

# Ripple Effects Mapping Within a Process Evaluation of Sport for Development Provision in England

Jase Wilson  and Dan Bates 

Carnegie School of Sport, Leeds Beckett University, UK

**Correspondence:** Jase Wilson ([jase.wilson@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:jase.wilson@leedsbeckett.ac.uk))

**Submitted:** 12 September 2024 **Accepted:** 2 December 2024 **Published:** 16 January 2025

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Impact Evaluation of Community Sport Programmes and ‘Sport Social Work Practices’” edited by Kirsten Verkooijen (Wageningen University & Research) and Pascal Delheye (Ghent University), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i416>

## Abstract

Evaluating the impact of sport for development is fraught with practical and methodological challenges. The evaluator is often presented with complex and messy social realities compounded by ill-defined interventions with hard-to-follow outcomes. Further, those subject to an impact evaluation can feel under the spotlight with little contribution to the research programme, which complicates the potentially informative learning and developmental processes of the evaluation. This article provides an introduction to ripple effects mapping (REM) as an evaluation technique and draws on the case study of a community-based, physical-activity intervention within the UK. This article will demonstrate the utility of REM as a co-productive technique for exploring programme outcomes but also as a tool to capture and understand the impact of the programme on participants. Through the presentation and analysis of the example REM, produced collaboratively with programme participants and stakeholders, the discussion illustrates the suitability and potential of REM as a process evaluation tool. The article presents REM in the context of evaluating sport for development practices and provides a critique and reflection about the refinement of REM as a robust evaluation tool.

## Keywords

community engagement; evaluation; impact; participatory methods; physical activity; ripple effects mapping; sport for development

## 1. Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognises sport as an important enabler of sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). A priority area identified by the UN General Assembly is the

promotion and facilitation of research, monitoring, and evaluation in sports for development and peace (United Nations, 2022). This priority reflects the need to better understand the potential outcomes and impacts of community sport-based programmes, but also why such changes occur and under what circumstances. However, understanding the “impact” of sport for development and what counts as “evidence” remains a pressing issue (Adams & Harris, 2023; Coalter, 2013; Daniels et al., 2018; Harris & Adams, 2016). This article presents a novel approach to understanding impact through the application of ripple effects mapping (REM) within the evaluation of a national sport for development programme in England. Given the range of potential outcomes sought through sport-based programmes for change, it comes as no surprise that impact evaluation continues to be fraught with a number of challenges. The focus of this article is to reflect upon and discuss the utility of REM within an evaluation setting and critically assess the strengths and limitations of the technique. REM workshop results are presented and analysed to give examples of how outputs may appear and how they can be interpreted, yet also what further methods can be applied to triangulate findings and add depth. The following section outlines several of these common challenges, before introducing REM as a technique. The purpose here is not to suggest REM is a straightforward panacea to remedy the trials and tribulations of conducting robust evaluation, but rather to demonstrate both its evaluative potential and current limitations. This article is therefore guided by the following two research questions: How can REM be used to understand the *pathways to impact* of sport for development programmes? What are the limitations of REM and how can the technique be further refined to address these limitations?

## 2. Literature Review

Evidencing the outcomes and impact of sport for development remains a challenging task. To begin with, the enduring belief of some practitioners and policymakers in the view of sport as “unambiguously wholesome and healthy activity in both a physical and moral sense” (Smith & Waddington, 2004, p. 281) is often seen to negate the need for robust evaluation and evidence. Furthermore, such programmes are interventions in a *messy* social context (Daniels et al., 2018), often with “ill-defined with hard-to-follow outcomes” (Coalter, 2007, p. 552). Even when organisations do publicly present their impact, it is common to find that reporting is characterised by vague programme aims and objectives, limited details on the measurement tools used, and an over-reliance on anecdotal and self-reported evidence (Brazier et al., 2024). Even when the reporting of evidence is more robust and systematic, in multi-faceted social interventions it remains difficult to attribute any measured change to a single programme component (Coalter, 2013) or isolate factors with sufficient dexterity to prove the direct impact of sport-based approaches (Lindsey & Chapman, 2017).

Furthermore, the desire for more evidence has often been entrenched within positivist paradigms that dismiss alternative forms of knowledge and instead promote the desire to generate stronger statistical data (Haudenhuyse et al., 2012; Piggitt et al., 2009). A preoccupation with positivist methodologies in evaluating sport-based social programmes has been, in part, according to Kay (2009), a product of the political desire for evidence-based policy and increased accountability which encourages the use of measuring methods. So even with resounding calls for more evidence, in the context of such wide-ranging, amorphous, and often contested definitions it is not wholly clear what would constitute proof of success (Coalter, 2013).

However, all is not lost. Those calling for a paradigm shift in evaluating the social impact of sport for development programmes who want to enable richer interpretations using qualitative participatory methods

alongside quantitative measures (Levermore, 2011) would likely be encouraged by the burgeoning body of work that draws upon theory-based evaluation methodologies. This work aims not only understand *if* a programme works, but *why, for whom, and in what circumstances* (Coalter, 2012; Daniels et al., 2018; Harris, 2018; Verkooijen et al., 2020). The emerging generation of insights around the social processes and relationships within sport for development programmes has coincided with more critical questions about the role of the evaluator. There is a recognition that the exertion of power pervades all aspects of the evaluation process including the production and dissemination of knowledge (Adams & Harris, 2014; Kay, 2012; Lindsey & Jeanes, 2023). As such, approaches that enable greater collaboration between researchers, policymakers, and participants throughout the evaluation have been advocated on the basis that they provide a fertile basis for evaluation-as-learning (Brazier et al., 2024; Harris, 2018; Mansfield, 2016; Shulha et al., 2016). The following section outlines the innovative and participatory REM technique adopted within the evaluation of a nationwide sport for development programme. This technique enabled the collection of rich insight into essential programme processes and indicative outcome pathways, whilst also remaining sensitised to how evaluation exercises are influenced by different stakeholders' perspectives about the purpose and utilisation of evidence.

REM has recently gained popularity among those seeking to understand the impacts of complex social interventions. REM has been used to explore intended and unexpected programme impacts within the fields of health promotion (Nobles et al., 2022b; Washburn et al., 2020), education (Peterson & Skolits, 2019), inequality and poverty alleviation (Welborn et al., 2016), community development (Sadeghzadeh et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2020), and physical activity provision (Nobles et al., 2022a; Rodriguez Espinosa et al., 2023). While there are variations as to how the method is employed, especially in the analytical stages (see Chazdon et al., 2017; Nobles et al., 2022b), the cornerstone of the technique is participatory workshops with stakeholders who have had significant engagement and experience of the programme. REM explores programme implementation from multiple perspectives, and as such typically aligns with interpretivist social research (Taylor et al., 2020). REM, according to Chazdon et al. (2017), is highly influenced by appreciative inquiry. Early approaches to REM have typically included peer-to-peer interviews at the start of the session where participants (in pairs) are given an interview guide and take turns interviewing one another. This allows participants to share their perspectives of how a programme has impacted them, a meaningful experience, or indicate changes that they have viewed or experienced as a result of the programme. These stories are then relayed back to the entire group as the evaluator/facilitator supports respondents to co-produce a visual map illustrating the development and interconnection of these stories. However, not all REM workshops follow the peer-to-peer approach, especially those that involve the ongoing maintenance of a map over weeks and months (see Nobles et al., 2022b). Chazdon et al. (2017) advise facilitators to provide an interview schedule for participants and in some instances detail how an initial "set-up" presentation at the beginning of a REM workshop can be used to coach novice interviewers on the basics of qualitative interviewing. Further details on peer-to-peer interviewing will be discussed in the methodology section.

Chazdon et al. (2017) outlined three mapping approaches (web mapping, in-depth rippling, and theming and rippling) and utilises the community capitals framework as a primary framework for analysis (see Sadeghzadeh et al., 2022; Welborn et al., 2016). Recently, Nobles et al. (2022b) added a fourth timeline approach which they argue is more familiar to practitioners and helps to outline impact pathways over time. In many cases REM workshops are performed retrospectively, however, Nobles et al. (2022b) argue that mapping activities should run concurrently at regular intervals adding a prospective element rather than

being purely retrospective. This is in part due to feedback by REM participants that sessions have acted as a reflective tool helping them to identify impactful aspects of their work. As Taylor et al. (2020) note, REM sessions aided participants in unpacking and sharing the intricacies of their work, building a sense of collective understanding, and coalescing around programme goals. To date, the pairing of REM with traditional qualitative methods has yet to be explored by sport for development researchers. Conducting REM workshops in combination with in-depth qualitative work can help to unpack the nuance of decision-making and experience which may not always be surfaced during a REM session. Utilising REM to explore the programme's impacts (retrospectively and prospectively) can support an analysis of contribution as researchers can examine the context that programme impacts occur within. This can help to produce a rich and informative picture of the intervention's impact that is readily communicable to other stakeholders and funders.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Case Study Selection

The case is a national physical activity programme that aims to increase physical activity levels in deprived communities in England. The overarching management structure of the national programme consists of 25 local project areas which are managed locally by a consortium. Within the consortia is one lead organisation (LO) where the two main job roles are housed—the strategic lead (who oversees the general trend and vision of the project) and the project lead (PL), who does the day-to-day engagement and coordination of the project. Nationally, the programme has adopted a place-based approach which can be understood as part of the general trend towards localism within developmental approaches at the national level of policy (Weck et al., 2021). Place-based approaches signify a reliance upon key local actors (place-partnerships), specific place-based regeneration strategies (utilising the facets of culture as pro-development tools, for example), local level empowerment, and adopting strategies that are contextualised to the socio-cultural, geographical environment in which they are meant to perform. The above-noted strategies are all meant to combat social exclusion to work strategically with localities on the basis of their strengths and weaknesses (Weck et al., 2021).

At the national level, there was originally a strategic preference for football-focused activities, though in practice this is very loosely applied at a local project level. After 18 months of delivery, the national programme had delivered over 10,000 sessions and had a total of 118,000 attendances with 8,800 unique individuals, 71% of whom lived in England's most deprived wards (defined by a high Indices of Multiple Deprivation score). The purpose of this evaluation was to capture reported programme outcomes and impacts and understand how and why these occurred at a local project level. Not all project areas were selected for in-depth REM case study work. Local projects were selected on the basis that they (a) showed a commitment to community engagement, often through innovative practice, (b) demonstrated success in engaging typically 'hard to reach' groups in physical activity, and (c) the degree to which the project contributed towards the national strategic outcomes.

This article presents the findings from a project we will call here Active Ladies (AL). Within the AL project, over 85% of participants are from Global Majority backgrounds (e.g., Black/Caribbean, Pakistani, Bengali, Arab, Indian, and "other Asian backgrounds"). The AL project was alone responsible for 30% of all participation

from Global Majority women across the entirety of the 25 national programmes (as of September 2023 data). Furthermore, AL is the only project to hire a Muslim woman for the pivotal job role of PL. This was identified as significant because it reflected the place-based approach and ethos of the national programme in working with predominantly Muslim women, but also marked a change from the systemic issue of underrepresentation in sports development recruitment (Whitley & Welty Peachey, 2020). So this case was not selected on the basis of being representative of national provision; that is to say that the AL project was selected “not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something” (Eysenck, 1979, p. 9).

### 3.2. Recruitment

Sampling protocol for REM sessions suggests that participants should have *high involvement* with the project either as managers, participants, or wider stakeholders (see Chazdon et al., 2017). In retrospective impact mapping, a varied sample of project stakeholders is preferred (see Chazdon et al., 2017) while in concurrent timeline mapping (see Nobles et al., 2022b), smaller managerially focused groups are suggested. Following Chazdon et al. (2017), this evaluation included a range of stakeholders to capture a holistic snapshot of the AL project (see Table 1). The lead researcher developed a REM participant information sheet and relied upon the PL to disseminate this and recruit participants. The PL acted as the gatekeeper for participant recruitment and worked with the research team to finalise the range, experience, and background of desired participants. Prior to beginning fieldwork the evaluation research was granted ethical approval through their university ethics process. All evaluation participants were given an information sheet outlining the evaluation, their right to withdraw and how to do so, and details on how information would be used. It is worth noting that participation in the evaluation for the AL project is part of the contractual obligations for local projects in direct receipt of programme funding. However, the inclusion of all others (e.g., session participants) was entirely voluntary.

**Table 1.** REM session participants.

Stakeholder group	Number	Position/role/experience	Rationale
LO	5	PL and consortium members	Understanding planning and project development
National leadership team	1	Programme manager	Key relationship manager between project and national team
Project participants & volunteers	8	Project attendees	Understanding beneficial project actions and impact on participants
Local voluntary, community and social enterprises	5	Representatives from partner community organisations	Understanding relationships and impacts

### 3.3. Conducting a REM Workshop

The REM workshop explored here lasted approximately two hours and began with peer-to-peer interviewing, followed by the main participatory mapping exercise, and then ended with a reflection activity to identify key impact pathways. The lead researcher began the workshop with a ten-minute presentation about the workshop’s goals and agenda. Participants were then put into pairs and provided with a peer-to-peer interview schedule for quality assurance. The schedule had one leading question and follow-up prompts:

- Can you think of an event or an experience related to your involvement with the project that you are really proud of?
  - What happened, what did you or others do?
  - Who was involved/impacted? What was their response?
  - Are you doing anything different now as a result of this?
  - What surprised you about this?
  - If you could summarize, what is the main point of learning in this story?

Participants were instructed to find an interview partner they hadn't worked with recently and given 7–8 minutes each to interview one another. They were asked to listen “with purpose,” take detailed notes, and ask follow-up questions. Stories were then relayed back to the whole group with the lead researcher acting as facilitator during the radiant mind mapping exercise. Following Nobles et al. (2022b), key events were mapped along a timeline during the REM workshop and the researcher facilitated a group discussion that explored the story of the AL project from a multitude of perspectives. The researcher recorded events but also included qualitative comments where further context was needed, or to highlight significance. Participants, towards the end of the REM session, were asked as a group: What is the central, or most significant part of this story? Time was given to explore their responses. The result of the above process was the production of a REM vignette that explores not just *what* or *how* something was done, but *why* those activities were significant in the eyes of the participants. Hence, the approach contributes to the ongoing evolution of REM as an approach but also aligns with Taylor et al.'s (2020) claims of REM's power as an interpretivist tool to explore meanings within a given context (for further comprehensive practical guidance on conducting a REM workshop see Chazdon et al., 2017; for specifics on the timeline approach adopted here see Nobles et al., 2022b). Finally, the facilitator endeavored to adopt a reflexive approach, interrogating one's privilege and positionality which are identified as essential in utilising REM within this evaluation of sport for development, enabling the researchers to be sensitised to evaluator-respondent power relations.

### 3.4. Additional Data Collection and Analysis

A digitised version of the hand-captured REM output was created using Miro, a free mind-mapping software programme, which was preferred over other options (Vensim or XMind) due to its ease of use. As discussed above, the workshop recorded not just events, but participants comments and interpretations of these events (although not verbatim). Analytically, the research process embedded into its approach the *most significant change* (see Chazdon et al., 2017) approach which highlights the central or most important thematic construct of the REM workshop. In this article, the researchers have not veered from this theme of *the right person* (see Figure 3 and Section 4.2.2) as this was viewed as the agreed central aspect the REM map and was a thematic construct co-produced with those present.

The REM output and its findings (impact pathways) were then the focus of follow-up qualitative fieldwork, thereby adding a greater degree of rigour and robustness to the evaluation through the triangulation of methods (Tracy, 2010). A two-day follow-up site visit included eight formal semi-structured interviews with other programme staff and participants, and four site visits to observe key project delivery spaces and sessions—which also entailed ad hoc informal conversations about the programme with those in attendance. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim while field notes were taken by hand and also transcribed. Predominantly, and for the purposes of this article, qualitative materials were process-coded to

understand where on the timeline the comments fit. Important qualitative comments were selected to be included on the map in Miro based on the criteria of adding important context or significance. For example, Figure 2 is a timeline adaptation of interview material with the director of the LO which tells the story of the initial consultation period and how the findings underpinned approaches taken within the project (thus adding both context and significance to later temporal events). The purpose of this tranche of fieldwork was to rigourise and establish the credibility of the key impact pathways identified through the REM session, whilst also adding a richer understanding of the impact and value of the programme for participants and other stakeholders. Crucially, follow-up fieldwork enabled the evaluation team to add further details to the digitised map, strengthening and enriching the value of the map as an interpretive impact assessment tool.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Participant Experiences of REM

Participant reflections indicated that the session generated significant enthusiasm, a sense of momentum and pride in the project's efforts. For example, the PL described that the REM workshop helped validated her approach:

The mapping exercise, bringing everyone together, was very impactful. I think it validated how I'm talking about the project...to know the feelings of other people really did validate for me that actually I'm on the right track. (PL)

Project participants also reflected positively. Given their evident feelings of affinity and connection to the AL project and the impact it has had on their lives, REM provided a space for them to speak openly about their experience and for it to be valued. For example, the participant comment below, shared among the group and reiterated during an audio-recorded interview, indicated how motivated she was to speak on the project's behalf.

For me, this project gave me the first step to change my life. It was the first step in a new virtuous cycle for me. That is what I want to say and coming here to say it to everyone today, it is my joy.

From a strategic perspective, the REM workshop helped to solidify perspectives about *how* the project was having an impact. As the project's strategic leader described:

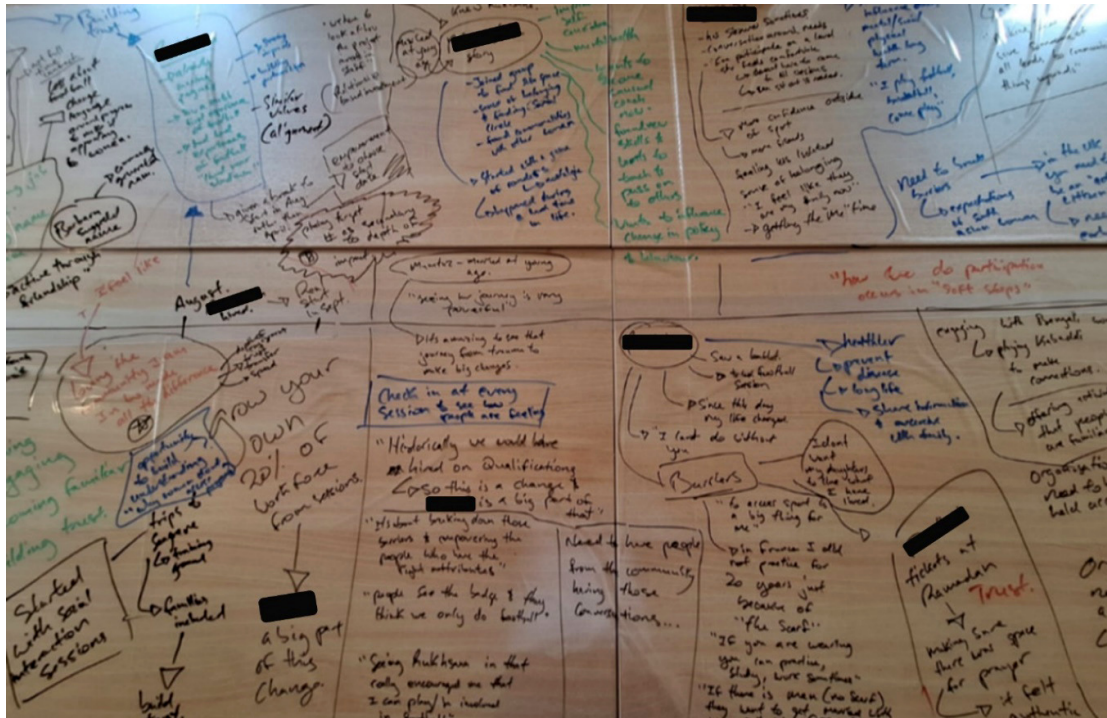
I think it's taught us a lot of lessons. Like me personally, the team, but also organisationally as a whole. I've got absolute faith in the way that the project works, but I think the workshop has just helped to solidify that perspective.

In all, REM was viewed favourably by participants and especially by the project's leadership team who identified its capacity to stimulate learning and reflection and to solidify perspectives about what has worked well thus far and why.



## 4.2. REM as a Process Evaluation Tool

The REM workshop provided a thorough insight into the perceived project processes and key impact pathways. The REM output is demonstrated in Figure 1—provided here not to offer any specific reading, but rather to illustrate the volume and nature of the information generated. The timeline can be identified running horizontally through the center of the map, with multiple ripples coming off with additional details.



**Figure 1.** Picture of anonymised ripple effects map produced during the research workshop.

Ripples indicated that where outputs and outcomes were achieved, this was often due to a process of building stronger relationships with trusted community organisations and utilising familiar and trusted community spaces for delivery; making activities more accessible and reducing perceived cultural barriers. This finding is consistent with other examples of community-based physical activity programming (Bates & Hylton, 2021). The map also illustrated a key impact pathway: recruiting staff who “represents the community” with lived experience of social, cultural, and gendered barriers to participation. The AL project helped the LO to realise the benefit of adopting a “grow your own” policy which now sees the LO committed to hiring 20% of staff from within the target community. The reason for this was participants’ emphasis on important processes such as having “staff that represents the community,” “working around prayer times or caring duties,” “focus on inclusivity,” and “increased control and choice about how and how often to participate.” The overarching finding from the REM workshop was that the participants trusted the programme and felt a connection to it. One of the primary project inputs that have led to this was identified as the “culturally appropriate” PL who implicitly understood their needs and could shape the programme accordingly. As such, the following section details two impact pathway ripples central to impact: (a) the project’s initial community engagement processes and (b) the project’s successful recruitment of an appropriate candidate into the PL role.



#### 4.2.1. Community Engagement Processes

Interviews conducted with other project participants following the REM workshop strengthened the original findings of the ripple effects map. The lived realities of local women were often characterised by high rates of social isolation, domestic violence, mental health issues, and the resulting low physical activity rates due to feeling unsafe doing activities outside the home and the stigma attached to women's exercise. Building trusting relationships was therefore essential, as the director of the LO explains:

The City Council was keen to bring in external consultation to do the in-depth consultation research, I was totally against that. I wanted the funding to make a difference rather than just paying someone to parachute in and take the money....So we gave the funds to food banks to restock their stores; in return they would complete the in-depth community research for us. We knew that our target audience were utilising food banks, and because these are trusted organisations, they were able to do a really detailed consultation report....Positive outcomes from this process were that we were able to support food banks, we got high-quality consultation that we are still using today, [and] the process helped us to become the leading organisation for the project.

This key impact pathway and the associated outcomes are represented in Figure 2. Giving directly to food banks for a quid pro quo exchange while cutting out external consultants, demonstrated a commitment to a trust-building process in the eyes of local individuals and organisations. This unconventional community engagement led to a second impact pathway (Figure 3) and the creation of a women's only project, sensitised to the cultural and social needs of the community (e.g., breaks for prayer, working around caring duties), and led by a local Muslim woman with a professional background in counselling and social work.

#### 4.2.2. Recruiting the "Right Person"

Figure 3 illustrates the recruitment process and chain of events leading to the successful launch of the AL project (red timeline), the significance of which cannot be understood without recognising the processes leading to it. The appointment of a PL with no prior professional experience in the field of community sport was unconventional, but given the challenge of engaging this target group in the past, the director of the LO and the strategic leadership team made a choice to hire based upon the consultation results rather than conventional wisdom (e.g., an essential requirement of sports qualifications and/or football-based experience):

Previously, we haven't had much visibility among Muslim audiences so we've had a difficult time reaching them. Historically we would have hired based on qualifications, so this is a big change and we wanted to break down the barriers to employment and empower the person who had the right attributes. (strategic lead)

However, as the appointed PL described during the REM workshop, she "already felt a barrier" when the director initially attempted to recruit her (blue timeline). Growing up near a Premier League football club stadium had meant traumatic memories of football-based violence; as a Muslim she associated football with feelings of fear and exclusion. However, AL community engagement processes and their focus on trust building helped her to see their authentic community-centered intentions. This ripple illustrates the importance of the

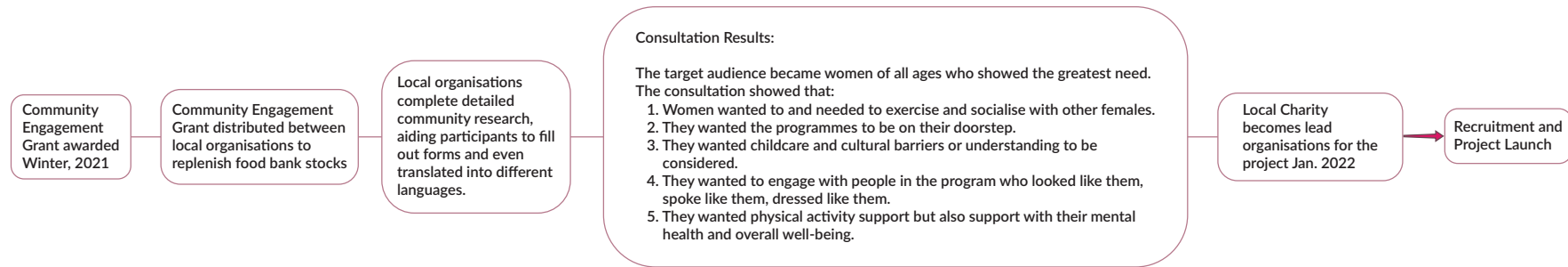


Figure 2. Community engagement impact ripple.

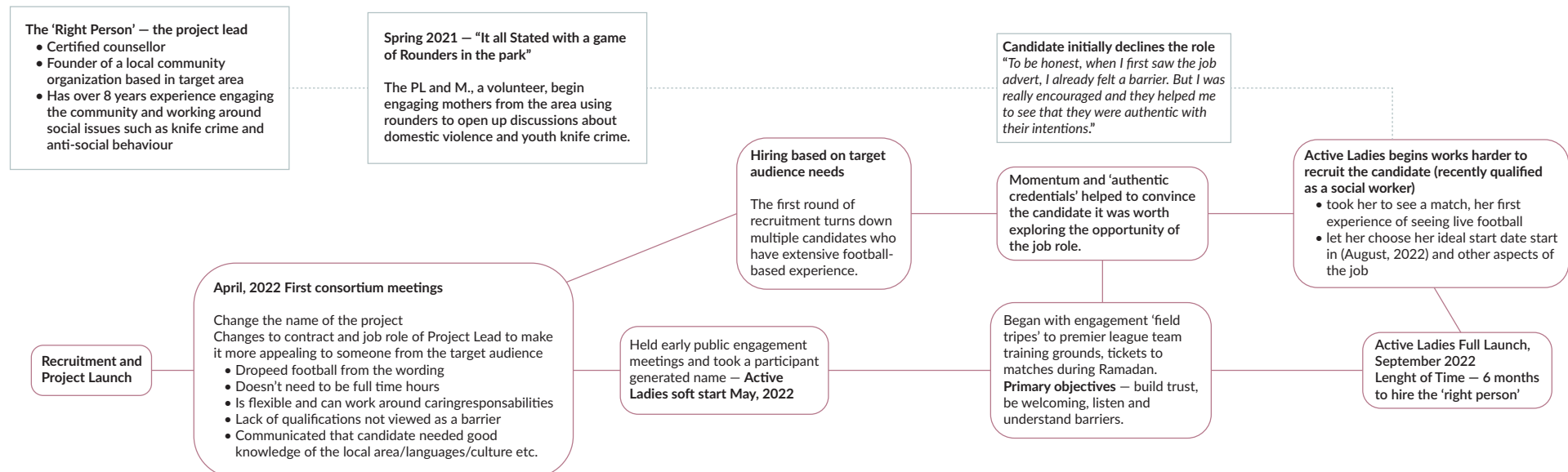


Figure 3. PL recruitment impact ripple.

lived experience and cultural knowledge that the PL brought into the project, without which it remains to be seen how the AL would have engaged the target community, and produced the outcomes and impact that it has today. Crucially, REM enabled the evaluation team to understand the *messy* recruitment process that contributed to the project's outcomes; a key impact pathway that could easily be omitted by more narrow outcome-focused evaluation methods.

## 5. Discussion

Participation in the REM workshops often stimulated a deeper reflection among participants about the core purpose of their project, about which activities were impactful, and how collectively the group of stakeholders valued some outcomes over others. The sessions also generated excitement through a heightened sense of the project's impacts seen from multiple perspectives. These are common reflections that others who have employed REM also report (Chazdon et al., 2017; Nobles et al., 2022b; Peterson & Skolits, 2019; Washburn et al., 2020). As Taylor et al. (2020) have argued, REM fits well within an interpretivist paradigm given its ability to incorporate multiple perspectives on an intervention. However, there is also a risk in presenting these processes in an overly pragmatic way; an attribution-focused timeline or the reduction of reported outcomes to a logical nodal structure would omit important contextual information which enables a thorough understanding of how and why any programme may generate impact. Therefore, combining the REM workshop with further in-depth qualitative work was essential to triangulate details, fact check, and rigourise the ripple effects map. For example, Figure 3 indicates that it took the LO six months to hire “the right person.” While this important point was captured during the REM workshop, the follow-up research added details that were not recorded or reported during the initial REM workshop, including (a) trust building as a primary objective during recruitment and (b) knowledge of mental health needs as a central recruitment criteria. These insights helped to demonstrate the significance of the LO's actions and how pertinent it was for them to remain true to the original consultation and wait for the right person. Furthermore, fieldwork clearly captured how the LO managed to recruit a reluctant person in the first place by being flexible about job roles and working arrangements, making it more appealing to someone from the target audience, and heightening the importance of cultural and local knowledge as key parameters for recruitment.

There are temporal challenges with REM. Through the timeline approach specific outcomes (e.g., the launch of the project after delays) were identified and unpacked to reveal their significance. During the mapping process, this required a temporal sliding backwards and forwards to understand the *messyness* leading to the outcome. Existing iterations of REM seem to suggest mapping as a somewhat straightforward exercise. For example, Chazdon et al.'s (2017) field guide utilises short-, medium-, and long-term changes of a project and the leading to salient outcomes being recorded. However, as part of the national-level evaluation research, it was found that much of the national programmes results had been achieved through local projects revisiting and interrogating their organisational structures and preferences (e.g., employment contracts, or the need for qualifications). Furthermore, the meaningful experiences involved in participant stories often did not involve identifiable outcomes—rather, session participants identified a sense of emotional connection and togetherness which grew over time as being central to the successes of the AL project.

Participants also shared opinions and ideas that had no specific moment but were clearly relevant to the impact of AL. For example, what they learned over the project (personally or professionally) and how that

may affect their lives or work in the future. This mix of timeline outcomes, stories, opinions, and reflections drove the evaluation and enabled a rich understanding of the project's impacts over time. As such, future REM work could be combined with a theory-based evaluation framework (Weiss, 1995) to generate findings with greater transferability and resonance beyond single cases. Future applications of REM may find it productive to use the map and key impact pathways produced during the REM workshop to aid in the refinement of an underpinning programme theory detailing what works, for whom, why, and in what circumstances (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Verkooijen et al., 2020).

More critically, debates about power within REM have not been fully explored and are often overlooked within evaluation research (Adams & Harris, 2014; Kay, 2012; Lindsey & Jeanes, 2023). As Kay (2012, p. 892) notes, the process of specifying which knowledge and data to record means that, "[monitoring and evaluation] systems define knowledge on the basis of external client understandings and requirements that not only have limited local meaning but also suppress the potential for local alternatives to be expressed." With this in mind, the evaluation framework adopted here ensured stakeholders were able to participate in the REM workshop and subsequent data collection and share their rich and meaningful experiences of the project and its impact on their lives. The use of REM and subsequent fieldwork enabled the centering of local knowledge, social connections, and professional practices within the evaluation of impact. While it is not feasible to include all the contextual information within which a project is situated from one REM workshop, the gathering of additional qualitative data around key impact pathways was a vital component in establishing a contextual richness to the timeline outcomes to help stakeholders build a deeper and more robust understanding impact.

## 6. Conclusion

This article illustrates the application of REM to a process evaluation of a sport for development programme in England and considers its utility as an evaluation tool. Specifically, the article has examined how REM can be utilised to identify pathways to impact, provided a reflection on the process of conducting REM workshops, and illustrated the value of REM as a participatory process. We have further considered the strengths and limitations of REM and provided approaches for researchers to apply additional, supplementary methods. This research therefore demonstrates that REM, when utilised within a flexible and reflexive evaluation framework, offers a participatory impact assessment technique suitable for producing rigorous research and sensitised to power relations in the production of evidence. The blending of REM with other evaluation-orientated methods is a novel approach to evaluation, with limited exploration within existing REM research. REM workshops are an informative way of gathering rich insights into how programmes function, and crucially, which activities and processes make the greatest contribution to the achievement of specific outcomes. The approach used here reflects the concerns of others who have highlighted the challenge of identifying single programme components that lead directly to outcomes (Coalter, 2013; Lindsey & Chapman, 2017). Instead, this article advocates an approach that (a) enables the researcher to work collaboratively with those who know the programme best and from different perspectives, (b) grasps the complex and interconnected web of factors that coalesce to generate impact over time, and (c) directs their fieldwork towards establishing the veracity of those ripple effects and outcomes. It is argued therefore that REM provides both researchers and practitioners with an accessible and informative evaluation technique for demonstrating and understanding impact, whilst also creating a basis for organisational reflection and learning.

The REM example presented in this article illustrates the centrality of recruiting “the right person.” Rather than the established recruitment practice of prioritising sport qualifications and experience, a mix of similar social and cultural lived experience was identified through community engagement as essential for engaging the target community. The REM workshop helped to uncover nuanced details around this recruitment process, which project participants and practitioners both agreed was a fundamental pathway to impact in the project, and which was confirmed through the further triangulation of fieldwork methods. Such findings are consistent with existing research that highlights the importance of culturally appropriate and empathetic programme leadership (Alarслан et al., 2024; Coalter, 2012).

The output of the REM map can be useful to organisations both as an internal and external reporting tool. Internally the REM output can help to evidence key performance measures, especially those that are more nuanced. For example, the community director of the LO explained to the lead author that “sense of belonging” for staff and participants is the core aspect of their new strategy and how “moving forward, we need to evidence that.” The REM output explored here gives strong evidence that staying committed to the original community engagement results, adjusting internal policies to realise these, and hiring a culturally and professionally appropriate person has led to a strong response by participants and local organisations who harbour feelings of trust and emotional connection to the AL project. As such, for external audiences, the REM output can demonstrate the LO’s level of accountability to the consultation results which clearly outlines the organisation’s capacity to deliver place-based projects by highlighting meaningful adjustments made to stay committed to the consultation. This, in turn, can aid in the process of bidding for future work which follows similar principles. Finally, as an external communication tool, the REM output can be utilised as evidence to influence external partners who are reluctant to buy into more unstructured and flexible approaches to sports development and who may need convincing. Interjecting targeted results from the REM workshop into this context can provide a powerful justification in support of more flexible, localist approaches to sports development.

Existing evaluation in sport for development has often been criticised for prioritising measuring methods that do not capture the crucial but elusive social processes central to understanding change (Kay, 2012; Long & Sanderson, 2001), or over-claiming programme impact based on wishful thinking, anecdotal evidence and personal testimonies (Coalter, 2013; Hartman & Kwauk, 2011). In response, theory-based evaluation approaches have been increasingly advocated to better explain how, why, for whom, and in what circumstances outcome occur (Coalter, 2013; Harris, 2018; Verkooijen et al., 2020). With such critique in mind, REM could be refined further for use within theory-based evaluation methodology, enabling researchers to capture the key components, relationships, mechanisms, and sequences that are identified within and across pathways to impact. This article has demonstrated how REM can provide a rich and robust visual aid to prompt such investigation of how and why a combination of activities and processes generated anticipated (or unanticipated!) impacts. Crucially, this article presents the first application of REM to understanding the processes leading to outcomes and wider community impact within sport for development research and evaluation. It is hoped that this article may initiate the beginnings of a methodological ripple of its own for those interested in further refining evaluation techniques in the pursuit of a better understanding of sport for development practices, processes, and impacts.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the Premier League, The FA, and the Government's Football Foundation and Sport England for providing funding and supporting data collection. Furthermore, they would like to thank the participating project areas for their support of the research project and for providing access to participants.

## Funding

The authors disclose receipt of financial support for the research that is part of this article from the Premier League, The FA, and the Government's Football Foundation and Sport England.

## References

- Adams, A., & Harris, K. (2014). Making sense of the lack of evidence discourse, power and knowledge in the field of sport for development. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 27(2), 140–151. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPSM-06-2013-0082>
- Adams, A., & Harris, K. (2023). *Evaluation in sport and leisure*. Routledge.
- Alarслан, G., de Jager, D., Super, S., van Hilvoorde, I., Koelen, M., & Verkooijen, K. (2024). What makes community sports programs successful? A group concept mapping study to identify effective elements. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 104, Article 102420. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2024.102420>
- Bates, D., & Hylton, K. (2021). Asset-based community sport development: putting community first. *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 26(1/2), 133–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2020.1822754>
- Brazier, J., Foster, C., Townsend, N., Murphy, J., Northcote, M., & Smith, A. (2024). Mapping the provision and evaluation practices of local community health and wellbeing programmes delivered by professional sports clubs in England: A practice-based targeted review. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 16(1), 39–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2023.2271904>
- Chazdon, S., Emery, M., Hansen, D., Higgins, L., & Sero, R. (2017). *A field guide to ripple effects mapping*. University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.
- Coalter, F. (2007). Sports clubs, social capital and social regeneration: 'Ill-defined interventions with hard to follow outcomes'? *Sport in Society*, 10(4), 537–559. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430430701388723>
- Coalter, F. (2012). 'There is loads of relationships here': Developing a programme theory for sport-for-change programmes. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 48(5), 594–612. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690212446143>
- Coalter, F. (2013). *Sport for development: What game are we playing?* Routledge.
- Daniels, J. E., Bell, B., & Horrocks, C. (2018). Capturing the realities of sports programmes: Systematic 'messiness'? *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 10(4), 779–794. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2018.1513414>
- Eysenck, H. J. (1979). Introduction. In H. J. Eysenck (Ed.), *Case studies in behaviour therapy* (pp. 1–17). Routledge.
- Harris, K. (2018). Building sport for development practitioners' capacity for undertaking monitoring and evaluation—Reflections on a training programme building capacity in realist evaluation. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 10(4), 795–814. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2018.1442870>
- Harris, K., & Adams, A. (2016). Power and discourse in the politics of evidence in sport for development. *Sport Management Review*, 19(2), 97–106. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2015.05.001>
- Hartman, D., & Kwauk, C. (2011). Sport and development: An overview, critique, and reconstruction. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 35(3), 284–305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723511416986>
- Haudenhuyse, R., Theeboom, M., & Nols, Z. (2012). Sport-based interventions for socially vulnerable youth:



- Towards well defined interventions with easy-to-follow outcomes? *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 48(4), 471–484. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690212448002>
- Kay, T. (2009). Developing through sport: Evidencing sport impacts on young people. *Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics*, 12(9), 1177–1191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430430903137837>
- Kay, T. (2012). Accounting for legacy: Monitoring and evaluation in sport in development relationships. *Sport in Society*, 15(6), 888–904. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2012.708289>
- Levermore, R. (2011). Evaluating sport-for-development: Approaches and critical issues. *Progress in Development Studies*, 11(4), 339–353. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146499341001100405>
- Lindsey, I., & Chapman, T. (2017). *Enhancing the contribution of sport to the sustainable development goals*. C. Secretariat.
- Lindsey, I., & Jeanes, R. (2023). Politics and power in evaluation. In A. Adams & K. Harris (Eds.), *Evaluation in sport and leisure* (pp. 27–40). Routledge.
- Long, J., & Sanderson, I. (2001). The social benefits of sport: Where's the proof? In C. Gratton & I. Henry (Eds.), *Sport in the city: The role of sport in economic and social regeneration* (pp. 187–203). Routledge.
- Mansfield, L. (2016). Resourcefulness, reciprocity and reflexivity: THE three Rs of partnership in sport for public health research. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 8(4), 713–729. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2016.1220409>
- Nobles, J., Fox, C., Inman-Ward, A., Beasley, T., Redwood, S., Jago, R., & Foster, C. (2022a). Navigating the river(s) of systems change: A multi-methods, qualitative evaluation exploring the implementation of a systems approach to physical activity in Gloucestershire, England. *BMJ Open*, 12(8). <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2022-063638>
- Nobles, J., Wheeler, J., Dunleavy-Harris, K., Holmes, R., Inman-Ward, A., Potts, A., Hall, J., Redwood, S., Jago, R., & Foster, C. (2022b). Ripple effects mapping: Capturing the wider impacts of systems change efforts in public health. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 22(1), Article 72. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-022-01570-4>
- Pawson, R., & Tilley, N. (1997). *Realistic evaluation*. Sage.
- Peterson, C., & Skolits, G. (2019). Evaluating unintended program outcomes through ripple effects mapping (rem): Application of rem using grounded theory. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 76, Article 101677. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2019.101677>
- Piggin, J., Jackson, S. J., & Lewis, M. (2009). Knowledge, Power and Politics: Contesting 'Evidence-based' National Sport Policy. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 44(1), 87–101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690209102825>
- Rodriguez Espinosa, P., King, A. C., Blanco-Velazquez, I., Banchoff, A. W., Campero, M. I., Chen, W. T., & Rosas, L. G. (2023). Engaging diverse midlife and older adults in a multilevel participatory physical activity intervention: Evaluating impacts using ripple effects mapping. *Translational Behavioral Medicine*, 13(9), 666–674. <https://doi.org/10.1093/tbm/ibad018>
- Sadeghzadeh, C., Sheppard, B., de Groot, J., & De Marco, M. (2022). Evaluating the benefits of a snap-ed-funded community garden intervention using ripple effect mapping. *Health Education & Behavior: The Official Publication of the Society for Public Health Education*, 49(1), 141–149. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10901981211058075>
- Shulha, L. M., Whitmore, E., Cousins, J. B., Gilbert, N., & al Hudib, H. (2016). Introducing evidence-based principles to guide collaborative approaches to evaluation: Results of an empirical process. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 37(2), 193–215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214015615230>
- Smith, A., & Waddington, I. (2004). Using 'sport in the community schemes' to tackle crime and drug use

- among young people: Some policy issues and problems. *European Physical Education Review*, 10, 279–298. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X04047127>
- Taylor, J., Goletz, S., & Ballard, J. (2020). Assessing a rural academic-community partnership using ripple effect mapping. *Journal of Community Practice*, 28(1), 36–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2020.1716286>
- Tracy, S. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
- United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (A/RES/70/1) <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n15/291/89/pdf/n1529189.pdf?token=hJf3Gpfhmm0BoKcvvW&fe=true>
- United Nations. (2022). *Sport: Catalyst for a better, stronger recovery for all* (A/77/161). <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n22/424/48/pdf/n2242448.pdf?token=zLlcJUIU27FZyED2v2&fe=true>
- Verkooijen, K. T., Super, S., Mulderij, L. S., de Jager, D., & Wagemakers, A. (2020). Using realist interviews to improve theory on the mechanisms and outcomes of sport for development programmes. *Social Inclusion*, 8(3), Article 2747. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v8i3.2747>
- Washburn, L. T., Traywick, L., Thornton, L., Vincent, J., & Brown, T. (2020). Using ripple effects mapping to evaluate a community-based health program: Perspectives of program implementers. *Health Promotion Practice*, 21(4), 601–610. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839918804506>
- Weck, S., Madanipour, A., & Schmitt, P. (2021). Place-based development and spatial justice. *European Planning Studies*, 30(5), 791–806. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2021.1928038>
- Weiss, C. (1995). Nothing as practical as good theory: Exploring theory based evaluation for comprehensive community initiatives for children and families. In J. Connell, A. Kubisch, L. Schorr, & C. Weiss (Eds.), *New approaches to evaluating community initiatives: Concepts, methods and contexts* (pp. 65–92). The Aspen Institute.
- Welborn, R., Downey, L., Dyk, P. H., Monroe, P. A., Tyler-Mackey, C., & Worthy, S. L. (2016). Turning the tide on poverty: documenting impacts through ripple effect mapping. *Community Development*, 47(3), 385–402. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2016.1167099>
- Whitley, M. A., & Welty Peachey, J. (2020). Place-based sport for development accelerators: A viable route to sustainable programming? *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 27(6), 530–539. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2020.1825989>

## About the Authors



**Jase Wilson** (PhD) is a post-doctoral fellow in sport development at the Carnegie School of Sport. His research focusses on aspects of social justice, equality, diversity, and inclusivity in relation to sport and physical activity. He is also interested and involved in a wide range of qualitative research methods, participatory research methods, ethnography, and the philosophy of qualitative sciences.



**Dan Bates** (PhD) is a senior lecturer in sport development with a research and teaching focus in sport for development. His research expertise covers several aspects of sport for development theory and practice, with a specific focus on community models of provision and theory-based evaluation. He is an active researcher and currently leads several commissioned national and regional evaluation projects that examine the impact of sport-based programmes, supporting partners to develop their monitoring, evaluation, and learning.