carried out in “natural” environments (including surfing) has found positive benefits on participant’s social skills, confidence and wellbeing [29,55,63]. An evaluation of a surfing program designed to increase personal well-being and connectedness to the natural environment among “at risk” young people in England suggests that the “blue space” environment, and immersive and physically demanding nature of surfing, was important, particularly for “certain cohorts with challenging behavior who may thrive on the necessary expenditure of energy and associated high arousal emotions” [43] (p. 14). The impact on health and well-being was certainly alluded to in the interviews we conducted, for instance, expressing appreciation for the physically active nature of surfing, and as a means of getting young people “out of the house”, and “off of technology” (interviews). However, the significance of connecting with nature appeared to be more about its potential as a learning experience. For example, as illustrated above several interviewees contrasted surfing with football, suggesting that the natural unpredictability of the ocean environment offers more diverse challenges:

I mean, you can put all of them into football but it doesn't necessarily challenge them and it doesn't immerse them in (interviewee).

This echoes much of the literature on adventure education where the ability to be challenged, takes risk, and overcome obstacles (physical and emotional) is emphasized e.g., [11,64].

Getting sand in your wetsuit when you've got no arms or legs and they're on your stumps ... [which are sensitive]. They've got to problem solve [...] the challenge to actually get out in the surf [...] it's massive (interviewee).

Reflecting many S4D projects, interviewees believe that these challenges hold potentially longer-term benefits for the everyday lives of participants. One interviewee described how a woman who was "struggling with a life-crisis", was able to "transform her life":

The way that she was breaking through the challenges of the sport of surfing, she was applying that to other areas of her life. She left her job, started studying and made all these really positive changes (interviewee).

So you have to really be in control of your emotions and your fear the whole time. If you can do that and you can put fear to the side, then you can learn to do that in other places (interviewee).

As noted above, this point of view regarding the integrally positive qualities of sport has been a consistent concern for critical sociologists. Coakley has been particularly critical of the "evangelistic" notions adopted by some proponents of sport that suggests, "it inevitably leads to multiple forms of development" for individuals and communities [1] (p. 307).

The main issue here is not necessarily the in/accuracy of the claims regarding sport's positive impact on participants and their communities; rather, of concern is the ways in which it is informed by so-called "neo-liberal ideology" informing development discourses, which focus on personal development and success as part of inculcating self-governance and self-reliance [65]. The responsibility for change and development falls almost entirely on the shoulders of the individual, ignoring the impact of social issues and therefore the need for "progressive change at a collective or community level" [1] (p. 309). Subsequently, any positive effects received through participation in physical activity must then be integrated and translated by individuals into their everyday lives in order to "enhance their own life chances" [1] (p. 309). Furthermore, it is "only when these lessons are internalized by enough people with the positive qualities, decisions, and choices of individuals benefit the communities in which they live" [1] (p. 309).

Some subtle signs of these processes did emerge here, in terms of "western visions of health, education ... life skills and healthy living" [66] (p. 291). The best example is provided by the Wave Warriors program, which is run by Surfing New Zealand. This program involves introducing students and teachers to surfing, encouraging children to join local clubs, and teachers to consider qualifying as surf instructors. The overall aim of Wave Warriors is to increase the number of schools offering surfing as part of the curriculum. However, as the education coordinator of Surfing NZ explains, this option is realistically only feasible for more affluent schools: "When we get funding we target low decile schools that wouldn't really be able to afford the opportunity". Consequently, the Wave Warrior program for these low decile schools is limited to a one-off, or annual, "Have-a-go day". This is perhaps an example of what Hartmann and Kwauk [66] refer to as "mission drift", whereby program providers let slip their original aims in order to follow funding. "We focus on a lot of Maori and low decile schools and kura kaupapas (schools operating under Māori customs and using Māori as the medium of instruction)—these guys haven't even been to the beach before so it is a bit of an experience and it is an educational program where they're learning about surf safety as well as learning to surf" (interviewee). Another interviewee agreed:

The feedback is just amazing, their faces, when we get the pictures, they absolutely love it and they realise something that they can do ... The surf safety side is really emphasized so it's giving them that.

They may never surf again, a lot of them won't. But if they end up going out to [Piha], they know what a rip looks like, they know how to deal with that and they know a bit about that coast, and that for us is really important. We'd love them all to carry on surfing but the reality is that they won't.

Essentially, for these least privileged children, the "Have-a-go days" become less about participation in surfing and more about inculcating important surf safety and "life skills". The promise of surfing becomes "the carrot that gets them there on the day, and then you've got their attention and you teach them all that". The reception of these have-a-go days appears to be overwhelmingly positive. Yet, the feedback from the schools also confirm the concerns expressed above, that the students in low-decile areas are unlikely to regularly return to the surf, or beach, if at all.

Words can't express how much we appreciate the "Have a Go Surfing Day" we experienced yesterday. Hardly any of our students had been to a surf beach and none had ever been surfing. Quite a few of them were nervous to go, so not only did they learn that it is good to put yourself a little out of your comfort zone and take risks, but they also realised that that is when you get the most self-satisfaction when you try something they are nervous to do (Senior Teacher of PE, School Participant).

Such feedback is thought-provoking. Undeniably, knowledge regarding water safety is important, however, surfing is also bound up in a somewhat neo-liberal discourse "about positive personal development in North America, Australia, New Zealand, and some European nations ... [which] emphasize individualism as a central value and stress the importance of self-confidence/efficacy/esteem in overcoming barriers, making choices, and improving one's life" [1] (p. 314). Although this notion of development is often favored by those who run and support such programs, the danger is that sport based "social good" projects come to resemble "experimental social policies" aimed at governing "unskilled" youth by equipping them with the tools for self-improvement and self-management" [1] (p. 288). In this context, surfing appears to be following this more traditional sport development path driven by Western-centric models and goals. While there are opportunities and resources in Aotearoa/New Zealand for practitioners to engage with community-focused Maori indigenous knowledges and practices in relation to being in the sea, and of health and well-being, these do not appear to have been commonly centered or taken up.

5.3. Surfing as Escape: An Alternative Discourse

While the belief in the positive developmental benefits of surfing for young people, and adults alike, was certainly a marked feature in some interviews, there was also a counter narrative that stressed the importance of surfing as a form of "escape". Interestingly, the two narratives were sometimes co-existent within the same interview. A juxtaposition seemed to emerge between society ("man-made", "culture", "mind", "life") and nature (uncontrollable, "sensory", "body", "awakening"). Such a juxtaposition was explored in Fiske's (1989) analysis of surf-beach semiotics, where people felt "The body's (or nature's) life of sensation breaks free from the control of culture" [67] (p. 62). Anderson too, has drawn attention to the "liminal" nature of the surf zone [68] (p. 956), which, as an "in-between" space, offers a very particular spatial experience for those who enter. He suggests that "encountering the surf zone dislocates individuals from their everyday lives and ... allows their temporary escape to experiences outside the influence of marine and terrestrial cultures" [68] (p. 956). In this vein, for the organizer of one initiative, diving into the ocean is experienced as a cleansing:

To me it's the best escape, and the funnest thing ever. Like the best escape means once you get up ... as soon as I duck dive it kind of rinses off all the bad vibe. You just forget about everything for a while (interviewee).

Caddick, Smith and Phoenix have also highlighted "escape" as a significant aspect of surfing in their research on the health and wellbeing of combat veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [69]. They focus on the notion of "respite", as used by one of their respondents, to describe

the way surfing allowed participants to “just leave all that away somewhere on the beach and then, we’ll deal with that later” [69] (p. 79). For the veterans in their study, the respite provided by surfing was recognized as temporary, yet valued. Sometimes, it was acknowledged as being a key factor in preventing major deteriorations in mood state, and even preventing suicide. Although surf sessions only happened weekly—as with Fluro Fridays—the process of looking forward to it, and the feel-good after-effects, lasted several days.

Central to the effectiveness of respite was the all-encompassing sensory nature of being in the ocean [22]. As Caddick et al. describe, when the veterans “moved throughout the seascape with its constantly fluid and shifting modality, the intentionality of their consciousness was no longer dominated by PTSD; rather, it was directed outward toward the sensory stimulations of the ocean” [69] (p. 80). Similarly, Hignett et al. [13] suggest these extremely positive stoke experiences described by surfers can be an incredibly strong emotion, that for at risk youth may lessen their more usual strong emotions of anger and frustration. This same process was widely reflected in the words of our participants:

... just even seeing the impact of women and girls getting in water for the first time [...] This awakening and this whole kind of body awareness happening. Like experiencing themselves in their body in a different way for the first time ... that's actually the essence of it all (interviewee).

You get to step out of life. It's amazing. And you've got to get in your body. You've got to get out of your head and get in your body. It's amazing. [...] You've got a whole lot of sensory stuff going on (interviewee).

As noted above, the idea that “getting into your body” and becoming absorbed in the “sensory” is a central aspect of what makes surfing “special”. As Anderson [68] has explored, the sensory immersion in nature, in the ocean, in the surfed-wave, converges to make surfing an almost spiritual experience. He theorizes that “convergence-with-water” can be experienced as “transcendental”; a feeling of such joy and happiness that it “carries the mind to the edge of its limited plane of understanding” [68] (p. 958).

This process is reflected in the words of the founder of Waves of Freedom. For her, the “essence” of the Waves of Freedom project emerged in the freedom discovered through experiencing the body in a different way for the first time. In contrast to both the notion of respite, and that of development, a bodily awakening connotes a significant and fundamental change. Quoting the poetry of Hafiz, she likens it to a process of allowing, of freedom, of letting the soul “unfurl its wings”. Even at a basic level, this kind of awakening can open up the body-mind to new experiences and meanings, sentiments reflected in the narratives of many project organizers:

They've had an awesome time outside so it's that positive association of doing that stuff outside [...] giving them the opportunity opens up a whole plethora of options later on as well. It's opening their minds to stuff that's out there and what they can do (interviewee).

In the context of sport-for-development, this notion of surfing as freedom is a powerful one. In many ways, it coincides with what Hartmann and Kwauk [66] refer to as a “critical alternative” to existing sport-for-development discourses. In their view, in order to move towards a truly transformative notion of “development” through sports, we must resist the discursive emphasis on “socializing otherwise deviant or marginalized, at-risk individuals into the mainstream social order” [66] (p. 293) and focus instead on the enlightenment and empowerment of such individuals and their ability to affect change. Applying this approach to the context of surfing, the notion of awakening is key, because it involves a shift away from positioning the individual as a subject in need of development, and of sport as the provider of this development. Instead, surfing is positioned as a sort of “freeing” experience which, rather than restore social order works to instigate an embodied, connected enlightenment.

Hartmann and Kwauk [66] draw on the philosophy of Brazilian educator Friere (1970/2008) to argue that freedom should indeed serve as the cornerstone of this alternative approach. Freire’s critical

pedagogy has been adopted across many fields interested in fostering transformative action, including those in the sport for community development field [70]. For us, the relevance of Freire's work is something that emerged organically from the symbiosis of data and literature. The words of the participants seemed to "speak to" his particular approach to "freedom". As it is used here, this notion of freedom lies in contrast to (neo)liberal ideals of freedom (to choose, to consume, to participate) and is also distinct from "the right or the free will of an individual to reject indoctrination or to critically question the assumptions, myths, and relations of power in operation around him or her" [66] (p. 294). Instead, Freire's concept of educational or developmental freedom refers to an "indispensable condition for the quest for human completion" [66] (p. 292). This freeing educational potential was recognized by some as a key motivator for starting up surfing initiatives:

Yeah. For me, surfing was an expression of freedom. The ocean teaches you in a certain way. You can't even say in which way because you don't know what's going to happen. You know there's the ocean, you want to go for a surf but every wave breaks differently [...] It can make you vulnerable, it can make you more connected to the present moment, gratefulness about the experience, more connection (interviewee).

6. Discussion—Surfing for the Moment

The words of our respondents seem to suggest that the potential of surfing as a facilitator of social good lies less in linear personal development and more in the transformative power of the momentary. To revisit Fiske, this is a process whereby surfing "momentarily disrupts and fractures the seamless world of sense (as opposed to sensation) that is the hallmark and *raison d'être* of culture" [67] (p. 62). This is perhaps unsurprising, given the wealth of academic and cultural literature on the temporary and yet highly valued significance of getting into "the zone" or experiencing "flow" in surfing. Flow especially is revered as a sublime state of focus, clarity and joy, where an individual is fully submerged in the present moment [71].

To emphasize the disruptive nature of the momentary in the context of surfing for "social good" however, necessarily raises some important questions regarding the compatibility of surfing with youth and "sport-for-development" initiatives. Through the interviews we conducted, it became clear that there were a number of aspects about surfing and surfing culture that made the activity both "special" and "especially challenging".

On a logistical level certainly, the unpredictable and momentary nature of surfing carries with it some difficulties when attempting to apply it to the existing "formula" of sport-for-development initiatives. This was especially evident in the case of Waves of Freedom and the Surfing + Social Good Summit; where the initiatives sort of "came together" through a convergence of minds, ideas and circumstances.

The aim was really just to bring people together [...] I had no intention of setting up an organization. Organisation is too fancy a word, it really is like a voluntary collective, like a passion project almost on the side that's continuously evolving (interviewee).

Another issue that emerged through the interviews was that of sustainability. While surfing's unpredictable and all-encompassing nature has been highlighted here as carrying significant transformative potential, it also carries with it significant implications in terms of safety regulations. When applying surfing to a structure of development, the requirements for specialized equipment, transport and qualified staff mean that costs soon add up. Funding thus emerged as one of the biggest and most common challenges. For instance, the DSA are able to hold no more than three have-a-go days a year and have to work hard to raise sufficient funds. Surfing NZ too are significantly limited by the cost of surfing as an activity. Their aim is to increase the number of schools offering surfing as part of the curriculum, but they find themselves "competing" with mainstream sports.

'The cost per head is around \$30 [for surfing], where someone like netball will do it for \$6 or \$7 a head ... we can't compete with that' (interviewee).

We are also mindful that the research on blue space and surfing to date, including our own, has focused on national contexts where, similar to New Zealand, “nature” exists symbolically and materially as a place for leisure and pleasure. In other historical and geographical contexts, entering the sea has to be avoided due to its detrimental effects, caused for example by pollution, or socio-political factors limiting the access of particular cultural/ethnic/gendered individuals [72]. Indeed, the idea of the sea, ocean and beach as sites of personal transformation and wellbeing needs to be considered in very contextually specific ways. As both Daniel Burdsey [73] and Karin Amimoto Ingersoll [74] point out in their respective work in Britain and Hawai‘i, oceanic spaces are not removed from identity politics and histories. Burdsey offers a reading of the British seaside that makes visible the racial politics that have always shaped possible experiences of the coast. Ingersoll’s engagement with oceanic blue space takes a different tack, offering a Hawaiian “seascape epistemology”; an alternative oceanic way of being in the world that cannot be separated from what it means to be Kanaka Maoli. Although tied in with the seeming placelessness of the sea, both studies are rooted in geographic and cultural place. Likewise, Perera’s [75] work on Australia’s insular imagination as an island nation draws on “rediscoveries of oceans as politico-cultural sites and as forces in the making of new social relations and knowledge” (p. 4). In this way, blue spaces are contested spaces; in how they come to connect us to “nature” and in how they take us away from “culture”, and who gets to decide which is which. Unlike the participants in our interviews, not everyone experiences the sea as a site of freedom [72,76], learning and development, nor is everyone welcome to do so. In surfing in particular, issues of localism manifest culturally and physically to exclude those whom self-appointed locals see as outsiders. Ecological sensibilities and connections to the sea and surf, while developed through surfing programs, might not be able to be easily continued independently [23]. In turn, this has implications for the limited ways that “surf for social good” programs can make beaches and oceans accessible to participants, beyond learning to swim and surf.

These issues did come up in the interviews. They recognized that surfing is not always easy, and has particular and specific challenges. Rebecca Olive’s research [48] illustrates how the ongoing male-dominated cultural politics was experienced as a barrier for some women she interviewed. Nonetheless, many of our interviewees were very aware of these issues, and in several cases, awareness and experience of these difficulties drove their desire to focus on particular groups such as girl and women, or disadvantaged youth:

Because I know girls find it harder to get into that sport . . . it’s a sport that is easier for men . . . And also all the talk about women in sport at certain ages dropping off . . . and I grew up in the country not getting the opportunity as well.

Nonetheless, despite awareness of these difficulties and limitations, our participants, unsurprisingly remain devoted to the transformative and well-being potential of surfing.

Yet, perhaps most importantly, is the challenge presented by a vision of surfing “for-development” which focuses almost entirely on a sort of personal transformation or awakening. Even if surfing does lead young (and old) people towards “physically, socially, psychologically, emotionally, and intellectually healthy” lives, does this transpire to a process of “giving back” as Lerner et al. [37] suggest is important for “promoting the positive development of the next generation of youth”? [36] (p. 23). We would argue that this (possibly contentious) issue remains a complex one, whether it is applied to surfing, or to a more mainstream program. The process of contribution, as with PYD itself, “is not automatic, but on the contrary, is dependent upon a multitude of factors” [36] (p. 35). As one of the project organizers discussed, they need the kids when they are aged at around 15–16 years old to come back and help with coaching and organizing the juniors, as some do in more formal club-based sports settings. The organizer explained that,

It’s started to happen but generally the surfers will work their way through the ranks, then they go to the open and then we lost them. They didn’t actually come back and give anything back.

7. Conclusions

In concluding, we must acknowledge that the challenges presented by surfing as a tool for “social good” and “positive development” are certainly proving difficult to negotiate for many of the projects we focused on. In addition, we acknowledge that with surfing now part of the Olympic program, perceptions of, and programs associated with surfing might change towards more traditional sporting pathways. However, we would argue that these challenges by no means outweigh those presented by more mainstream sports. Indeed, on a more hopeful note, we contend that the positive “developmental” potential of surfing is significant enough to warrant searching for solutions to the challenges it presents.

In *Mobilising Communities for Social Change*, Todd uses Paolo Freire’s work to argue that “people can change the world by changing how they perceive themselves in the world” [77] (p. 177). Through our discussions, we have demonstrated that “‘things happen’ to surfers in [the] ‘wet stretch between land and sea’ ... individuals are “transformed”” [68] (pp. 956–957). Sometimes, these transformations are irreversible and cause an “awakening” which has the potential to create lasting change. Often, these transformations are short-lived, or even momentary, but as we argue, they can be nevertheless significant. In fact, Todd argues that,

‘This is where justice lies, in the valuing of and being present in the present. This is a radical shift in thinking about community change, which is often entirely future focused ... While these present possibilities are often smaller than the large change that we imagine ... they are cumulative, creating justice as they build on one another’ [77] (p. 178).

If we continue to posit sport-for-development programs as offering pathways to social change, which many critical sociologists argue we ought to, then we must remain open to the possibilities that lifestyle and action sports such as surfing offer. While we, following, Coakley [1], remain cautious about over-claiming the positive effects of sport for development, we also remain hopeful about what sport, physical activities and physical cultures, can do. What we advocate here, lies in confluence with what Hartmann and Kwauk [66] (p. 289) refer to as a “critical alternative” for sport-for-development (see also [10]), and while we agree that this “radical, transformative vision” may be a “difficult and challenging” one to move towards [66] (p. 298), at the very least our findings suggest that surfing as a tool for social good is an area which warrants both further recognition, and further research.

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