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Moving towards post-capitalist futures: ‘Collective Physical Activity’ with peripheral young adults in the North East of England

Gianmarco Dellacasa

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

University of Durham

Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences

2025

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Abstract

Background: The physical activity sector has recently experienced an increased focus on research and policy addressing the social determinants of inactivity and related inequalities. Concurrently, wealth and health disparities have been increasing dramatically, and the climate crisis is pushing humanity towards a crossroads between widespread destruction and system change. In this context of global crises and rising socio-economic inequalities, this thesis explores the potential need for alternative approaches to physical activity and its associated inequalities.

Theory and methodology: To scrutinise this proposition, the thesis first surveys relevant contexts, literatures and premises that this research examines, including the role of capitalism in growing inequalities, as well as literature and interventions related to physical activity and Sport For Development (SFD). Subsequently, it proposes a novel post-capitalist theoretical approach, 'Collective Physical Activity' (Co-PA), which aims to promote physical activity here and now while reflecting on alternatives to the status quo. It then presents empirical work conducted with peripheral young adults in the North East of England, a region characterised by socio-economic deprivation and high levels of physical inactivity. Then, it analyses the application of Co-PA principles in the research design, beginning with qualitative semi-structured individual interviews, followed by group workshops based on principles of critical pedagogy, and culminating in the co-design of physical activity actions.

Outcomes and analysis: Participants were interviewed about their views of physical activity, community, and society more broadly. They highlighted significant material barriers to physical activity, including work commitments, lack of free time and financial constraints while also individualising responsibility; they also showed general awareness of inequalities alongside a sense of disempowerment and difficulty to imagine alternatives to the status quo. They later participated in workshops inspired by Freirean critical pedagogy aimed at fostering democratic and participative discussions about physical activity as well as socio-political topics. These workshops started shifting participants' views towards the need for systemic solutions, while they also found empowerment in the physical activities that they perceive as personally meaningful, such as walking, valued for being an accessible option that allows them to be active on their own terms, with friends and in nature. Participants finally co-

designed physical activity actions primarily centred around walking, which I analyse as a synthesis of the material barriers encountered and the empowerment supported by the critical pedagogical discussions.

Concluding remarks: Integrating my interpretations and theoretical propositions with the participants' views and experiences, the arguments presented in this thesis provide some support for engaging with post-capitalist concepts as a potential avenue for sport and physical activity initiatives that have social justice at heart. This experimentation with the Co-PA approach is presented as just one way of politically engaging with physical activity amidst escalating socio-economic and environmental challenges, with the aim to strengthen its contribution towards significant system change. In fact, the thesis calls for adaptations or alternatives that may emerge from the expertise of scholars, community organisations, social movements, and independent groups of people.

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Term
Co-PA	Collective Physical Activity
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CWB	Community Wealth Building
eHealth	Electronic Health (internet-based health interventions)
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning and others
mHealth	Mobile Health (mobile phone-based health interventions)
NHS	National Health Service
PA	Physical Activity
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PE	Physical Education
RQ	Research Question
SES	Socio-economic Status
SDH	Social Determinants of Health
SFD	Sport for Development
SDP	Sport for Development and Peace
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organization
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

Declaration

- An article that includes some parts of the theoretical proposition of Chapter 3 has been published in the Annals of Leisure Research (2023, 27, article number 3).
- A book chapter with a short reference to some of the findings present in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 has been accepted for publication in the edited collection 'Social Class, Physical Education and Community Sport' (Routledge, 2025).

Statement of copyright

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. Quotations and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

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Mamma e Papà, you are the main reason I have made it this far: I have gone through many countries and met thousands of people to discover that my best friends were right there in via Senatore Borletti 5. Claudia, you are the main reason I wake up with a smile: I have looked for the meanings of life and love, and both keep leading me to you.
Vi voglio bene.

Dedication

To the Palestinians and all oppressed people.

To my afternoon call, parents and biggest supporters.

To my lunchtime call, sister and reason for being.

Chapter 1. Introduction

The physical activity sector has recently seen an heightened focus of research and policy on the social determinants of inactivity and related inequalities (e.g., Choi et al., 2017). While this is an important shift, it took place within a socio-political context in which global inequalities kept increasing dramatically. Wealth disparities, far from being attenuated, have been rising in recent years: since 1995, the richest 1% have captured almost 20 times more global wealth than the poorest 50% of humanity (Ahmed et al., 2022). As a result, the health-wealth gap is worsening too and in many countries, including the UK, the most affluent people live longer and healthier lives than the most deprived ones (e.g., Bennet et al., 2018; Watt, Raymond and Rachet-Jacquet, 2022). On top of this, we are now facing the effects of a climate crisis that is severely threatening humanity's well-being (IPCC, 2022; 2023), with irreversible impacts predicted to include food insecurity and famines leading to forced migration and socio-economic instability, as well as millions of excess deaths and chronic conditions which will disproportionately affect disadvantaged groups (Bressler, 2021; Islam and Winkel, 2017). In such a context, this thesis argues that it is increasingly difficult to address physical activity inequalities solely within the sphere of physical activity policy, and that broader joined efforts to reduce inequalities should be explored in order to lay the foundations for a more sustainable and egalitarian society.

At present, one third of the global population does not meet the recommended levels of physical activity (Strain et al., 2024) and there are significant disparities in how people of different demographics can engage with sport and physical activity, which result from the intersection of multiple factors such as, among others, gender and ethnicity (Sport England, 2023). Stark inequalities in participation, however, result predominantly from socio-economic conditions: taking England as an example, 73% of people in the highest socio-economic groups are active, whereas this figure decreases to 53% in the lowest socio-economic groups, in which women and ethnic minorities are overrepresented (Sport England, 2023). The fact that lower socio-economic groups have less opportunities to be physically active (Sport England, 2023), contributes to various adverse health outcomes and shorter life expectancy (Chastin et al., 2021). Furthermore, the physical activity gap between those with the most and least economic resources keeps widening, which indicates a long-term downward trend in the equity of physical activity levels (Sport England, 2023). A

considerable amount of work has focused on identifying the needs of people in lower socio-economic groups to attempt to reduce inequalities (e.g., Sport England, 2018). However, many of those initiatives focus on individual strategies to cope with adverse circumstances (e.g., Lowther, Mutrie and Scott, 2002; Mason and Kearns, 2013) or do not go far enough in challenging the root causes of inequalities (Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013).

I hereby draw on Piggin's (2020, p. 5) definition of physical activity as involving 'people moving, acting and performing within culturally specific spaces and contexts, and influenced by a unique array of interests, emotions, ideas, instructions and relationships'. From this perspective, physical activity is intended as inherently social, situated in spaces and contexts that work as opportunities or barriers, as well as inherently political (Piggin, 2020). Sport and physical activity are often considered a microcosm of society, and in this thesis I argue that the inequalities observed within this field do nothing but reflect a wider trend of rising disparities and should therefore be addressed from an holistic political perspective. In fact, I place this thesis at the intersection between the physical activity sphere and socio-political engagement: a position that was reached more assuredly within the course of this PhD itself, having shifted from a primarily physical activity focus to one that could also address the above-mentioned concurrent crises that, within its course, kept worsening.

The PhD (and my own) journey

I originally developed this PhD proposal in early 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a time in which the widening of global inequalities became ever clearer (as Chapter 2 addresses in more detail). Once I relocated to the North East of England and I started engaging in local communities experiencing deprivation, I felt the need to heighten the socio-political side of this research, from a secondary outlook to equally central alongside physical activity. My original aim was to explore how to increase physical activity levels of peripheral young adults and how to better understand their needs in order to refine provision of opportunities for engagement. While this remained important, living in the North East of England during an era of increasing cost-of-living, worsened by political inaction and global crises, pushed me to shift the overarching aim towards exploring how overtly political post-capitalist reflection(s) and physical activity action(s) might support each other in striving for

social change. This shift in focus led me to reframe the research questions, which guided both the theoretical and practical dimensions of the research:

1. How can the Co-PA praxis (*reflection* + *action*) aid 'conscientisation' in both physical-activity-related and political terms?
2. To what extent can this Co-PA praxis support the participants' view of the possibility to organise communities and society differently?
3. To what extent can these collective reflections affect the participants' perception of physical activity and ways to engage in it?

These questions are not treated as isolated inquiries but as interrelated dimensions of a broader research and pedagogical process. They are addressed throughout the thesis, from their relation with the methodological approach (Chapter 4) to how they connect with the interviews (Chapter 5), the collective reflections in the workshops (Chapter 6) and the co-designed actions (Chapter 7). Finally, in Chapter 8 I will revisit the research questions and reflect on their theoretical, methodological and practical implications in light of the findings presented in the other chapters. A more detailed overview of the thesis structure is provided later in this chapter.

In fact, I should first acknowledge that the intersection between the post-capitalist ethos and physical activity, is also a clear reflection of my own personal journey, which led me first to visualise this project and later make it happen. I grew up in the periphery of Rome, in a context whose increasing deprivation I could only appreciate after moving abroad, but luckily supported in both study and sport related endeavours by my parents. After my Master's degree I moved to Malta, and then England and Sweden, which allowed me to come into contact with many different cultures and also experience life in countries with very different welfare systems, as well as physical activity habits. In my own transition to adulthood, moving between countries and jobs, struggling to earn a living, I found myself completely inactive for nearly a decade. Then, severe struggles with depression forced me to adapt my lifestyle to try and re-gain some sort of normal functionality. I then left Sweden to go back to Rome, I started therapy (luckily at an affordable price) and I started joining my sister on her runs: at first, I would bike alongside her, because I was too weak and I had lost all my fitness; then, I started jumping off the bike for one minute, then two and then more until I could finally run for a few minutes without having to stop. When my mental health started improving, I was coincidentally reading a book by Swedish neurologist Anders Hansen titled

‘The real happy pill: power up your brain by moving your body’ (2017). This is when I realised how lucky I had been to be supported by an amazing family but also to have re-discovered the power of physical activity, which literally brought me back to life. At the same time, my political consciousness knew that one of the reasons why I had fallen in such a dark place was because of the struggles to survive that the capitalist system imposes on most of us. I was also well aware that many people do not have the same chances to get out of such dark places, therefore I started visualising a project that could support young adults – from similar backgrounds to mine – to find their way to be active despite material circumstances but that would also take into account the wider socio-political context. And thanks to the vision and support of Professor Emily Oliver and Dr Caroline Dodd-Reynolds first, and Dr Leanne Trick and Dr Iain Lindsey soon after, this idea turned into a research project.

Thesis’ structure and approach

In light of the above, this research was designed to approach physical activity inequalities from a perspective that can give heightened relevance to the wider socio-political context they are happening in, and that aims to support conscious efforts towards creating a different society where people’s well-being is centred. In this time of pressing multi-faceted crises, this thesis explores how to approach physical activity in a way that may adapt to the challenges ahead, potentially contributing to the dramatic shift necessary for humanity to survive and, ultimately, to thrive. Therefore, the project was centred around a twofold simultaneous purpose: (i) promoting physical activity and well-being in low socio-economic groups and marginalised contexts here and now, and (ii) supporting reflections and actions oriented towards future societies built around human prosperity. And, importantly, whether these two aspects could reinforce each other. In Chapters 2 and 3, I make the case for this post-capitalist-oriented approach that I call ‘Collective Physical Activity’ (Co-PA), which has the aim to promote physical activity among people on the periphery while co-creating opportunities directed towards radical change.

Since the early stages of writing the PhD proposal, I insisted on adding a practical side to this project. I was eager to explore theoretical concepts and learn from local young adults and their physical activity preferences, but I was also determined to conduct research that would not only be analytical nor simply extract knowledge from the communities I engaged with. In

fact, this thesis starts from a theoretical position based on a Marxist dialectical materialist view of society and physical activity, namely one that sees the influence of socio-economic conditions as the fundamental starting point (as Chapters 2 and 3 address). At the same time, dialectical thinking aims to enable human intervention in order to change those material conditions for the better (Au, 2017). In light of this, Freirean critical pedagogy came for me to be the perfect link between the theoretical stance and the willingness to act practically, an approach (see Chapter 3) that allows to merge theory and practice: namely a 'praxis', at the same time reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (Freire, 1972). In accordance with Freire's own perspective, dialectical materialism provides a framework for critical pedagogy to analyse existing conditions in the world while aiding people's consciousness of those conditions alongside empowerment to change them through collective action (Au, 2017). In this project, I therefore employed qualitative methods in interviewing participants, to familiarise myself with their views of physical activity, community and society more broadly (see Chapter 5). I also created workshops inspired by critical pedagogy with the aim to foster democratic and participative discussions (see Chapter 6). In these conversations, we reflected on societal issues (such as climate change, wealth and health inequalities), not only focusing on increasing awareness, but also aiming to find an empowering sense of agency. Discussions concentrated also on what could be done to solve such issues at an individual, community and societal level, while examining pragmatic alternatives to the capitalist status quo, such as cooperative ways to run businesses, Community Wealth Building (Dubb, 2016) and degrowth paradigms. Throughout all the discussions, attention was paid to physical activity's potential role in connection to the topics and circumstances analysed. The final stages were left open to the co-design of potential physical activities, which could allow participants to experiment with taking direct action within the physical activity sphere and within their communities (see Chapter 7). My main contributions and findings are therefore articulated in Chapters 5 (in relation to the interviews), Chapter 6 (workshops), Chapter 7 (physical activity actions) and finally Chapter 8 (conclusions and final reflections).

The overall novel contribution that this thesis aims to make is in the integration of critical pedagogy and physical activity through a post-capitalist-oriented approach, here named Co-PA. Unlike the dominant paradigms in the academic field of sport and physical activity that mostly focus on individual behaviour change or policy and institutional reform (Coalter, 2012; Rigby, 2022), this thesis foregrounds community-led and activist strategies that aim to

challenge the structural roots of inequalities. Theoretically, it draws on Marxist dialectical materialism to view physical activity as a site of struggle and transformation not confined within the boundaries of the capitalist system, but where collective agency can be fostered and aimed at more egalitarian post-capitalist alternatives. Methodologically, it applies this theoretical approach through a Freirean praxis (Freire, 1972), experimenting a dialogical and participatory approach merging reflections and actions, with the aim to enable critical engagement with structural inequalities and their alternatives, while supporting bottom-up physical activity opportunities. While participatory approaches such as Participatory Action Research (PAR) and co-production have gained traction in sport and physical activity research, their application remains underutilised in projects that aim to challenge systemic inequalities or reimagine socio-economic structures (Rich, Smith and Giles, 2024; Spaaij et al., 2018). As Spaaij et al. (2018) note, such approaches often enhance relevance and involvement but may struggle to shift power or foster systemic critique. This project builds on those foundations but diverges by embedding participatory principles within a dialectical materialist and post-capitalist framework.

This dual contribution – theoretical and methodological – positions the thesis at the intersection of physical activity and SFD literature and interventions, Participatory Action Research and post-capitalist political theory: the overt post-capitalist reflections offer a distinctive perspective that may help advance current approaches by explicitly linking physical activity to systemic critique and transformative praxis. While drawing on Marx's (1996) critique of capitalism, the thesis underlines physical activity's potential as a site of collective empowerment and systemic transformation, building on and aiming to extend existing work on critical pedagogy in sport (e.g., Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013), as well as bottom-up opportunities where sport is experienced as a political practice (e.g., Milan and Milan, 2021). Additionally, it is aligned with principles of post-colonial sport studies (Bale and Cronin, 2003; Bancel, Riot and Frenkiel, 2017), which highlight how physical activity is a contested space, where colonial legacies and capitalist structures intersect with local resistance and identities, and where community-led and culturally relevant alternatives to mainstream sport can find fertile ground for experimentation. In doing so, it aims to add an overtly post-capitalist element to calls for activist approaches to physical activity (e.g., Jackson and Sam, 2025; Spaaij et al., 2018), offering a new prefigurative lens through which to approach and address the urgency of the current multifaceted crises by *reflecting* on alternative egalitarian futures and *acting* in ways that embody those principles.

Caveats and considerations

Before providing a thesis overview, I here want to highlight a few specifications, some of which are also addressed in more depth in later chapters – such as the reasoning behind terminological choices – and some of which have guided my style of writing. To begin with, I have earlier mentioned Piggin's (2020) definition of physical activity, whose ethos I embrace throughout, and the reader will notice that during the interviews and workshops I instead used Sport England's definition[1]. Even though Piggin's definition describes better this thesis' holistic perspective, I found Sport England's to be useful in the collective discussions, since it allowed room for the participants to reflect critically and build their own holistic understanding (see Chapter 6). Generally speaking, I acknowledge the vast amount of literature and diverse uses of terms such as sport, physical activity, movement, exercise and so forth, but I do not engage directly in this debate, and I quote the respective terms when citing studies who privileged one over the other. Similarly, in Chapter 4 I explain the choice to conduct the project with young adults from the North East of England: in doing so, I make the case for my preference towards using the terms *marginalised* and *peripheral* alongside each other. 'Marginalisation' can refer to the position and process of individuals, groups, or populations being pushed outside of mainstream society, making them feel powerless in influencing decisions or events (IPBES, 2019; Schiffer and Schatz, 2008): this concept highlights well the systemic role of capitalist structures in creating inequalities. On the other hand, I consider the term 'peripheral' less stigmatising and apt for describing areas or groups that are not centrally important or are at the edges (Blom, 1996): I argue that it better captures the potential for transforming these peripheries into spaces of shared well-being and equality, rather than striving to reach the oppressive centre. However, as I will expand on in Chapter 4, I do not feel a strong preference for any of the terms that can be used to address deprivation or limited access, and I also use low-socio-economic groups and low-socio-economic status (SES) in certain instances throughout the thesis, where this is how wider authors have measured or conceptualised their data. The distinction that I find most important is however the one highlighted in Chapter 2 between *systemic change*, which I visualise as still constrained within the boundaries of the capitalist system, and *system change*, that can start

[1] Sport England (2023) intends as physical activity bouts of 10 minutes or more of at least moderate intensity. These could include sporting activities, fitness activities, dance, cycling for sport and leisure or travel, as well as walking for leisure or travel.

within the capitalist system while being oriented beyond it. Overall, I have tried to address existing literature and academic debates to the extent that I perceived necessary, but I also opted for stating my perspective without harshly critiquing other people's work and ideas, even when I disagreed. Drawing on principles of prefigurative politics (in which people try to embody and enact the same values of the society they seek to build), I believed that this thesis' peculiarities could starkly emerge anyway, and that they would hopefully do so abiding by principles of kindness.

With the same prefigurative principle in mind and seeing knowledge as not limited to the 'West', I apply to myself an important critique for having privileged too often literature written in English, with sporadic exceptions in Italian, Spanish and Swedish – the other languages I speak – and some articles focused on the 'Global South'. Apart from acknowledging this, I have used a 'glocal' approach to knowledge, namely one that considers knowledge from every corner of the world as equally relevant, while also finding it important to adapt to local specificities. The reader might also notice that the style of writing reflects part of my background in humanities and the fact that I am not a native English speaker. While during these four years I have considerably shortened the average length of my written sentences, some might still be pretty 'Latin' and long from an anglophone perspective, but I aimed for the best possible language while not wanting to completely erase my voice (which is, indeed, very 'Latin'). As I contextualise in Chapter 4, I have embraced the academic experience while remaining an outsider, enjoying working at university while feeling at home in the neighbourhoods of the North East that welcomed me like one of their own. I believe that this positionality has proven relevant in engaging with young adults that – to different extents – lived at the margins and seemingly appreciated my peer-to-peer approach. Some of my unorthodox approach might emerge in places in my writing, and I hope it will aid the reader to perceive the same authenticity with which I conducted the project, talked with all the people involved and passionately tried to write about it. Similarly, I have tried to quote the participants' words as close to their original phrasing as possible, as not to obfuscate their veracity. Apart from these caveats, I hope to convey the main messages of this thesis in compelling ways and I thank the reader in advance for taking the time to engage with it and my ideas, something that I do not take for granted (especially within the constraints of neoliberal academia) and that I am extremely grateful for.

Next steps and chapters overview

The following Chapter 2 surveys the contexts of different strands of ideas that this research touches upon, namely the role of capitalism in growing inequalities, as well as physical activity and Sport For Development (SFD) literature and interventions. This intersection sets the scene for this thesis' approach, in which the focus on physical activity and socio-political aspects are regarded as equally important, and which the thesis pays simultaneous attention to. The chapter starts by outlining the growing wealth and health inequalities, the unequal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis, and why these issues highlight capitalism's inextricable relation with inequalities and the need for a shift in the way the latter are approached. Then, it contextualises physical activity's benefits alongside its inequalities, and the landscape of research and interventions that are trying to tackle them, within the physical activity sphere as well as SFD.

In Chapter 3, the theoretical approach of the thesis is outlined, drawing on Marxist dialectical materialism, which intends dialectical thinking and materialism as united in order to understand the interrelated processes that happen in the material world and to enable human intervention to change those conditions. Connected to this, Freirean critical pedagogy is presented as the basis for the methodological approach of this project, one that merges critical reflection with action. The chapter starts by highlighting the relevance of Marx's analysis for this thesis' focus on inequalities and the onto-epistemological position that stems from it, as well as the role of structure and agency. Then it delves into the methodological underpinnings of critical pedagogy and its links with post-capitalist thinking and prefigurative acting. Finally, my proposition of Co-PA is presented as an approach to physical activity for social justice, suggesting its three core features as meaning and enjoyment, collective engagement, and a post-capitalist outlook.

Seeing theory and practice as united, Chapter 4 analyses the translation of the previously highlighted principles into the research design. This project, as highlighted in the chapter, is just one potential way to experiment with the Co-PA approach, which could rather evolve and be adapted to different contexts and people. The chapter begins by highlighting the research questions that the project tried to answer. Then it looks into the why, where and who: namely the focus on young adults and what I mean by 'marginalised' and 'peripheral';

the North East of England; and characteristics of the two groups of participants that have taken part in this specific project. I later reflect on the recruitment phase, my first approaches with places and people, as well as my positionality as an outsider researcher. Then, I present the research assemblage and the methods chosen, starting with individual interviews followed by group workshops based on critical pedagogy, and culminating in the co-design of physical actions. Finally, I explain the methods of analysis and ethical considerations, before moving on to the findings in following chapters.

Chapter 5 focuses on the findings of the initial individual interviews, addressing the participants' understanding and lived experiences of physical activity as well as some broader aspects of their communities and society. Here I analyse the physical activity preferences of the participants, with focus on how walking was mentioned as a predominant activity despite it not always being considered as 'counting', and how work and other material circumstances play a significant role. Then I explore the struggles that the participants encountered within physical education (PE) and other mainstream physical activity settings, as well as their preference for being active together with other people, although preferably on their own terms. The third section is dedicated to the socio-political topics discussed in the interviews, where I look at how 'capitalist realist' thinking (Fisher, 2009) seemed to affect the participants' ability to visualise alternatives to the status quo of inequalities, and later delve into their political (dis)empowerment and hope(lessness). The chapter is concluded by analysing how the views expressed by the participants relate to the post-capitalist and collective ethos of Co-PA, as well as how despite a generally strong awareness of social determinants of health and structural issues, the majority of participants seemed to individualise responsibilities. Which – I argue – introduces the relevance of the critical pedagogical approach of the workshops that follow.

Chapter 6 examines the workshops conducted with two groups of participants, and it addresses step by step the collective reflections that took place. The participants' written and oral comments intertwine with some of my own reflections, though I nonetheless aim to centre participants' opinions and group dynamics. Images of the collectively produced boards are included to provide the interested reader with the opportunity to read through the complete range of participants' quotes. Within the text, each section proceeds by analysing in parallel the same part of the workshops in each group, and I simultaneously highlight key aspects that emerged, similarities and differences found between the two groups, as well as

whether the collective discussions shifted participants' views in comparison with individual interviews. In Workshop 1, issues related to climate change and wealth inequalities were discussed, alongside reflections on health and physical activity opportunities. In Workshop 2, we discussed alternative ways to run businesses, Community Wealth Building (Dubb, 2016) and degrowth paradigms – always with a link to sport and physical activity – and then visualised how an ideal community could look. In Workshop 3, physical activity's benefits and inequalities were considered, before beginning to plan a potential physical activity action for the community which is the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter 7 examines the final stages of the project, namely the co-design and realisation of physical activity actions, additional meetings and other post-workshops interactions between me and the participants. In this part of the project, participants were in charge of the co-design and organisation of physical activity actions that could target themselves, their peers and their wider communities. I here present the two groups' actions separately, before reflecting on learning across both of them, focusing on how these actions related to material barriers, as well as the previous stages of the project and the theoretical stance of this thesis. The chapter also includes methodological reflections, interpretations of the participants' engagement and perceptions, as well as some valuable perspectives from one particular youth worker based in a community centre were the project took place.

In Chapter 8, I summarise the main findings of this thesis, which aims to contribute to the discourse around physical activity inequalities through the theoretical development of a post-capitalist approach (Co-PA) and the methodological and empirical learning that came with its practical experimentation. Here, I reflect on the main contributions that this thesis makes from a theoretical, methodological and practical perspective. Then I compare this project's outcomes with other Freirean experimentations within the sport field, and later focus on the limitations and potential recommendations for future research and applications, alongside a call for action to learn from and link with existing inspiring efforts. Finally, I conclude with an overall summary of the project's main message, suggesting that it would be relevant to further explore ways to promote physical activity in the here and now, whilst also strengthening its engagement in post-capitalist-oriented struggles for social change.

Chapter 2. Surveying the context: physical activity and sport for development within the context of growing inequalities

This chapter seeks to situate the thesis in the existing landscape of physical activity and Sport For Development (SFD) research with focus on inequalities, in an age of global concurring crises. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive literature review, but rather to survey the context(s) of different strands that this research relates to, namely the role of capitalism in growing inequalities, as well as physical activity and SFD literature and interventions. The intersection of such strands sets the scene for this thesis' approach, namely one in which the focus on physical activity and the socio-political are equally relevant, and which are accorded simultaneous attention through the thesis. In recent years, efforts to look at the complexity of social determinants of physical activity have multiplied. These approaches make important contributions to identify social, economic and environmental factors but they often limit themselves by considering physical activity policies as the 'upstream', debating 'systemic change' in relation to the physical activity system or confined within the current socio-economic model (Bauman et al., 2012; Choi et al., 2017; Rigby, 2022; World Health Organization, 2018). This thesis makes the case for an 'upstream' approach that looks beyond physical activity policies and starts discussing a wider 'system change', looking at what role could physical activity play in challenging the very roots of capitalist inequalities and move beyond this system. SFD scholars have also grappled, to different extents, with the relation between sport and systemic issues: in this chapter I draw on existing literature to highlight points of contact with this thesis' approach as well as aspects that I suggest should be strengthened. The chapter starts by looking at the growing wealth and health inequalities (2.1.1.), the unequal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (2.1.2.) and the climate crisis (2.1.3.), and why these issues highlight capitalism's inextricable relation with inequalities and the need for a rapid shift in the way we approach social disparities (2.1.4.). Against this backdrop, the chapter then contextualises physical activity's benefits alongside its inequalities (2.2.), and the landscape of research and interventions that are trying to tackle them, within the physical activity sphere as well as SFD (2.3.). Finally, I briefly introduce my case for an approach to physical activity that works simultaneously 'within, against and beyond' capitalist structures (2.4.), which will be fully presented in the following Chapter 3.

2.1. Rising inequalities: framing the issue(s)

This thesis' approach stems from the will to both address growing health inequalities – with the notion here used in its broader sense to indicate 'avoidable and unfair differences in health status between groups of people or communities' (NIHR, 2022) – and to enhance physical activity's potential of contributing to a more just society. To highlight the significance of physical activity at the same time as considering the potential for radical system change, the chapter starts by briefly outlining some systemic issues that exacerbate inequalities, namely the health-wealth gap, the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis, as well as their inextricable link with capitalism's core nature.

2.1.1. Wealth and health inequalities

Reports show that global wealth inequalities, far from being attenuated, have been rising in recent years. Since 1995, the richest 1% have captured almost 20 times more global wealth than the poorest 50% of humanity (Ahmed et al., 2022). During the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic, while 99% of the people saw their income worsen, the wealth of the 10 richest men has doubled, with 252 men now possessing more wealth than all 1 billion women and girls in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean combined (Ahmed et al., 2022). If we look specifically at the UK, incomes for the poorest 14 million people decreased by 7.5% in 2022, while incomes for the richest fifth saw a 7.8% increase (ONS, 2023). Wealth is even more unequally divided than income: in 2020, the ONS calculated that the richest 10% of households in the UK hold 43% of all wealth, whilst the poorest 50% own just 9% (ONS, 2022). This wealth is unevenly spread also from a geographical point of view, with the North East of England faring worse than any other region in the UK (ONS, 2022; The Equality Trust, 2023). Social mobility is at its lowest in 50 years, with young people in the North finding it hardest to become wealthier than their parents (IFS, 2023). In addition, it has been calculated that by 2035 the wealth of the richest 200 families might become larger than the whole UK GDP (Tippet and Wildauer, 2023). The above-mentioned statistics are not accidental since, as Hickel (2020) argues, under capitalism the accumulation of wealth for the few is based on creating artificial scarcity and impoverishment of the many in order to exploit their cheap labour.

Concurrently, the overall health-wealth gap is widening in many Western countries, where more people should have supposedly benefited from capitalist economic growth: in the US, the richest men live 15 years longer than the poorest ones, while for women the difference is 10 years (Chetty et al., 2016); in France, the gap is approximately 11 years (Blanpain, 2018); in Italy, 4 years (Osservatorio Nazionale sulla Salute nelle Regioni Italiane, 2018); in Sweden, the difference between individuals with different educational backgrounds in Vårby Gård and Danderyd, two areas of Stockholm connected by the same metro line, is 18 years (SCB, 2016). Looking at the UK, the most affluent people live on average 9 years longer than the most deprived ones – based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) –, and people in the most deprived areas of England are diagnosed with serious illness earlier than their peers in more affluent areas (Bennet et al., 2018; Watt, Raymond and Rachet-Jacquet, 2022). Children and young people under 20 years old in poorer areas are also more likely to live with health issues such as asthma and epilepsy, as well as having experienced alcohol problems, while people in their 20s are diagnosed with chronic pain, alcohol problems, anxiety and depression (Watt, Raymond and Rachet-Jacquet, 2022). The North East of England fares worse than the rest of the country not only in terms of wealth, but also when it comes to health. People living in the North East have the highest health care needs due to long-term illness, which include chronic pain, alcohol problems, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and cardiovascular disease (Watt, Raymond and Rachet-Jacquet, 2022). On top of this, economic inactivity due to sickness is at its highest level since records began: reports found that COVID-19 has made regional inequalities worse, as the north of England – alongside other less well-off regions – have higher long COVID incidence than the UK average (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2022).

2.1.2. COVID-19, the unequal pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to millions of deaths, as well as long-term health consequences (del Rio, Collins and Malani, 2020). While governments around the world were starting to loosen or abandon mitigations, urging people to 'learn to live with COVID' (Gurdasani and Ziauddeen, 2022), studies were already highlighting the need for reinforced systemic strategies to avoid incalculable consequences in the years to come. For example, COVID-19 is associated with long-term health detriments even in people with initially mild cases, such as higher risk of heart disease (Xie et al., 2022), 40% increased risk of diabetes

(Xie and Al-Aly, 2022), reduction of grey matter and brain size (Douaud et al., 2022), and likely overall multi-organ and immune system impairment (Dennis et al., 2022; Ryan et al., 2022). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted vulnerable communities where life expectancy was already lower: for instance, in England the mortality rate for COVID-19 in the most deprived areas has been more than double the mortality rate of the wealthiest ones (ONS, 2020), showing how the *laissez-faire* approach to the pandemic is itself a matter of social injustice. Of note, common pre-existing morbidities in COVID-19 deceased patients include hypertension, cardiovascular disease and diabetes (Ng et al., 2021), all factors that can be positively affected by physical activity (Bassuk and Manson, 2005).

Another interesting aspect, from a sociological perspective, is the way the pandemic has been handled and how this might reflect and/or influence people's approaches to society. Several studies have found that the more individualistic – rather than collectivistic – a country was, the more COVID-19 cases and mortalities it had (Maaravi et al., 2021). The connection between individualism and the severity of the pandemic's development is argued to be due to social non-cooperativeness in individualistic countries which reduces the effectiveness of mitigations (Huang et al., 2022). In the first stages of the pandemic, concepts such as 'we're all in this together' and 'stronger together' have been employed to invoke a collective effort (Flynn, 2022), but this approach was short-lived. Such collectivist attitudes were contrary to the individualism of neoliberal ideology (Flynn, 2022), and most Western countries were fast to switch towards an approach to the pandemic that reflects their overall approach to most health matters, namely one based on individual responsibility. When, in 2023, the WHO announced the end to the 'emergency' phase of the pandemic (UN News, 2023), meaning that it wasn't 'sudden, unusual or unexpected' anymore (WHO, 2019), most mainstream discourse has declared COVID-19 over altogether, with many speaking about it in the past tense and making the issue fade out of public debate. I argue that this is just another example of how, under capitalism, people's well-being is side-lined in favour of the continuation of the 'business as usual' status quo. Even when this means widespread deaths and decreased health or putting human life on the planet at risk.

2.1.3. Climate crisis

The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports (2022; 2023) have emphasised that the window for action to stay in a climate safety zone is shrinking fast. The 2022 report suggested that while the world should cut by 2030 its total emissions by 45% – from 2010 levels – to avoid climate catastrophe, at current levels they are predicted to increase by almost 14% in the same period. Irreversible impacts will include frequent and intense weather events, biodiversity and ecosystem loss, as well as food insecurity and famines leading to forced migration and socio-economic instability. It has been calculated that climate change will contribute from 9 to 83 million cumulative excess deaths by the end of the century (Bressler, 2021). But these deaths, as well as chronic conditions and morbidities, will not affect everyone equally, with disadvantaged groups continuing to suffer more from the adverse effects of climate change, in turn resulting in greater subsequent inequalities (Deivanayagam et al., 2023; Islam and Winkel, 2017; Somanathan et al., 2021; Zivin and Neidell, 2014). This applies to within-country inequalities as well inequalities across countries, where the people most affected by climate hazards are the ones already facing discrimination based on gender, age, race, class, indigeneity, disability as well as due to their geographical location (Deivanayagam et al., 2023; IPCC, 2014; Islam and Winkel, 2017).

These issues are direct consequences of the capitalist growth model (Singh and Hickel, 2023) whose benefits have been captured mainly by the richest countries and people: currently, twenty of the richest billionaires are estimated to be responsible for emitting, on average, 8,000 times more carbon than the billion poorest people (Lawson and Jacobs, 2022). Some refer to the current period as Capitalocene (Moore, 2015), since this crisis does not have to do with humans as such (as the alternatively used term Anthropocene would let us think), but rather with the dominance of the capitalist system and its core features (Hickel, 2020; Moore, 2015). Capitalism is organised around perpetual growth on a finite system, which is in itself a contradiction, and seeks to do so by exploiting ever increasing amounts of nature and human labour (Hickel, 2020; Raworth, 2017). Therefore, I argue, every discourse centred around overcoming inequalities should grapple with capitalism, this being the root cause of an increasing health-wealth gap, exacerbated by the unequal COVID-19 pandemic, and a climate crisis that is putting not only human's health but also our very future at risk.

2.1.4. Capitalism and its inextricable relation with inequalities

So far, I have only briefly mentioned some characteristics of capitalism, but I think it is important to clarify how I define it in this thesis. It is often assumed that capitalism is simply a system of markets and trades, but these had already existed for thousands of years before its emergence (Hickel, 2020). Capitalism's distinctive trait is to be organised around perpetual growth in order to constantly extract and accumulate surplus for the owners of capital, and it does so primarily by exploiting nature and human labour (Engels and Marx, 2015; Hickel, 2020; Marx, 1996; Raworth, 2017). Historically, it arose in the 16th century by processes of enclosures that destroyed rural communities creating a mass of 'paupers' (from the Latin word meaning poor), as well as colonialism: two sides of the same strategy to exploit cheap or enslaved labour and natural resources. Still to this day, capitalism is argued to be characterised by some key features (Hickel, 2020; Panayotakis, 2003; Singh and Hickel, 2023): it is largely undemocratic, with production and wealth controlled by a very small elite; the goal of production is not to meet human needs or to improve social outcomes, but rather to maximise growth, profit and accumulation for the few; lastly, there is a constant focus on cheapening inputs, especially nature and labour, by compressing resource prices and wages. The latter is a crucial point for this thesis, given the focus on the peripheries and less wealthy social classes. Capitalism creates artificial scarcity in order to keep wages down (Hickel, 2020; Panayotakis, 2003): the proponents of capitalism themselves thought it necessary to impoverish people in order to create growth (Perelman, 2000), and this process is still at the core of our economic and social order. Therefore, I argue that no social justice or substantial equality is achievable within a system that is built on the creation and retention of injustice and inequality.

In the previous paragraphs of this chapter, I have highlighted statistics on how wealth disparities, COVID-19 and climate change influence health and reinforce inequalities: these examples do not show an unlucky historical phase but rather confirm the very nature of the economic system we live in, one in which inequalities are bound to keep growing. In fact, while investments and research on the social determinants of health have increased in the past decades (Singh and Hickel, 2023), results struggle to follow. United Nations (UN, 2022) projections indicate that, if current trends continue, preventable mortality and health inequalities will persist through the rest of the century. Singh and Hickel (2023) have suggested a framework named 'Capitalogenic Disease' with the purpose to assess the extent

to which specifically capitalist arrangements may have negative effects on health. This framework does not aim to ascribe all social determinants to capitalism nor argue that capitalism is the only cause of diseases, but in cases where ill health is caused or exacerbated by *specifically* capitalist relations, it would be useful to identify and understand these dynamics in order to respond appropriately (Singh and Hickel, 2023). The proponents of this framework have analysed eight concrete examples, among which feature aspects that are relevant to this thesis, namely poverty-related mortality, diseases related to work, health disparities in race and gender, and health impacts of climate change (Singh and Hickel, 2023). While research on social determinants might shed light on structures and some 'causes of the causes' (Marmot, 2018) these terms are often used as generic descriptors and end up being *de facto* depoliticised (Singh and Hickel, 2023). Therefore, I argue that discourses on social determinants and health inequalities should confront head-on the political and economic system at their roots, because naming and understanding the way capitalism works is a necessary step towards substantially tackling inequalities. This is why, in this thesis, I make the case for addressing the ultimate 'upstream' factor, the capitalist socio-economic order, in order to strengthen efforts that aim to tackle physical activity inequalities.

2.2. Physical activity's benefits and inequalities

While being physically active might not solve poverty, the climate crisis, or pandemics on its own, we know that the benefits deriving from an active lifestyle can contribute to making our bodies and minds more resilient to adversities (da Silveira et al., 2021). Furthermore, in this thesis I aim to explore how meaningful and engaging opportunities for physical activity could widen their scope beyond improving individual well-being, aiming to strengthen community health (here intended as promotion of the health of all members of a community through collective efforts) while contributing to wider social change. Before delving deeper in the latter aspect, it is important to briefly outline some of the key evidenced impacts of physical activity as well as the disparities in physical activity levels.

By adopting a salutogenic lens, as argued by Quennerstedt (2008), health can be seen not only as the absence of diseases, but rather as something dynamic, always in the process of becoming, and health matters as holistically including the whole human being in relation with the environment. To begin with, it is important to acknowledge that physical activity does not

have the same impact in all people and, for some, it can even have negative consequences. However, in terms of physical health benefits for the majority of people, existing intervention-based evidence implies regular physical activity's efficacy (throughout the life course) in preventing premature death and as a mediator of several chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancer, hypertension, obesity, and osteoporosis (Warburton, Nicol and Bredin, 2006). From a salutogenic perspective, the practice of physical activities is also important to strengthen aerobic capacity, motor skills and coordination, as well as the immune system, generating benefits in the response to viral communicable diseases (da Silveira et al., 2021) and generally supporting overall human health and well-being. Neuroscience has also demonstrated that mental health and cognitive abilities are improved by physical activity, with regular physical activity having a positive impact on treating post-traumatic stress disorder (van der Kolk, 2015), depression, anxiety, as well as preventing dementia (Hansen, 2017). And, at the same time, physical activity enhances our mood, the ability to focus and concentrate, memory, creativity, resistance to stress and, some have argued, our overall intelligence (Hansen, 2017). Improvements can also include social aspects such as our ability to communicate, conflict resolution, prosocial behaviour, teamwork, empathy, respect for diversity, and social responsibility (Hermens et al., 2017) when physical activity is practiced with other people. Lastly, physical activity can promote democratic participation, engaging in empowering experiences, creating opportunities for involvement and joy, and fostering a holistic well-being that is experienced in movement, in ongoing activities and in the social relationships surrounding it (Quennerstedt, 2008).

However, there are significant disparities in how people of different backgrounds and demographics can engage with sport and physical activity. Nearly one third of the global population does not meet the recommended levels of physical activity, with notable inequalities by sex, age, region, and country (Strain et al., 2024). According to Sport England (2023), 65.6% of men in England are active – moving or exercising at least 150 minutes a week – compared to 60.8% of women. And while 64% of White British adults being active represents a marginal increase since 2016 levels, no ethnic minority group is showing improvements, with Black (56%), Asian (55%) and other ethnicities (55%) actually registering slight drops (Sport England, 2023). Such stark inequalities result predominantly from the intersection with socio-economic conditions. While 73% of people in England's highest socio-economic groups are active, this figure decreases to 53% in the lowest socio-

economic groups where women and ethnic minorities are overrepresented (Sport England, 2023). Activity levels have recovered and risen above pre-pandemic standards among the most affluent and mid-affluent groups, but they decreased by 2.1% below 2016 levels for the least affluent ones: according to Sport England (2023) this might be related to the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, but it also indicates a longer-term downward trend among this group. Patterns of distribution of community assets in deprived and non-deprived areas are complex to assess, but generally more affluent neighbourhoods have been shown to have a greater density of many resources associated with physical activity participation (e.g., parks, tennis courts; see: Haake et al., 2022; Macintyre, Macdonald and Ellaway, 2008). In fact, the most deprived places in England fare worse statistically, with activity levels decreasing below pre-pandemic (–3.1%) and 2016 (–2.6%) levels (Sport England, 2023).

As Chapter 4 will outline, this research project focuses on young adults living in the North East of England, an age group and a geographical area that are among the most critical in terms of physical inactivity. Among young adults, activity levels were falling before the pandemic and this trend continues: there are now nearly half a million fewer active young adults than six years ago (Sport England, 2023). In the most recent Sport England's spotlight on low socio-economic groups (2018), the transition to adulthood appeared to be particularly crucial for people in lower socio-economic groups: the rate of inactivity amongst 16–24 year olds from these groups was already starkly higher when compared to their wealthier peers, and it increased further within the 25–54 age groups. In the North East, 29.4% of people are inactive (compared to a national average of 25.8%) and only 60.9% are active: as a point of reference, 67.1% are active in the South West and 66.5% in the South East (Sport England, 2023). However, despite awareness of the influence of socio-economic determinants and increased attention to these disparities, many sport and physical activity interventions focus on changing individual behaviours or struggle to engage deeply with the roots of inequalities and marginalisation (Lowther, Mutrie and Scott, 2002; Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013).

2.3. The landscape of sport and physical activity research and interventions with focus on inequalities

A considerable amount of research, policy and interventions has focused on identifying the needs of marginalised people and people in lower socio-economic groups (e.g., Sport

England, 2018) to attempt to reduce their inactivity. However, the focus falls often on individual strategies to cope with adverse circumstances or struggles to substantially challenge their structural causes (e.g., Lowther, Mutrie and Scott, 2002; Mason and Kearns, 2013). Research has identified up to 117 correlates of physical activity, including demographic, biological, psychological, behavioural and social factors (Choi et al., 2017): while agreeing with the relevance of all these aspects, socio-economic factors can often override the other ones (see Collins, Kay and Collins, 2014; Spaaij, Magee and Jeanes, 2014), especially in relation to people in lower socio-economic groups. Therefore, I suggest that looking at physical activity policy as the 'upstream', considering policies as central to physical activity promotion and seeing persistent inequalities as a sign of their shortcomings (e.g., Rigby, 2022), might be missing a crucial point. Namely that within capitalism, disadvantage and inequalities are fundamentally interwoven in the social fabric, which makes it difficult to target physical activity inequalities without substantial socio-economic changes (Coalter, 2012).

While seeing the relevance of strategies that aim to increase physical activity levels *despite* negative social determinants of health (SDH), this thesis argues for an approach that explores how physical activity could contribute to a wider effort to affect those very SDH. Some SFD initiatives go in a similar direction – using sport and physical activity to attain specific social development objectives – but this thesis draws on such different strands of research while also arguing for an approach that can create new bottom-up opportunities for marginalised people to engage, be active and strive towards more radical social change. In the next subsections, I start by focusing on physical activity research and interventions (2.3.1), highlighting the connection with three aspects that this research aims to contribute with, namely a focus on the transition to adulthood, a salutogenic and less individualised approach, and an overtly political standpoint to tackle physical activity inequalities in lower socio-economic groups. Then I highlight three characteristics of SFD and other sport policies and interventions that target inequalities and, drawing on their analysis, I suggest the basis of this thesis' approach: first, positing attention on a broad perception of physical activity (2.3.2.); second, focusing on the importance of bottom-up collective opportunities (2.3.3.); third, advocating for system change in order to tackle societal issues at their roots (2.3.4.). Here, I start making the case for a post-capitalist approach which I consider necessary not only to promote *systemic change* (within the boundaries of the capitalist system) but also to envision *system change* (starting within the capitalist system but being oriented beyond it), challenging

the deepest causes of inequalities and collectively aiming to build alternatives to the capitalist status quo of oppression.

2.3.1. Physical activity research and interventions: towards a focus on young adults through a salutogenic and overtly political approach

The WHO Global Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents (2017) concluded that focusing on adolescent health and well-being can bring benefits not only immediately, but also into adulthood, and for the next generation. Many non-communicable diseases (NCDs) that manifest later in life are partly the result of 'modifiable risk behaviours' established during this time, including low levels of physical activity (Sawyer, 2012; van Sluijs, 2021, p. 429; WHO, 2014). However, van Sluijs et al. (2021) argue that, in physical activity research, this life stage is poorly understood and the evidence is mostly related to younger adolescents (aged 10–14 years) and school settings. While school-based initiatives can have immediate positive impact, to this date they have had little success overall, and a Cochrane Review found that these interventions were not effective in increasing the percentage of children and adolescents who are physically active during leisure time *outside* of school (Dobbins, 2009; van Sluijs, 2021). van Sluijs et al. (2021, p. 430) therefore argue that increased knowledge from individuals not in school as well as older adolescents 'going through major life transitions (e.g., starting employment and parenthood) is urgently required to curb rapid rises in the health consequences of physical inactivity'. I argue that this is particularly relevant for young adults from lower socio-economic groups, for which these transitions can be even more challenging and that often already lack the supportive social and built environments that are conducive to physical activity (van Sluijs, 2021). This research project, in fact, focuses on young adults (aged 16–25 years old) from the North East of England, an age group that, as highlighted by van Sluijs et al. (2021), requires further research attention.

Furthermore, a lot of the literature related to young people and physical activity presents a medicalised and/or obesity focus (e.g., Dimitri et al., 2020; Oude Luttikhuis et al., 2009; Posadzki, 2020). According to Nobles et al. (2021) and their secondary analysis of the childhood obesity prevention Cochrane Review, interventions have persisted to focus on downstream (e.g., individual and family behaviours), individualistic determinants over the last decades. As argued by Dodd-Reynolds et al. (2024) and van Sluijs et al. (2021) a shift in

focus and innovative thinking is required to tackle physical activity inequalities and, I argue, these efforts should move beyond the focus on obesity, individual behaviours and improving life expectancy. Drawing on Piggin's definition of physical activity (2015, 2020) highlighted in the previous chapter, this thesis aims to look at physical activity beyond disease risk and life expectancy, not to marginalise the medical aspects of physical activity, but to move beyond its over-medicalisation. From this holistic perspective, physical activity is intended as inherently social, situated in spaces and contexts that work as opportunities or barriers, as well as inherently political (Piggin, 2020). This is why this thesis attempts to apply a salutogenic and community-based approach to physical activity (see sections 2.2. and 2.3.3. in this chapter) as well as trying to strengthen its political potential.

As previously mentioned, I suggest that physical activity opportunities should engage with and address head on the challenges that lower-SES young people face, especially as they transition into tertiary education, employment, marriage, or parenthood, as well as none of these. Across the literature, adolescents from higher-SES are often reported to have better knowledge of the health benefits of physical activity (see Stalsberg and Pedersen, 2010) but a systematic review by Alliott et al. (2022) has found that low-SES adolescents have a similar understanding of the benefits of being active, and knowledge is not a barrier to participation. Instead, barriers are recognised to be in a lack of social and parental support (often financially related) and environmental influences such as fewer and worse recreational areas, longer distances to get to physical activity grounds and neighbourhood safety concerns (Alliott et al., 2022; Gordon-Larsen et al., 2006; Holt et al., 2009; Stalsberg and Pedersen, 2010). Such social, economic and environmental factors have been the focus of growing attention in the field of physical activity research and practice (Bauman et al., 2012; Choi et al., 2017). While recognising value in similar current efforts to tackle inequalities in the physical activity sphere, I argue that mostly individualised approaches as well as efforts confined within the current socio-economic system risk falling short in their intent. I, therefore, suggest shifting the focus towards a more collectivised approach and one aimed at 'system change', in order to move towards overcoming a socio-economic system that creates, reproduces and exacerbates those inequalities in the first place (see section 2.3.4. in this chapter). In light of the above-discussed literature on physical activity, this research project aims to: (i) heighten focus on young adults to address their peculiar physical activity needs, especially in lower socio-economic groups; (ii) adopt a less individualised and more holistic, salutogenic and community-based approach to physical activity and health; (iii) use an overtly political

approach in the pursuit of tackling physical activity inequalities by confronting the influence of socio-economic structures.

2.3.2. Sport and SFD research and interventions: towards (more) physical activity

As highlighted in the previous section, this research project focuses on promoting *physical activity* for its holistic health benefits, but it aims to do so in a way that can be argued to resemble existing *SFD* approaches. In the following paragraphs, I draw on sport and SFD related literature, highlighting points of contact as well as aspects that my approach aims to shift or strengthen. Regarding SFD and sport-related literature and interventions, this thesis draws on and is inspired by this knowledge, while taking its own stance in three regards: (i) strengthening the focus on opportunities for physical activity (rather than sport) which may be inclusive and non-competitive; (ii) favouring a grassroots and bottom-up experimentation rather than primarily influencing policies and top-down directives; (iii) reinforcing the political aspect through a post-capitalist approach. When it comes to the first of these points, Schulenkorf, Sherry and Rowe (2016) in their integrative review of 437 articles related to SFD, found that 225 of them discussed sport as a general concept, rather than specific sport activities: in the remaining articles, a broad range of sports and physical activity programs was identified, with general physical activity (as opposed to sport-specific activities) and football as the most common choices. Of note for the subsequent parts of this thesis, walking did not feature as a standalone activity in any of the 437 articles reviewed. However, the authors suggest that alternative sports or general physical activities 'such as walking or gardening may be equally relevant to specific development efforts, and they all provide opportunities to entice different participant groups' (Schulenkorf, Sherry and Rowe, 2016, p. 33). These findings, I argue, are a first step towards supporting this thesis' preference for the term 'physical activity' and what this might entail in terms of broadening inclusivity and accessibility.

Sport has been demonstrated to be potentially beneficial to the overall life skill development (e.g., cognitive and social skills) of those partaking in sport initiatives and programmes, for young people in particular (Hermens et al., 2017). However, scholars have also noted that many standard sport practices, despite good intentions, can end up generating negative experiences, marginalising disadvantaged groups or promoting inactivity among the young

people that disagree with the imposed system based on performance and competition (Bean et al., 2014; Beltrán-Carillo et al., 2012; Edwards, 2015; Thomson, Darcy and Pearce, 2010). For instance, studies have found that inactive young people report negative feelings towards the focus on winning matches instead of well-being and enjoyment (Beltrán-Carillo et al., 2012), with this aspect being reported as a major determinant of their inactivity. This is particularly relevant since such negative experiences continue to affect the desire to maintain a physically active lifestyle later in the adult life (Cardinal, Yan and Cardinal, 2013). However, it should be noted that even if organised competitive sport can be aggressive and exclusionary, adaptations can be put into place in order to cultivate a 'safe space'. For example, Spaaij and Schulenkorf (2014), bring the example of a Brazilian programme that used modified football games to make sure that all participants – female and male, experienced or inexperienced – could feel safe and enjoy being active. Staff and participants also believed that adapted competition could allow a creative tension with educational value, since it created opportunities to respond to and resolve these situations in a positive way.

In light of this, this thesis draws on existing literature (e.g., Spaaij and Schulenkorf, 2014) in recognising that competition and sports should not be entirely dismissed, but it argues to strengthen the focus on experimenting with different and alternative forms of physical activity. Especially when targeting less active people from marginalised and low socio-economic backgrounds, or more generally people for which mainstream sports might be not appealing or out of reach. Different types of physical activities may facilitate different outcomes and fit in different contexts, something that has not yet been experimented or investigated in enough detail in the SFD field (Schulenkorf, Sherry and Rowe, 2016; Welty Peachey, Schulenkorf and Hill, 2020). For example, Welty Peachey, Schulenkorf and Hill (2020) suggest that non-traditional, cooperative sports may be best suited to facilitate cross-cultural understanding and peace building, since they necessitate an equal and level playing field where all participants begin at the same level. Similarly, I suggest that non-traditional sports and other physical activities can be relevant among people (especially young ones) who are inactive, who have had negative past experiences in mainstream sport settings or who simply do not enjoy the competitive side (e.g., Beltrán-Carillo et al., 2012). Less formal activities could be many and diverse but, most importantly, I suggest facilitating the exploration without imposing practices from the top-down, in order to emphasise values of excitement, spontaneity, non-conformity, sociability, and creativity (Rich et al., 2019; Thomson, 2000).

Patterns of participation in sport are already changing towards that direction, with informal participation often replacing club-based and formally structured involvement in sport (O'Connor and Penney, 2021). Some have used the term 'post-sport' (Atkinson, 2010, p. 1250) in relation to activities that are similar to mainstream ones but that value cooperation and social inclusion and move away from competitive, hierarchical and patriarchal forms of sport. O'Connor and Penney (2021) have highlighted how these practices seem to respond to societal demands for increased freedom, autonomy and social connection (Atkinson, 2010, 2013; Tomlinson et al., 2005; Wheaton, 2004), while wanting to resist to the traditional focus on ability, fixed scheduling and activities reliant on membership fees (O'Connor and Brown, 2007; O'Connor and Penney, 2021; Wheaton, 2004). Therefore, I argue, collective bottom-up opportunities for physical activity would be fertile soil to allow people to reflect on and explore new and personally meaningful ways to be physically active, while at the same time engaging in civic and democratic practices.

2.3.3. Sport and SFD research and interventions: towards (more) bottom-up collective opportunities

Public health discourses that primarily focus on individual choices and behaviours have been increasingly critiqued (e.g., Sniehotta et al., 2017) as they may fail to engage with system and social-level barriers. Indeed, it has been repeatedly evidenced that people from lower socio-economic backgrounds experience barriers to physical activity related to costs and limited provision of facilities and opportunities in their local neighbourhoods (e.g., Alliott et al., 2022). Aligned with perspectives that recognise the importance of social, system-based, and systemic barriers, community-based approaches can represent a valid alternative to individualised ones, given they aim to meet local needs while promoting deeper and broader citizen participation. For example, Edwards (2015) found value in the role of sport in community capacity building, and Shilbury, Sotiriadou, and Green (2008) argued that sport can be rightly positioned in community development efforts to contribute to overall community well-being. Sport programmes have been argued to have an 'intrinsic power' to activate people and remove barriers between groups (Schulenkorf, 2012, p. 6), while parks and sport centres can represent shared spaces to foster collective identity and community building (Glover and Bates, 2006). Furthermore, the fact that people feel psychologically

more comfortable in sport and recreation spaces increases opportunities for dialogue (Autry and Anderson, 2007) as well as awareness of community issues and social justice beliefs resulting from social interactions that are not commonly available in other aspects of public life (Arai and Pedlar, 1997).

However, SFD is commonly conceptualised as a top-down process (Rich et al., 2019) and also traditional sport practices governed by national or regional bodies tend to favour more rigid top-down approaches, with sponsor objectives sometimes overriding local preferences (Chalip, 2006; Vail, 2007). Some critical scholars have also noted how even sport-based initiatives that aim to address inequalities are sometimes used as a form of social control, focusing on the development of personal responsibility and accentuating passive forms of citizenship (Parker et al., 2019). According to Coalter (2010), the practice of sport for community development is usually presented in one of these three forms: *traditional sport*, assuming that sport participation has inherent developmental properties for participants; *plus sport*, where sport is used to attract participants to a program where other types of education are primary; and *sport plus,* in which sports are supported with extra activities in order to maximise developmental objectives. While acknowledging the relevance of all these strategies, in this project I align with the *sport plus* approaches that can encourage collective action beyond sport and physical activity, reinforce shared value systems, and develop critical learning cultures (Edwards, 2015). Welty Peachey, Schulenkorf and Hill (2020), in their comprehensive analysis of SFD theoretical and conceptual advancements, recommend that the 'dosage of sport' should be stronger than non-sport activities at first, since participants are drawn to SFD programs for the sport component that excites and motivates them. I argue that this perspective is valuable for people that already like sports and being active, while the opposite might be true when approaching inactive and disengaged people, like those who are the focus of this research. Therefore, I aim to apply dimensions of community capacity (Wendel et al., 2009) to physical activity, adding significant aspects of Freirean critical pedagogy (Freire, 1972) to empower active citizenship. In essence, to 'challenge the status quo and offer marginalised groups the opportunity to enhance their agency' (Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013, p. 442). In order to achieve this, this thesis explores a theoretical approach that emphasises empowering grassroots opportunities over primarily influencing policies.

Schulenkorf and Siefken (2018, p. 99) argue that managerial aspects and processes underpin the organization of any SFD programme and add that 'significant changes to the status quo

require whole-of-government approaches' and they highlight the need for 'policy interventions in areas outside of – but closely linked to – the health sector'. At the same time, Schulenkorf and Siefken (2018) bring examples of policies that started leading to positive healthy lifestyle choices (e.g., Schofield and Siefken, 2009), but were discarded after changes in government that ended political support. The same authors also admit that, in the current political climate, SFD programmes in most countries are struggling to receive renewed support and funding (Schulenkorf and Siefken, 2018). In this regard, I suggest an approach that could go along the lines suggested by SFD but that focuses more significantly on the grassroot potential of the communities, building networks that can survive and thrive also without institutional or policy support and, if necessary, push against it. As Schulenkorf and Siefken (2018) acknowledge, SFD programs can encounter limited political support, short-term funding or a focus on immediate return on investment rather than sustainable development (e.g., Coalter, 2010; Schulenkorf and Adair, 2014). Therefore, I suggest a less managerial and heavily policy-related approach, in favour of a more bottom-up, community-led and politically engaged one.

When looking at the community level of development – as in the case of almost two thirds of the 437 SFD studies considered by Schulenkorf, Sherry and Rowe's review (2016) – most studies include existing programmes, projects, or events that communities offer or participate in. Conversely, in this project I focus on disadvantaged communities where such programmes do not exist and organizations/community centres struggle to survive, let alone put in place accessible sport and physical activity opportunities. Milan and Milan (2021) bring the interesting example of *palestre popolari* in Italy, where self-organised 'community gyms' repurpose abandoned buildings to create spaces where sport is experienced as a political practice based on self-organisation, inclusion and accessibility. Most of these community gyms emerge in deprived areas characterised by high unemployment, growing school dropout rates and organised crime (Milan and Milan, 2021). These independent efforts recover vacant spaces previously appropriated by capitalist urbanism and return it to local residents, embodying an alternative model of urban development centred on people rather than profit. And, doing so, they play an important role in movement building – reaching out to people that would otherwise not engage with political movements or ideas – while seeking to mitigate the socio-economic needs of those communities that are not met (or ignored) by political choices and existing policies. Milan and Milan (2021, p. 734) stress how these community gyms 'contribute to spearhead novel relationships at the individual, gym and

neighbourhood levels, namely: they involve marginalized subjects giving them agency, forge politically aware individuals, and reach out with mutual aid interventions addressing their social surroundings'. I suggest that sport and physical activity opportunities that aim to target marginalised and low-SES people, should support such alternative community endeavours (where they exist) as well as creating new spaces and opportunities were these are lacking. I also argue for doing so in overtly political and engaged ways that would not necessarily depend on governmental funding and approval, given how limited and volatile these have proven to be. Therefore, I suggest that it is crucial to experiment further and deeper with participatory and bottom-up approaches that include reflective dialogic activities alongside the co-design of sport and physical activity opportunities. These could be seen as chances for radical and liberating democratic engagement with the aim to meet different individual and community needs related to physical activity, while enhancing the community's ability to act collectively towards tackling structural inequalities. And I argue that, in order to explore the full potential of such actions, it is necessary to engage with more egalitarian forms of organisation – alternative to the capitalist system and its values –, especially given the urgency of the multi-faceted crises discussed above.

2.3.4. Sport and SFD research and interventions: towards system change

Scholars in the field of sport for development (SFD) have examined the use of sport to exert a positive influence on public health, the socialisation of children, youth and adults, the social inclusion of the disadvantaged, and the economic development of regions and states (Lyras and Welty Peachey, 2011). However, even when traditional sport programmes are successful in improving prosocial behaviour, collaboration and empathy (Hermens et al., 2017), these values are at odds with the principles that are promoted in the wider society by the capitalist cultural hegemony based on competition for survival and success. To use a sport metaphor, it is like learning how to play football and ending up in a swimming pool to play water polo. As warned by Spaaij and Jeanes (2013), interventions leaving unchanged the root causes of deprivation and marginalisation may amount to little more than a political instrument for regulating the poor, failing to contest this order and to open up alternative realities (Coakley, 2007). SFD approaches have often adopted a perspective based on Western capitalist ideology (Edwards, 2015; Hartmann and Kwauk, 2011; Kay and Bradbury, 2009) and the term 'development' itself evokes capitalist terminology connected to perpetual growth and

Western cultural hegemony. I argue that an economic system radically based on exploitation (Buchanan, 1982) and accumulation of wealth for the few at the expenses of the impoverishment of the many (Hickel, 2020), is at odds with SFD's view of a just and equal world.

On this note, despite a significant focus on creating social cohesion (e.g., Sherry, 2010), opportunities for education (e.g., Burnett, 2010) and members of disadvantaged communities (e.g., Sherry and Strybosch, 2012), a limited amount of SFD research has been conducted on livelihoods (e.g., McSweeney et al., 2020). Schulenkorf, Sherry and Rowe (2016) argue that financial independence – as a key aspect of livelihoods – plays a central part in improving living conditions and generating associated social benefits (Coalter, 2010), therefore they encourage scholars to:

> 'conduct more research on SFD programs that focus on job skills training, employability, rehabilitation, and the creation of social enterprises; in particular, we believe that the SFD sector would benefit from collaborative research between social scientists and economists regarding new approaches, innovative strategies, and creative tactics to improve the livelihoods of disadvantaged people around the world'.

While agreeing with the need to improve people's livelihoods in the here and now and to experiment with innovative strategies, this thesis applies Marxist and Freirean lenses in trying to move beyond conceptions that remain within the socio-economic status quo of capitalism (e.g., employability). In my view, the livelihoods of disadvantaged people can be substantially improved only by creating consciousness (Freire, 1972) and striving towards a society that prioritises people's well-being instead of their (and the natural world's) exploitation in the name of short-term profit for the few (Hickel, 2020). Therefore, I suggest an overtly political approach combining the physical activity aspect with critical reflection and action.

Extending this critique of capitalist-framed development, post-colonial sport studies can offer complementary insights that further reinforce the view of sport and physical activity as contested terrains of resistance. Bale and Cronin (2003) highlighted how sport has historically operated both as a mechanism of colonial control and as a space for postcolonial identity formation and resistance. Similarly, Bancel, Riot and Frenkiel (2017) explored how postcolonial societies have hybridised Western and indigenous physical cultures, using sport

to reclaim agency and challenge global hierarchies. These perspectives resonate with the understanding of sport as a site shaped by power, struggle, and cultural negotiation. Applying these perspectives to the specific context of this research project, I argue that physical activity can also serve as a site for post-capitalist transformation within the peripheries of Western societies, particularly when approached through grassroots, community-led, and politically engaged frameworks such as Co-PA. This framing of physical activity as a politically charged and context-situated practice can provide a foundation for exploring how spaces of resistance, where they do not already exist, can be intentionally created and fostered.

Spaaij and Schulenkorf (2014), in their article arguing for the importance of cultivating 'safe space' as a key ingredient of SFD, acknowledge the relevance of the political dimension, seen as the creation of an environment based on open dialogue, collaborative learning, and respect for difference where people feel less inhibited to share their political experiences and views. They describe a safe space saying that it 'should not be viewed as an environment without conflict or risk, but rather as a space where tensions and conflict are maintained and managed' (p. 644). At the same time, the authors acknowledge that policies and codes of conduct – that are key part to creating a safe space – can also stifle critical thinking, creativity, and discovery (Spaaij and Schulenkorf, 2014). Finding value in the concept of safe space, this project aims to build one not despite an overtly political outlook, but through it. From a socio-political and class perspective, I argue that sport and physical activity-related opportunities in marginalised areas cannot shy away from discussing critically the very structures of oppression. Therefore, I draw on the authors' call for creating not an environment without conflict or risk, but rather one where tensions are allowed and managed (Holley and Steiner, 2005; Redmond, 2010; Spaaij and Schulenkorf, 2014). In the case of my research based in a low-SES region of the UK, this means allowing critical discussions, radical thinking and space for visualising a liberating kind of conflict (in Marxist terms, class conflict is always present, although it is normally won by the capitalist class at the expense of the many).

In the earlier mentioned example of the Italian community gyms, 'safe space' is used in a slightly different way, namely to describe these entities 'freed from the consumption-oriented practices and competitive logics of the shiny, expensive looking mainstream gyms' that also function as vehicles for progressive social change (Milan and Milan, 2021, p. 727). In these prefigurative counter spaces, sport is experienced as a political practice, reclaiming the right

to leisure within the struggle against gentrification and introducing also 'individuals who would otherwise not embrace anti-systemic politics' to a critical approach (p. 729). Milan and Milan (2021) argue that leisure, too, can create moments of disruption able to generate change, and that sport, when understood as a political act, can unsettle the capitalist logic of commodification of leisure. While drawing on both Spaaij and Schulenkorf's (2014) and Milan and Milan's (2021) concepts of safe spaces, I embrace the latter's vision of the need for disruptive actions in order to create 'safe spaces' for marginalised people and bring about substantial social change. Spaaij and Jeanes (2013), using a Freirean lens, have critiqued existing pedagogical strategies in Sport for Development and Peace (SDP), highlighting how they often do not go far enough in providing a transformative educational experience (more on other Freirean approaches is included in Chapter 8). They define a truly liberating education as one that should 'strive to promote authentic and lasting social change by fostering critical consciousness and facilitating transformative action in order to challenge broader social structures and power dynamics' (Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013, p. 451). In line with this view, in this thesis I make the case for 'Collective Physical Activity' (Co-PA) stressing the novel contribution of its overtly post-capitalist-oriented layer, with the aim to promote physical activity among marginalised people while co-creating opportunities for radical change.

2.4. Collective Physical Activity (Co-PA): an approach for social justice 'within, against and beyond' capitalism

As suggested by other scholars (e.g., Singh and Hickel, 2023) human and planetary health would be better aided by a post-capitalist economic system: one that is more democratic, equitable and where production is focused on satisfying human needs and well-being rather than capital accumulation. In agreement with this view, I suggest that sport and physical activity actions aiming for social justice would benefit from engaging directly with post-development ideas (Matthews, 2017), as well as degrowth (Escobar, 2015) and other non-Western propositions such as Buen Vivir (Harcourt, 2014) – as discussed in the following chapter – which could help promoting a language of possibility as well as hope in radically different futures (McGregor, 2009). This could strengthen physical activity's contribution to the transition towards socio-economic practices prioritising well-being over profit, and in which sport and physical activity, could become central and accessible to all. In other words,

in this project I try to experiment with the idea of a physical activity that, while contributing to improving physical, mental and social well-being, could also be a means for wider empowerment and civic engagement striving for radical social change. As highlighted in this chapter, many current physical activity and sport interventions give valuable contributions 'within' capitalist societies, despite not challenging the roots of the status quo. Others, such as the ones in the SFD field, work both 'within and against' current structures, conscious of the need for systemic change but often seeing this as limited to the physical activity system or remaining within the capitalist frame. In this thesis, I make the case for building on these approaches while strengthening them through a post-capitalist-oriented praxis working simultaneously 'within, against and beyond' the capitalist system, not only to prefigure utopian futures but also to inform transformative processes in the here and now. In the next chapter I present the features of this approach that I call 'Collective Physical Activity' (Co-PA), alongside the broader onto-epistemological and methodological approaches at the base of this thesis.

Chapter 3. Theoretical and methodological approach

This thesis' theoretical approach draws on Marxist dialectical materialism, which intends dialectical thinking and materialism as united in order to understand the interrelated processes that happen in the material world and to enable human intervention in order to change those material conditions for the better (Au, 2017). In light of this, Freirean critical pedagogy has been the basis for the methodological approach of this project, one that aimed to merge critical reflection with action: namely a 'praxis', at the same time theory and practice, reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (Freire, 1972). In accordance with Freire's own conception, dialectical materialism and critical pedagogy are here seen as directly related: the former provides a framework for the latter to analyse existing conditions in the world while aiding people's consciousness of those conditions alongside empowerment to change them through collective action (Au, 2017). From the perspective of Sparkes' paradigms (2012), this research can be said to be guided by critical principles, wherein I act as a critical and activist researcher, inspired by Freire's own role of activist pedagogist. In line with critical social research scholars (Harvey, 1990, p. 1–20), the focus of this research is therefore to 'dig beneath the surface of historically specific, oppressive, social structures': it is concerned not only with showing what is happening (e.g., health and physical activity inequalities) but also with doing something about it (e.g., potentially transformative action). In this chapter, I start by highlighting the relevance of Marx's analysis for this thesis' focus on inequalities (3.1.) and the onto-epistemological position that stems from it, one that draws on dialectical materialism and a conception of knowledge that is never fixed, always evolving (3.2.), as well as the interplay of structure and agency (3.3.). Then I look into the methodological underpinnings of critical pedagogy that have inspired key aspects of this project (3.4.), and its links with post-capitalist thinking and prefigurative acting (3.5.). Finally, I paint a picture of Co-PA as an approach to physical activity for social justice (3.6.), suggesting its three core features as meaning and enjoyment (3.6.1.), collective engagement (3.6.2.), and a post-capitalist outlook (3.6.2.).

3.1. Inequalities from a Marxist perspective: aiming for a classless society

Among the different approaches to social justice in sport that have been analysed by Lusted (2024), this thesis agrees with the integrated one that draws on Fraser's (1997; 2000) theory.

Fraser (2000) argues that while the shift towards recognition of cultural and other identity-related differences is an important area of social justice claims, in the last decades the emphasis it has received has led to the deprioritisation of financial re-distribution, favouring identity politics that remain 'largely silent on the subject of economic inequality' (Fraser, 2000, p. 109). To bring about what Fraser calls 'participatory parity' (2007), it is still important that all people (and their cultural, gender, sexuality, ability differences) are held in equal status, but people must also have sufficient access to material resources to enable their full participation to society. Therefore, I draw on Fraser's propositions in saying that, without both of these conditions, most injustices remain unchallenged. Therefore, applying a Marxist lens to inequalities, it is important to note that, within the current socio-economic system, no substantial equality can be achieved because one class is systematically oppressed.

Karl Marx is commonly regarded as the father of the concept of social classes, yet he did not 'claim to have discovered either the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them' as he himself wrote in a letter to Weydemeyer (Marx and Engels, 2010, p. 62). What can definitely be attributed to him, on the other hand, is the recognition that most of history has been characterised by the struggles between classes, beginning from the most ancient civilisations where oppressors and oppressed stood in constant opposition (Engels and Marx, 2015). Various theorists have defined social class in different ways on the basis of people's income, occupation, or status (e.g., Giddens, 2019). However, from a Marxist perspective, class is defined by the ownership of the means of production (especially on whether one owns capital), and the focus falls mostly on two classes and their contraposition: (i) the bourgeoisie – or capitalists – that own the means of production and exploit other people's labour power, and (ii) the proletariat – or workers – that do not own any means of production and are therefore forced to sell their own labour (Engels and Marx, 2015). According to Marx's analysis, capitalism's main aim is not to produce goods necessary for consumption, but rather to allow capitalists to accumulate further capital: in this kind of economy, capitalists use workers as commodities and pay them wages that are lower than the value produced by them – this 'surplus value' is what makes capitalists generate profit for themselves, while workers are exploited by definition (Marx, 1996). Furthermore, Marx distinguished between 'class *in* itself', which was defined as a category of people that simply share a common relation to the means of production (owning them or not), and a 'class *for* itself', which is a conscious and self-aware group that organises in the pursuit of its own interests (Borland, 2008). This consciousness is, in Marxist terms, the basis for the class

struggle that must lead to the proletariat revolution, namely a transition that brings to 'the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*' (Marx and Engels, 2010, p. 65). Unlike past social revolutions that led to new forms of production and exploitation, this kind of society aims to be egalitarian: the means of production would become socialised, namely collectively owned and managed, putting an end to any form of exploitation.

It has been argued that Marx posed most of his attention on work as the main expression of human potential, therefore focusing on the so-called *homo laborans* (working person) more than on the *homo ludens* (playing person) (Pivato, 1992; Hoberman, 1977). However, Marx (1866) briefly mentioned that his understanding of education concerned three areas: mental education, *physical* (or bodily) *education* and technological (work-related) education. As argued by Manacorda (1983), even though Marx has not spoken about physical education at length, it is clear that it was not seen as secondary: according to this interpretation, Marxist pedagogy builds on the ancient Greeks' idea that physical activity is fundamental for people's development, but instead of seeing this as a privilege of the higher classes, it aims to make physical education available to everyone and detached from military or purely professional purposes (Manacorda, 1983; 1988; Silvestri, 2024). Regardless of the different interpretations that can be made of Marx's direct or indirect interest for sport and physical activity, a Marxist perspective is crucial for the topic of this thesis under two main points of view: in the here and now, to challenge physical activity inequalities and the barriers that inhibit opportunities for working-class people; to visualise the wider need to go beyond a society in which the working class is systematically oppressed, and collectively build classless alternatives. In order to reach these objectives, Marx (and Engels) developed a philosophical approach named dialectical materialism.

3.2. Onto-epistemology: dialectical materialism and evolving knowledge

First, I will briefly describe my interpretation of dialectical materialism, before highlighting how it informs the onto-epistemological view of this thesis. Here I draw on dialectical materialism as the philosophy of Marxism: one that was intended as the worldview from the perspective of the working class, but also as a scientific method for knowing and changing the world (Spirkin, 1975). It is called dialectical materialism because it brings together *materialism* and the *dialectic*: it is *materialist* because it begins with the recognition

of material conditions as fundamental (and consciousness as a reflection of the objective world, achieved when these conditions are understood and organised within our minds); and it is *dialectical* because it recognises the interconnection of world's phenomena, as well as the constant movement and development resulting from internal contradictions and tensions (Spirkin, 1975). In Spirkin's words (1975) the worldview is not just materialism but also the dialectic, and the method is not just the dialectic but also materialism. In a *dialectical* worldview, everything is 'a dynamic complex of interlocking forces in which all phenomena are interrelated' (Eagleton, 2017, p.7) and processes cannot be analysed independently but rather only understood in relation with each other (Allman, 1999). A *materialist* worldview is one that recognises the primacy of the material world as existing outside of our perception of it (Au, 2017): our consciousness comes from and is a reflection of our interaction with this objective material world (Au, 1972). Dialectical thinking and materialism are therefore united within Marxist theory because the aim is to both understand the interrelated processes happening in the material world and to enable human intervention in those processes to change material conditions for the better (Au, 2017). The dialectics had been previously identified by Hegel (2010) as a continuous process in which nothing is permanent but everything changes and is eventually transformed, dissolved or replaced. But if Hegel saw change and development as the expression of ideas, from a Marxist perspective change starts from and is inherent in the material world: the dialectical development has to begin from the acquisition of knowledge happening through practical activity. Therefore, dialectical materialism finds the forces that could bring about societal changes to be already within the *material* world, in the form of the intrinsically contradictory nature of things that lead to *dialectical* movements and developments. The process of knowledge, namely consciousness in Marxist terms, arises when people start making sense of the material world (Spirkin, 1975) and act in order to transform it. In other words, the *dialectical* and the *materialist* aspects taken together constitute the Marxist approach to – at the same time – make sense of and transform the world.

The position of this research aligns with an interpretation of dialectical materialism not simply as ontology but as ontology and epistemology at the same time. I intend *materialism* as the assumption that the material world has objective reality (independent of mind or spirit) but that, through a *dialectical* process (human knowledge is intended here as socially acquired in the course of practical activity), this material world can be directly or indirectly observed and influenced. Therefore, neither of those prevails over the other: the dialectical

creation of meaning (epistemology) is a process inextricably linked with a materialist view of the world (ontology) as an objective reality that shapes and is shaped by human action.

From the *materialist* point of view of this thesis, I find it crucial to consider that the social reality is shaped by historical forces and economic and material conditions (Sparkes, 2012) and that these also structure and affect the perceptions of individuals so that their perceived 'reality' is strongly influenced by capitalist ideological processes (e.g., see Gramsci's 'cultural hegemony' and Fisher's 'capitalist realism' discussed in the following section). Aligned with Marx's materialism, the centre of attention is active and practical human life (Eagleton, 2017): in this sense, my focus is not much on ontological materialism (what the world is made of) but rather making society the core field of materialist inquiry (e.g., physical activity inequalities, socio-economic barriers etc.). However, materialism is not intended here in its most deterministic conception that would see humans as fully conditioned by their environments and therefore unable to change them. Rather considering that material conditions do set the pace in human affairs (Eagleton, 2017) but, since social reality and humans are independent entities – although dialectically related – humans may seek to understand and change these conditions. Therefore, the creation of meaning is a *dialectical* one, and so is the potential transformation of the social reality.

From an onto-epistemological point of view, the dialectical process is like a spiral consisting of the contrast between *thesis* and *antithesis*, resulting in a *synthesis*: this movement is iterative, which means that every synthesis can be the thesis of a new dialectical interaction. This is crucial for the theoretical approach of this research, both as an epistemological viewpoint and for its implications for transformative changes. Massey et al. (2015) posited that sport for development theory (SFDT) should be integrated with systems thinking to enhance the understanding of the change process: they argued that SFDT promotes linear thinking, namely that micro-level change leads to meso-level and macro-level change, but that developments should rather be viewed as fluid and interconnected. From a different perspective, Welty Peachey, Schulenkorf and Spaaij (2019) created a combined lens to put on the same level the social change perspective and the sport for development one, giving them equal relevance. While drawing on these ideas, I suggest that both the systems thinking and the combined lens risk sustaining 'flat' models, namely encompassing changes mostly within the capitalist system, without presupposing that those changes could lead to a transformed or completely new socio-economic system.

Therefore, I apply a dialectical materialist approach that involves an iterative movement from holistic and concrete phenomena to more abstract and general interpretations, and from there back to a more complex understanding and transformation of reality, in a continuous spiral and systemic process. This dialectical process, I argue, must take into account that the transformative action can lead to alternative realities (Freire, 1972). Therefore, dialectical materialism is the theoretical framework through which I set out to analyse physical-activity-related inequalities from the perspective of marginalised young adults, to inform a shared understanding of their specific needs and possibilities to create change, and from there back to potentially transformative actions. Using a dialectical materialist lens that sees unity between theory and action, this theoretical approach informs and gets informed by its practical application, and by going through a dialectical *thesis-antithesis-synthesis* process that can influence the theory itself in a continuous movement. In this project, assuming that the *thesis* could be seen as helping young adults in marginalised and low-income areas to become more physically active, the *antithesis* could be the circumstances that prevent them from being more physically active. Therefore, opposing elements such as the *thesis* (trying to become more active) and the *antithesis* (structural barriers) can dialectically interact and result in a *synthesis.* Whichever this synthesis will be, it will not be the end of the process but rather the potential beginning of new dialectical spirals, namely the *new thesis* for future dialectical interactions. This is why I believe it important to use an approach based on spiral thinking (rather than linear, complex or combined), namely to place the collective creation of consciousness and consequent actions within a framework for change that does not start and end within a system rooted in inequalities, but rather kickstarts a process aiming towards the creation of alternative ones. In this sense, the dialectical materialist spiral starts within the constraints of present material conditions and is oriented towards radically transforming these conditions and social reality. While the practical application within the scope of this research project cannot achieve such structural changes, the theoretical approach is one that is oriented towards and makes space for reflections and actions aimed at a different society based around people's well-being.

3.3. Structure and agency

As previously mentioned, this thesis does not embrace a view of materialism as a deterministic conception in which people have no agency and are seen as fully conditioned by their environments and unable to change them. Aligned with Marxist philosophy, I consider that material conditions are largely influential (Eagleton, 2017) but, since social reality and humans are dialectically related *but* independent entities, humans may seek to understand and change these conditions. Therefore, while starting the analysis from the current influence of structures on people, both structure and agency are here intended dialectically, in a continuous process of reciprocal cause and effect. In relation to the focus of this thesis, I agree with scholars that reject the idea that young people have agentic capacities to make leisure choices freely (Depper, 2019), especially the most marginalised ones, but I also argue for the importance to stress the role of their potential agency and support them in empowering ways to visualise and practice it. As argued from the perspective of critical realism, not all social phenomena are *directly* observable: structures exist that cannot be observed and those that can be observed may not present the social and political world as it actually is (Grix, 2002; Marsh and Smith, 2001, p. 530). I find value in this view, especially when the object of observation is the complexity of capitalist social reality, but I suggest that – from a Marxist perspective – the focus is precisely on enhancing consciousness in order to practice transformative action: in other words, reflecting and acting on what is observable with an outlook on indirectly influencing the not-directly-observable. This does not mean that social reality is easy to observe and understand, but rather that the challenge is to be necessarily undertaken in order to achieve overdue social changes.

Relating to this latter aspect, Fisher (2009) coined the term ‘capitalist realism’ to describe the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable system, but also that is now impossible to even imagine a coherent alternative to it. This concept was advanced precisely to make sense of this atmosphere that acts as an invisible barrier constraining thought and action. Currently, the social reality of capitalist society is presented as inevitable, despite its contradictions and profoundly inegalitarian state of affairs (e.g., Badiou, 2001). And since it has become increasingly difficult to suggest that this system is ideal, the focus of mainstream debates in defence of capitalism has shifted towards promoting the idea that alternatives are either dark totalitarian societies or utopian dreams impossible to achieve. Gramsci (1971) had defined ‘cultural hegemony’ the way in which a ruling class comes to impose their own worldview as the accepted cultural norm: this dominant ideology is therefore used to misrepresent the socio-economic status quo as natural and inevitable rather than an artificial

social construct that benefits the ruling class at the expense of most oppressed people. Therefore, connecting to what previously said about materialism, I argue that the social reality is shaped by historical forces and economic and material conditions (Sparkes, 2012), but also that, equally importantly, these forces also affect people's perceptions: in other words, people's perceived reality is strongly influenced by capitalist ideological processes. In Freirean terms (Freire, 1972; Shudak and Avoseh, 2015), the 'limit situations' that oppressed people face in the current system are partly due to the situations themselves (e.g., structural inequalities and barriers) and partly because of the internalisation of the oppressors' consciousness (e.g., Margaret Thatcher's slogan 'there is no alternative'). This is why this thesis' theoretical approach is closely linked with Freirean critical pedagogy, because it aims to make room for 'conscientisation' (Freire, 1972), namely the process of developing a critical awareness of social reality through reflection and action, engaging in a critical dialogue in which people can scrutinise their reality, challenge assumptions and act transformatively. Therefore, this research project embraces an approach that does not only aim to analyse how structures limit people's agency in the physical activity context (and beyond), but rather wants to initiate a process of conscientisation, trying to empower participants to use their agency in changing their own conditions and the oppressive structures.

3.4. Methodological approach: critical pedagogy

I have argued how my research is aligned with the Marxist view that sees change as inherent in the social reality and humans as capable of making change happen. However, as Freire (1973) warned, oppressed people often internalise oppressive structures and remain passive, immersed in a 'culture of silence' and 'democratic inexperience', that result in general feelings of alienation, fatalism and cynicism (Freire, 1972; Shor and Freire, 1987). From this perspective, critical pedagogy becomes a tool for reflection to reach consciousness that change is possible, and to facilitate transformative action to make it happen. Paulo Freire's ideas are rooted in the conviction that education must include both social critique and transformation: it should aim both at 'examining the causes of unjust social relations and at strengthening collective efforts for democratic change' (Schugurensky, 2011, p. 8). In this project, focusing on young adults living in peripheral areas, I believed apt to approach physical activity alongside a Freirean critical pedagogy, with the aim to experiment with

collective ways to develop consciousness of oppressive structures as well as of the possibility to challenge them, hence stressing the role of agency (possibly intended as collective action, one that sees people not simply as individuals but rather as social beings). In other words, creating a pedagogical space for young adults to learn to transform aspects of their lives as well as the structures around them (Hall, 2004; Novelli et al., 2024). Thus, a critical pedagogy has been chosen to acknowledge 'limit situations' that these young adults face, while using pedagogy in the pursuit of liberation, through 'testing action' on the 'untested feasibility', namely 'the future which we have yet to create by transforming today the present reality' (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 153).

A cardinal element of this pedagogy is therefore the dialogical reflection among peers, in which they can gain critical distance from their material conditions, develop a critical analysis of reality and try to transform it. This process aims to support people to develop 'critical consciousness' (Freire, 1973, 1990) and 'understand how the myths of dominant discourses are, precisely, myths which oppress and marginalize them – but which can be transcended through transformative action' (Lankshear, 1993, p. 44). As argued by Anderson (1989), people's constructions of meaning are often permeated with powerlessness and their conscious models have been influenced to accept and perpetuate, rather than just to explain, social phenomena. Therefore, a critical approach cannot accept to enthrone people's current views because this would risk reflecting the worldview of the dominant ideology imposed by the ruling class. *Theoretically*, I find necessary to acknowledge the processes by which certain meaning structures become accepted as natural and inevitable (e.g., 'capitalist realism') and whose interest they represent, while *methodologically* engaging with participants in order to develop alternative meaning structures to facilitate social transformation and emancipation (Sparkes, 2012). Critical pedagogy does not aim to simply describe the world but rather to change it, and changing collective consciousness, in Freirean terms, is the basis to create social change. However, this process should be directive without being authoritarian or manipulative: Freire points out that the educator (or activist researcher in my case) needs to create an open, democratic atmosphere but never one of *laissez faire*, where directiveness can be compatible with dialogue and respect for different opinions (Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013). Therefore, the aim is to foster positive interactions and move participants from disengagement to curiosity and involvement.

From a Freirean perspective, education is never neutral but rather always political: it either functions as an instrument to reproduce the status quo of domination, or sides with the interests of the oppressed to become the practice of freedom and social change (Freire, 1972; Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013). Freirean pedagogy offers a framework that not only challenges the status quo (through 'denunciation') but also articulates a language of possibility ('annunciation'), suggesting viable alternatives to domination and oppression (Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013, p. 444). I agree with this view according to which a truly liberating critical pedagogy should foster critical consciousness and facilitate transformative action with the aim to challenge broader social structures and power dynamics (Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013). Therefore, I suggest strengthening physical activity with a critical pedagogy that engages directly with the deepest causes of inequalities as well as with equitable, inclusive and sustainable post-capitalist alternatives. There is consensus around the idea that, if sport experiences aim to teach particular skills, these must be *intentionally* taught (Gould and Carson, 2008; Mwaanga, 2010), and that it is essential that pedagogical strategies reflect the broader values and outcomes that sport is hoping to promote (Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013). In the same way, I argue that if we want to promote equality, well-being, collaboration, inclusion and other similar concepts, we need to discuss in openly political terms how to build – not only physical-activity-related opportunities but also – our communities and society around them. This approach is here translated into a 'praxis' in Freirean terms (Freire, 1972, p. 36), that entails a dialectical process in which people 'act on their material surroundings (their reality) and reflect upon these with a view to transforming them' (Spaaij, Oxford and Jeanes, 2016, p. 572). According to Freire, reflection and action are inextricably linked and occur simultaneously: dividing these two elements would result in either mindless activism or empty theorising (Gadotti and Torres, 2009). Despite this, Freire's work has been critiqued for emphasising reflection over action, but the philosopher's refusal to write prescriptive guides is in line with his emphasis on contextualizing education, and with his critique of pre-packaged education programmes (Freire, 2005; Spaaij, Oxford and Jeanes, 2016). I embrace Freire's philosophy in saying that the intention is not to advance fixed procedures but rather ideas that can be creatively adapted to the specificities of different places, contexts and people, drawing on 'popular education' techniques (Novelli et al., 2024). Nevertheless, given the urgency of the current crises, I advocate for the need to interact with post-capitalist discourses, take inspiration from non-Western propositions and act as utopian prefigurative actors within the physical activity sphere and beyond.

3.5. Post-capitalist thinking and prefigurative acting

In the previous chapter I have briefly mentioned what makes capitalism inextricably linked with growing inequalities and arguably the biggest crisis humanity is facing, namely the climate crisis, and here I briefly mention some approaches that have been trying to address these problems. The main issue of this economic system is being organised around perpetual growth on a finite system, which is in itself a contradiction (Hickel, 2020; Raworth, 2017), and having rendered politically unacceptable to question economic growth (Hickel and Kallis, 2020). In recent years, to answer warnings about climate change and ecological breakdown, concepts such as 'green growth' have been advanced to address calls for a green and simultaneously growing economy (Dale, Mathai and de Oliveira, 2016). Green growth theory posits that continued economic expansion is compatible with our planet's ecology, and technologies will allow us to absolutely decouple GDP growth from resource use and carbon emissions (Hickel and Kallis, 2020). However, there is no empirical evidence that supports this theory on a large scale, and absolute decoupling from carbon emissions is highly unlikely to be achieved rapidly enough to prevent global warming over 1.5°C or 2°C, even under optimistic policy conditions (Hickel and Kallis, 2020): of note, 2024 has already breached the key 1.5°C limit (Poynting, 2024). Furthermore, relevantly to the topic of this thesis, similar approaches do not pay enough attention to reducing inequalities nor to shifting the focus towards prioritising people's well-being. This is why I argue that efforts to reduce inequalities (of any kind) should promptly turn their attention towards approaches that move beyond the capitalist frame and centre people's well-being and equality, such as post-growth/degrowth, Buen Vivir and other non-western propositions.

While some see slight differences between post-growth and degrowth approaches, I argue that they have substantially the same aim, namely a planned reduction of energy and resource use designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world, while at the same time reducing inequalities and improving human well-being (Hickel, 2021). The degrowth approach recognises that to respect planetary boundaries it is necessary to reduce economic activities that generate environmental damage and to limit the concentration of wealth in the hands of few people (Hickel, 2020; Savini, 2023). At the same time, this agenda gives a clear indication of the areas that should be prioritised in order to achieve distributional justice within and between countries: healthcare, education, public transport, cycling infrastructures,

care and social work, social relations, cultural development, family and friendship, to name but a few (Savini, 2023). Evidently, the degrowth agenda requests things that face pushbacks from powerful capitalist actors, including a democratic distribution of power and higher taxes on excessive wealth. However, degrowth approaches do not shy away from addressing the elephant in the room, namely the fact that the majority of people in the world can only achieve well-being within a different system: therefore, I argue that any discourse surrounding social justice should interact with these concepts and contribute to such a shift.

Furthermore, degrowth approaches take into account that, while the wealthiest economies should reduce their consumption, they should also support (through climate reparations and debt cancellation) the countries that need to increase resource use in order to meet human needs. At the same time, I also argue that we should facilitate a shift from global competition and prevarication towards cooperation, starting from decentralising the role of the West. For example, a lot could be learned from interesting alternatives to neoliberal capitalism that have been emerging from Latin America and other areas of the 'Global South', such as economic practices led by indigenous women and decolonial feminist movements, as well as the concept known as Buen Vivir (Harcourt, 2014). The latter is described as a vision of well-being and good living based on new arrangements for society, the economy, the environment, cultures, and peoples, that moves away from Western-centric capitalist conceptions of development (Gudynas, 2011; Harcourt, 2014). Instead of prioritising economic value by turning everything into commodities, different forms of value are found in cultural, historical, environmental, and aesthetic aspects of life (Gudynas, 2011; Harcourt, 2014). Often SFD approaches evoke conceptions of development that are closer to the capitalist one, as discussed in Chapter 2, and I instead suggest infusing sport and physical activity with post-capitalist ideas and their values. To move beyond the neoliberal growth model, I find relevant to openly discuss different approaches that aim to create a social equilibrium based on harmony between humanity and nature. And in this perspective – as opposed to capitalist exploitation and competition – collaboration and reciprocity with other people and nature can become key elements of a society in which well-being is prioritised (Gudynas, 2011; Harcourt, 2014).

In accordance with these views, I suggest that physical activity could play a more pivotal role in a future society organised around human prosperity as well as in current struggles striving towards it. I believe that social justice (intended as the fair distribution of wealth, health, and

opportunities to live an enjoyable life) can only be achieved moving away from the classist, sexist, ableist and racist principles at the core of capitalism (Fraser, Arruzza and Bhattacharya, 2019). With this goal in mind, physical activity actions could give their immediate contribution by engaging in prefigurative ways, namely enacting in the here and now the values we seek to promote and mirroring the structures that we aim to build in post-capitalist futures (Kreutz, 2020; Raekstad and Gradin, 2020). As in the example of *palestre popolari* in Italy (Milan and Milan, 2021) mentioned in the previous chapter, namely 'grassroots' or 'community' gyms that operate in the realm of prefigurative politics where alternative forms of sociality can be experimented here and now, creating autonomous spaces to experience and practice self-determination (Tonkiss, 2013). In such spaces, people can enjoy leisure time outside capitalist dynamics something that can have an impact not only on individual well-being, but also on the engagement with the local communities, creating alternative ways to conceive them and building sites for struggle and resistance (Milan and Milan, 2021; Rich, Spaaij and Misener, 2021). In this research project, I make the case for Co-PA precisely to integrate this post-capitalist orientation and its collective values into the physical activity sphere: to promote individual and community well-being in the here and now while aiming towards egalitarian, inclusive and sustainable futures. In the next section, I highlight my vision for Co-PA and which principles it could be built around.

3.6. Co-PA: meaningful, bottom-up, post-capitalist-oriented physical activity

While believing that approaching physical activity collectively and from the bottom-up is to be welcomed in any shape or form, in this thesis I set out to experiment with a praxis that could closely connect physical activity with the political. Before discussing its practical application in the following chapters, I here highlight three core features of what I call Co-PA. In the previous chapter, analysing aspects of SFD that this thesis builds upon, I have argued for a shift towards more physical activity, bottom-up perspectives and an outlook on system change. Building on this triadic structure, I here suggest Co-PA main features as: (i) finding meaning and enjoyment in physical activity; (ii) creating opportunities for collective reflections and engagement; and (iii) aiming towards post-capitalist alternatives. However, in truly dialectical terms, I think about them not as fixed procedural lines but rather as principles that can evolve during practical interactions and should adapt to contexts and people. In fact, I argue that future attempts at transformative physical activity actions aiming for social

justice should keep experimenting, changing, improving and building on an ongoing process of shared learning that can be carried out not only by scholars but also by institutions, community organisations, movements as well as independent groups of people. Nevertheless, I believe that certain features could help us strengthen physical activity's political potential, in the belief that 'large-scale problems do not require large scale solutions, they require small-scale solutions within a large-scale framework' (Fleming, 2007, p. 39).

3.6.1. Meaning and enjoyment

Tangen (1982) suggested that being physically active only for the sake of physical health cannot be said to promote health from a holistic and life-long perspective. Instead, focus should be directed towards the meaning in the activity, as well as in what surrounds it. Therefore, sport and physical activity become more relevant when they allow empowering experiences, create involvement and joy, and foster social relationships. While not advocating for the eradication of competition and performance altogether – which can be enjoyable for some – I suggest that enhancing diversification would promote sport and physical activity's more pleasurable and social aspects, widening the chances to participate in and create diverse opportunities to be physically active. At the same time, this aspect could assume a political value: it would allow more people to experience first-hand how pleasure in life can derive from activities that are more sustainable and fulfilling than mere consumerist practices – physical activity being one of many (alongside the arts, for example) but arguably the only one to have such unique and powerful effects on our physical, mental and social well-being.

Soper (2020) coined the term 'alternative hedonism' to delineate a new and ecologically sustainable vision of the good life, one that could help us delink prosperity from capitalist endless growth. Existing empirical evidence demonstrates that GDP growth is ecologically unsustainable and, past a certain threshold, tends to have a negative impact on social indicators and human development, happiness and well-being (Easterlin et al., 2010; Hickel, 2019). Conversely, post-capitalist alternatives based on a fair redistribution of income, investments in public services and guaranteed living wages, would enable people to live well while working less and in more meaningful jobs for the well-being of their communities (Hickel, 2019). At the same time, these societal shifts would leave more free time to have fun, cooperate with other people, care for loved ones, enjoy nature, and exercise more

(Hickel, 2019). From this perspective, meaningful and enjoyable physical activity could be one of the aspects gaining a more pivotal role in a society in which people's well-being is centred, as opposed to their capacity to generate profit. Envisioning and contributing to the creation of a future that allows for more free time, and less conventional and more creative and enjoyable ways of using it, is not only desirable but also necessary to address the climate crisis and allow most of humanity to thrive. However, in order to support the transition to such futures is very important to implement immediate changes: with this purpose in mind, I argue for a shift from primarily individualistic to more collectivised practices, in which individual enjoyment is not overshadowed but rather reinforced by meaningful interactions with others.

3.6.2. Collective engagement towards social justice

In the same way that promoting meaning and enjoyment should not replace competitive forms of sport but rather be strengthened alongside them, focusing on collective ways to organise physical activity opportunities does not mean discarding individual ways to exercise. However, it is necessary to confront how individualised fitness culture under capitalism has promoted a commodification of the body as one of the many sources of profit (Majuru, 2021) and has pushed a framework of obligations to use free time productively and to do so within the consumer marketplace (Smith Maguire, 2008). Therefore, I advocate for the transformative potential of allowing people to get together (more or less spontaneously) and engage with each other as well as with a variety of ways to be active outside capitalist frames. These collective opportunities would serve a twofold purpose: on one hand, meeting the diverse physical activity needs of individuals and communities, including the ones that struggle to engage with mainstream sport and fitness; on the other hand, actively experimenting with democratic and civic practices. I suggest enhancing the focus on such collective processes can broaden opportunities to experience directly how 'life in a truly democratic society might be like' (Graeber, 2012, p. 170), in turn strengthening people's ability to envision how a more egalitarian and socially just society could work, as well as testing its complexities. Allowing people to act collectively can also help to advance social justice and equality in the here and now, by centring the diverse needs of otherwise marginalised people.

Physical activity and sport have long been connected with principles of achievement and success presenting typically Western capitalist traits that often become exclusionary. Historically, exercising and related drills were used, especially in state-financed schools, to teach obedience to the working classes (Kirk, 2011). Even when competitive games came to dominate, they still retained an underlining purpose of social control, as well as being predominantly gendered, with boys and girls taught separately (Armour and Kirk, 2008; Kirk, 1992; 2011). Still today, corporate curricula and public health agendas emphasise a certain performative culture of the body (Evans et al., 2008), for example by reproducing whiteness as the 'norm' and relegating ethnic-minoritised people to be marked as 'deficient' (Azzarito, 2009; 2019). In this regard, I suggest that open and collective pedagogical opportunities should aim to defy such classist, racialised, gendered, and ableist norms, promoting difference not in negative terms, but rather with a positive value (Azzarito, 2019). For example, engaging with marginalised people can be an important opportunity to understand, platform and support their perspectives, potentially enriching and diversifying the landscape of sport and physical activity for everyone. However, this involvement should not be a tokenistic amelioration of their conditions (Lankshear, 1993), but it should rather contain the purpose to overcome the status quo that has generated their disadvantage in the first place. In this regard, I suggest that it is crucial to engage openly with alternatives to capitalism.

3.6.3. A post-capitalist outlook

As previously argued, the capitalist system is based on inherently exploitative and colonial features (Buchanan, 1982; Hickel, 2020), as well as on the ecologically unsustainable promise of perpetual growth (Raworth, 2017). Furthermore, the concentration of private capital and an increasing deregulation of markets have considerably inhibited democratic governments' ability to govern (Merkel, 2014) and address issues of inequalities. Moreover, we have been told for so long that there is no alternative to the current order that many people have internalised hopelessness, which makes envisaging a post-capitalist alternative ever more important (Harvey, 2013). Therefore, to move away from Western-centric and patriarchal capitalist perspectives, I suggest looking towards alternatives to neoliberal capitalism that are emerging from other parts of the world, starting with place-based practices built on justice and equilibrium between people and with nature (Harcourt, 2014). Engaging with these perspectives could help us pave the way towards more sustainable and egalitarian

futures in which resources are collectivised, humans do not exploit the planet elevating their needs above everyone else's, and society can be finally centred on people's well-being. Already now most interactions in our life are based on solidaristic principles (e.g., in our families, among co-workers, etc.), but the capitalist cultural hegemony stands to convince us of the impossibility of organising our society on those same principles on which we base our amicable relationships (Graeber, 2012). Therefore, bottom-up democratic processes can act as opportunities to experiment with different paradigms, allowing us to experience compassion and solidarity beyond the boundaries of our own social groups, as well as democratic engagement (and the challenges coming with it) beyond the mere act of voting in elections. In the belief that, as eloquently expressed by Chamberlin (2012, p. 45), 'if despair is perceiving an undesirable future as inevitable, one glimpse of a realistic, welcome alternative transforms our despondency into a massive drive to work towards that alternative'. In other words, Co-PA can offer opportunities to foster critical consciousness and wider empowerment, trying to replace despondency with hope in the power of collective action.

In relation to this proposition of Co-PA, I argue that prioritising meaning and enjoyment (over productivity and performance) as well as promoting opportunities to engage collectively (rather than individualistically), are post-capitalist traits in and of themselves. However, I think it is important to make these aspects explicit within the Co-PA approach, to allow people to reflect critically on how such ways of enjoying and collaborating could be extended to other aspects of their own civic life, as well as society more broadly. I believe that it is crucial to start from the issues arising from communities, using active and dialogical methods to engage people in collectively determining their own needs and priorities (Rich and Misener, 2019; Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013). These shared pedagogical experiences can go beyond sport fields or classrooms and may take many different forms, so long as they are integrating problem-posing dialogue with collective action aiming to transform people's social reality (Wallerstein and Bernstein, 1988). However, I argue that post-capitalist-oriented reflections can strengthen the political and civic aspect and help accelerate a process of transformative change that cannot wait much longer. At a time of concurrent global crises that are devouring our societies and planet (Fraser, 2022), I argue that it is urgent to strengthen physical activity's contribution to the creation of a more socially just society. Drawing on Freirean principles of critical pedagogy, I argue for an approach that challenges the status quo and articulates a language of possibility (Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013), promoting

the idea that alternatives to widespread inequalities are not unrealistic, but rather conceivable if we look beyond capitalism and collectively work in that direction. In the following chapter, I delve into how this approach has been applied to the research design.

Chapter 4. Research design and methods

The theoretical proposition discussed in the previous chapter is strongly linked with the rest of the project: from a dialectical materialist and Freirean perspective, I see theory and practice as united, therefore I tried to translate these principles into the research design. Since the beginning of my PhD journey, I have been committed to creating a project that would not be limited to analysis or theoretical propositions, but that would also include an aspect of action and engagement within the local communities involved. In doing this, I also tried to experiment with this approach in practice, to see what could be learned from it. At the same time, I suggest that the Co-PA approach – in truly dialectical terms – does not have only one way of being put into practice and that it should rather evolve and adapt to contexts and people. Within this chapter, and throughout the thesis, I refer to these two main methodological aspects: on the one hand, a data collection-oriented methodology, interested in the process of knowledge production; on the other hand, a social change-oriented methodology, focused on the practical application that combined principles of critical pedagogy with physical activity. These aspects are intentionally presented together because of their intertwined nature, and because during the project I attempted to give equal priority to both. Therefore, in the rest of the thesis, some parts might focus more on one or the other strain, but they will still be analysed jointly because of their complementarity. In this chapter, I start by highlighting the research questions that the empirical side of the project was designed to answer (4.1.). I later examine why, where and who (4.2.): namely why I chose to focus on young adults and what I mean by 'marginalised' and 'peripheral'; why the North East of England; and characteristics of the participants that have taken part in this specific project. I also dedicate reflections to the recruitment phase, my first approaches with places and people, as well as my positionality as an outsider researcher. Then, I present the research assemblage and the methods chosen to experiment with one potential way to apply the post-capitalist-oriented Co-PA approach in practice (4.3.), namely initial individual interviews and workshops based on critical pedagogy, culminating in the co-design of physical actions. Finally, I describe the methods of analysis (4.4.) and ethical considerations (4.5.) before moving on to the findings in following chapters.

4.1. Research questions

Since the beginning, the general focus of this research has been on ways to improve physical activity opportunities for marginalised young adults. However, I was confronting a world where material conditions kept worsening for the majority of people, and the aim to refine provision of physical activity opportunities started looking rather limited in its scope. Furthermore, overall public spending and funding for youth centres, sport and recreation were plummeting too (Harris, Hodge and Phillips, 2019; YMCA, 2022), which prompted me to tilt the project towards not only potentially influencing policies but also supporting grassroots efforts. From this perspective, and encompassing these objectives, the overarching aim of this project veered towards exploring how post-capitalist reflection(s) and physical activity action(s) might support each other in striving for social change. In the meantime, engaging with Sparkes' paradigms (2012) regarding the nature of the research process in social sciences and sport, I grew convinced of the legitimacy of a critical activist researcher's position. Therefore, I fully embraced the Freirean concept of pedagogy, which is forged *with* marginalised people and which makes oppression and inequalities (and their causes) the objects of reflection, and from that reflection tries to generate engagement in the struggle for social change (Freire, 1972). Sparkes (2012) spoke of 'catalitic validity' to refer to the degree to which the research process reorientates and energises participants in what Freire calls 'conscientisation', namely knowing reality in order to better transform it. This kind of validity in critical research relates to how the research process empowers the participants to create change (Sparkes, 2012). While not considering a complete evaluation of change achievable within this PhD only, I posed three main research questions:

1. How can the Co-PA praxis (*reflection* + *action*) aid 'conscientisation' in both physical-activity-related and political terms?
2. To what extent can this Co-PA praxis support the participants' view of the possibility to organise communities and society differently?
3. To what extent can these collective reflections affect the participants' perception of physical activity and ways to engage in it?

Since this research does not aim to prioritise either post-capitalist *reflections* or physical activity *actions* at the expense of the other, I believed that the focus should be seeking to explore effective ways in which they could strengthen each other. Aligned with Marmot et al.'s (2020) view of SDH, my position has always been one focused on upstream social determinants of physical activity: but rather than simply promoting physical activity *despite* negative SDH, I am interested in experimenting with ways to affect SDH *through* a more

political physical activity. On the back of this, I started planning and assembling the research and its different stages in a way that could support a process of 'conscientisation' in both physical activity- and socio-politically-related terms, and that would allow for dialogical reflections culminating in the co-design of physical activity actions. However, the planning of methods was influenced by and was finalised after determining which kind of participants would be involved, the choice of the area and finally the recruitment of the aforementioned participants, as the following section (4.2.) highlights.

4.2. Why, where and who?

In this section I illustrate the reasoning behind this project's focus on peripheral young adults living in the North East of England, whose ethos could be summarised by Novelli et al.'s (2024, p.10) words: 'a genuine conviction that it is at the margins, the edges, at the points where theory meets practice, where new ideas can emerge to challenge a status quo that has not been transformed by classical social science theory'. I grew up in the outskirts of Rome and I have always been fascinated by the 'peripheries', those liminary spaces that are geographically close to the centres but in which people feel very distant from it. The North East of England is, in my opinion, a fascinating periphery within the UK: an area of the 6th richest economy in the world (IMF, 2024), just a few hours away from London, with high levels of deprivation and a vast number of so-called 'left behind' neighbourhoods (APPG Left Behind Neighbourhoods, 2023). From an age perspective, I see young adults as a periphery themselves, being on the edge of both childhood and adulthood, and often lacking acknowledgment of their peculiarities. Therefore, I start by making the case for the specific focus on young adults (4.2.1.) and I present this project's definition of peripheral or marginalised people (4.2.2.). Then I highlight the specificities of the North East of England in relation to this research project (4.2.3.), the challenges faced when recruiting participants (4.2.4.) as well as their characteristics (4.2.5.). Finally, I look into the first pre-research contacts with places and people and reflect critically on my own positionality as an outsider researcher.

4.2.1. Who: young adults

The post-capitalist-oriented Co-PA approach could be applied and adapted to different contexts and age groups. However, the experimentation carried out within this research project has focused on young adults for several reasons. First and foremost, people in lower socio-economic groups are more likely to be inactive and the transition to adulthood appears to be particularly crucial in England: the rate of inactivity amongst 16- to 24-year-olds from this group is already starkly higher when compared to their wealthier peers, and it increases further within the 25–54 age groups (Sport England, 2018). However, despite this transitional age being a key period in establishing healthy behaviours (WHO, 2018) and a high-risk time for physical activity disengagement (Haycock and Smith, 2012), young adults are frequently omitted from targeted policy and research focus (e.g., Bambra et al., 2015; Department of Health and Social Care, 2019). As highlighted in Chapter 2, physical activity as well as SFD research have rarely focused on young adults and their transition to adulthood, with current evidence mostly relating to younger adolescents and school settings or adults (Schulenkorf, Sherry and Rowe, 2016; van Sluijs et al., 2021). In light of this, I suggest that targeting young adults could be important when aiming to reduce physical activity inequalities, since these significantly increase from childhood (11% less active children from the least affluent families compared to the most affluent ones) to adulthood (20% less active adults from lower socio-economic groups compared to the higher ones) (Sport England, 2023). This age group goes through a series of transitions that will influence the rest of their life and needs to navigate circumstances that are not only new, but increasingly challenging, especially for the less wealthy of them. Therefore, I argue that also their changing physical activity needs should be understood and supported, in order for them to find a new place for physical activity within their evolving lives.

This age group encounters multifaceted and intersecting transitions, including a transition from school to work, or from living at home with their parents to moving out as well as changes in leisure patterns (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Murray and Gayle, 2012; Raymore, Barber and Eccles, 2001). These complex transitions can take place in different ways and with different timings, but many youth experience setbacks by becoming parents too soon, dropping out of school, not managing to find work, or getting arrested (Jekielek, Brown and Trends, 2005). These experiences can then have long-lasting effects on young people's potential to thrive in adulthood (Jekielek, Brown and Trends, 2005). Furthermore, the young adults of today face an unprecedented conjunction of crises that they are strongly affected by and highly aware of, as also following chapters of this thesis highlight: from the

climate emergency to pandemics, from increasing socio-economic inequalities to wars. In fact, mental health issues are becoming ever more prevalent among young people, with one in four 17- to 19-year-olds in England reporting a probable mental health disorder (NHS, 2022). And while mental health issues can affect individuals in all socio-economic groups, being from a more socially disadvantaged background is associated with a substantially higher risk: psychosocial stressors, poor housing and unsafe neighbourhoods negatively impact young people's mental health and well-being, as do also unemployment and job insecurity (House of Commons Education Committee and Health and Social Care Committee, 2018; Kim and von Dem Knesebeck, 2015; Llosa et al., 2018; Meltzer et al., 2010). On top of this, climate change is also affecting mental health in several ways (Palinkas and Wong, 2020), with young people and people from low socio-economic status showing to be more vulnerable to anxiety and mood disorders related to disasters (Cianconi, Betrò and Janiri, 2020; WHO, 2014).

On the other hand, adolescents and young adults have a heightened neurocognitive capacity for change, which puts them not only in a place of vulnerability, but also of great opportunities (Backes and Bonnie, 2019) particularly until the age of 25, when the development of the prefrontal cortex should be fully accomplished (Arain et al., 2013). Positive experiences during this period can ameliorate the impact of negative experiences earlier in life, potentially providing a second chance to lead meaningful and healthy lives (Guyer et al., 2016). At this stage of life, they also develop greater capacity for strategic problem-solving, deductive reasoning, and information processing, due to their ability to reason about more abstract ideas: however, these skills require scaffolding and opportunities for practice (Backes and Bonnie, 2019; Kuhn, 2009). Their capacity for flexibility and adaptability can foster deep learning and creativity, making this age a remarkable opportunity for growth: but while connections within and between brain regions become stronger and more efficient, unused connections are pruned away (Backes and Bonnie, 2019; Crone and Dahl, 2012; Hauser et al., 2015; Kleibeuker et al., 2012). Indeed, this is a seminal period for social and motivational learning (Fuligni, 2018), when humans have a greater capability to solve problems in new and creative ways (Stevenson et al., 2014), and to understand more about themselves and the complexities of the social world (Mills and Anandakumar, 2020). In light of this, I decided to focus this experimentation of a Co-PA approach on young adults, not only to understand and support their changing physical activity needs but also to allow them to practice abstract thinking, problem-solving and deductive reasoning skills with

reflections on new and alternative ways to conceive the world. I suggest that young adulthood is a fundamental stage to support people's ability to see beyond hopeless 'capitalist realism' (Fisher, 2009) and to work towards Freire's (1972) idea of 'conscientisation', namely the process of developing critical awareness, challenging assumptions and acting transformatively.

Finally, another crucial aspect of this project that is connected with the specificity of young adulthood is the bottom-up approach. Brady, Chaskin and McGregor (2020) have looked into different strategies to engage marginalised young people in civic and political action, including sport and non-formal education. Among the main challenges, they identified young people's issues with top-down and paternalistic approaches: while recognising the benefits associated with policy innovations such as youth parliaments and other similar forums, these more formalised opportunities seem to be limited in their capacity to engage the most marginalised youth in a meaningful way (Brady, Chaskin and McGregor, 2020). From the perspective of sport and physical activity, O'Connor and Penney (2021) have argued that more informal physical activity practices can better respond to growing societal demands for freedom, autonomy and social connection (Atkinson, 2010; 2013; Tomlinson et al., 2005; Wheaton, 2004). This is particularly important for young adults that can benefit from self-realising activities that feel personally expressive, self-defining, engaging, purposeful and fulfilling (Waterman, 1993). A strong sense of agency and being able to make one's own decisions are key factors impacting on young people feeling engaged, and in the long term, young people who are valued and feel connected have better health as adults and can contribute to creating and building better communities (Burns et al., 2008). Therefore, I argue for the importance to give marginalised young adults the chance to make active choices: in this sense, a bottom-up approach is instrumental for them to find their own way towards meaningful physical activities and experiment with ways to engage with their peers and within their communities. In other words, I suggest favouring a bottom-up and participant-focused approach rather than a top-down and activity-focused one (Rich et al., 2019).

4.2.2. Why marginalised and/or peripheral

The second aspect that I wanted to address was the socio-economic one, albeit with an intersectional perspective. There are many ways to define people *on the edges* of society and

I do not feel strongly for or against any of those. However, I now give a brief overview of terms that are often used interchangeably, and I then argue for my interpretation of being marginalised and peripheral and the relevance of these terms for this thesis. *Disadvantaged* is commonly used to describe those who lack things considered as necessities and are therefore characterised by social or economic deprivation (Saunders, Naidoo and Griffiths, 2008). Although relevant, I argue that this term lays most of the focus on the people experiencing this state, rather than on the systemic causes that generate it. Another commonly used expression is *hard to reach*, used to describe those who are difficult to involve in social life, even though it is often the services being hard to reach rather than the people (Boag-Munroe and Evangelou, 2010; Crozier and Davies, 2007). As argued by Brackertz (2007), there are groups and population segments that have traditionally been underrepresented in public participation, but that would not be so hard to reach if the right approach was to be used. This is a potentially stigmatising terminology and seems to take for granted the best possible effort from institutions to reach such groups (Brackertz, 2007). Within the UK, the National Institute of Health Reasearch's INLCUDE project (2020) opted for the term *under-served group* to acknowledge that the lack of inclusion is not due to any fault of the members of these groups and that better services should be provided (NIHR, 2020). While finding this definition important, I believe that it falls short in recognising people's agency, leaving too much responsibility to 'provide a better service' in the hands of researchers and institutions rather than empowering people and communities. A definition that I feel closer to is Freire's (1972, p. 29) one of *oppression*, intended as 'any situation in which "A" objectively exploits "B" or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person, […] [interfering] with the individual's ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human'. This term goes in the direction of stressing the role of oppressive forces while acknowledging the need to support oppressed people in acting against such oppression.

Drawing on the above definitions, I argue that one of the best terms to match this research project's focus would be *marginalised*. Marginalisation is the position of individuals, groups or populations outside of mainstream society, as well as the process of making these people marginal in relation to dominant social groups and institutions, making them feel as if they have no power to influence decisions or events (IPBES, 2019; Schiffer and Schatz, 2008). This is, however, a complex and multidimensional concept which should not be seen as a state but rather as a process over time that can be best understood focusing on the view of the people experiencing it (Nayak and Berkes, 2010). This concept, in my opinion, helps to better

highlight the systemic role of capitalist structures in actively marginalising the vast majority of the world population and in creating inequalities. Baah, Teitelman and Riegel (2018) conducted an integrative review of 1,781 articles from which the concept of marginalisation emerged as strictly correlated with social determinants of health, intended as the conditions in which people are born and live (WHO, 2010), including factors like socio-economic status, education, physical environment, employment, access to health care and social support networks. SDH are inequitably distributed across gender, class, race, sexual orientation, and socio-economic and minority groups (Heidenreich, Trogdon and Khavjou, 2011), and people suffering these disparities can be referred to as marginalised (Meleis and Im, 1999; Venkatapuram, Bell and Marmot, 2010). Therefore, marginalisation, as defined by Hall, Stevens and Meleis (1994, p. 25), can be seen as 'the process through which persons are peripheralized based on their identities, associations, experiences, and environment'.

While agreeing with the definition of marginalisation and how it allows to express the role of structural inequalities, I find the term *peripheral* less stigmatising. As briefly mentioned earlier, this might have to do with my bias of speaking a Latin language that commonly calls periphery the non-central areas of big cities, like the ones where I was born and grew up in. I believe that the term periphery is easier to own and reclaim with agency by the people that can be described as peripheral: this word can describe the outer edge of an area, something considered as not centrally important or happening at the edges, or a less important part of a certain group (Blom, 1996). I argue that while marginalisation might sound as something to escape, being peripheral can entail not wanting to reach the centre at all (if the centre is intended in capitalist terms of oppression of others and nature) but rather transforming those peripheries into spaces of shared well-being, equality and collaboration (as difficult as this might be to realise). In other words, I do not aim to romanticise marginalisation, and I stress that a lot should be done to improve inequalities in the here and now: however, I suggest that owning the term 'peripheral' can be easier and more conducive of a structural shift in the way we look at society, namely a less hierarchical one and not one in which few people are at the centre while the majority struggle in geographical, socio-economic and other kinds of peripheries. Scholars of social movements have used the term *Global South* as 'a metaphor for all those left out of the benefits of our contemporary colonial, capitalist and patriarchal world, regardless of their geographical location' (Novelli et al., 2024, p. 1). I agree with these perspectives that look at the radical and insightful knowledge emerging from spaces at the margins of society, where the consequences of capitalism are most evident and where

innovations arise out of tensions and contradictions (Causevic et al., 2020), and I argue that people from lower socio-economic communities in the 'Global North' should be included in these discourses. Therefore, in this thesis I use *peripheral* or *marginalised* as a similar broad definition for what I consider to be the majority of people in our society that, to different degrees, pay the price of living in an unequal and oppressive system. My interpretation is an intersectional one, intending that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, geographical location, ability and age operate 'not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities' (Collins et al., 2015, p. 2). Therefore, in this thesis I refer to the participants as *marginalised* or *peripheral* young adults, intending them as included in a broad spectrum of people that are subject to the capitalist status quo but whose agency can and should be stimulated through a critical approach.

4.2.3. Where: the North East of England

I have highlighted how this project aimed to interact with peripheral young adults that can be considered 'on the edges' both developmentally and socio-economically: the third aspect of marginality is the geographical area in which this project took place, namely the North East of England. This region is the least wealthy in the UK (ONS, 2022; The Equality Trust, 2023), and social mobility is also at its lowest, with young people in the North finding it hardest to become wealthier than their parents (IFS, 2023). Furthermore, trends seem to point towards the wrong direction: the North East has recently overtaken London as UK's child poverty hotspot, with 38% of children living in poverty (Stone, 2023). Recent reports have highlighted how inequalities for the young people in this region are widening at alarming rates: the 11 local authority areas in the UK with the biggest rises in child – and young people – poverty over the last six years were all from the North East of England, with Newcastle upon Tyne and Gateshead recording two of the biggest increases (Stone, 2023). Consequently, also when it comes to health the North East fares worse than the rest of the country: people living here have the highest health care needs due to long-term illness, which include chronic pain, alcohol problems, COPD and cardiovascular disease (Watt, Raymond and Rachet-Jacquet, 2022). On top of this, economic inactivity due to sickness is at its highest level since records began: COVID-19 has made regional inequalities worse, as the north of England have higher long COVID incidence than the UK average (Institute for Public Policy

Research, 2022). Relevantly for the focus of this research, in the North East 29.4% of people are completely inactive (compared to a national average of 25.8%) and only 60.9% are active, compared to 67.1% in the South West and 66.5% in the South East (Sport England, 2023).

The North East of England is not only one of the most economically deprived regions in the UK, but also one historically shaped by industrial decline and political marginalisation. Once a hub for coal mining, shipbuilding, and heavy manufacturing, the region has experienced decades of deindustrialisation, resulting in long-term economic and social challenges (Gower, 2024). These structural shifts have left a legacy of underinvestment and persistent disadvantage, with many local authorities in the region ranking among the most income-deprived in England (Francis-Devine, 2024). Politically, many of these communities were part of the so-called 'Red Wall', traditionally Labour-voting, working-class constituencies that experienced a dramatic shift in recent elections, reflecting long-standing disillusionment and a sense of being left behind (Wainwright, 2019). The North East has also been disproportionately affected by austerity: between 2010 and 2020, local authority spending on youth services in the region fell by 83%, one of the steepest declines in England (YMCA, 2022). This erosion of public infrastructure has compounded existing inequalities and limited opportunities for young people. Situating this research within this socio-political context highlights not only the urgency of responding to local needs, but also structural forces that cab shape physical activity inequalities and the possibilities for collective resistance.

These dynamics are central to understanding the lived realities of the participants in this project. However, I want to stress how my focus on this region was not driven by a form of pity nor simply by the aim to partially ameliorate those conditions: as previously mentioned, I argue that it is precisely in these areas that new ideas can best emerge to challenge the status quo of inequalities (Novelli et al., 2024). While the North East of England is geographically located in the 'Global North', I believe it has something in common with the 'Global South' that has been left out of the benefits of contemporary capitalist world, insofar as both are potentially rich sources of ideas, knowledge and strategies to make the world a better place (Novelli et al., 2024). Therefore, in this project I remained committed to learning about the specificities of this context and allowing the participants to guide me through them, while aiming to build critical energy on the very characteristics that make these people and places fertile ground for much needed social change. In the same way in which the salutogenic approach tries to look at well-being focusing on health rather than diseases (Quennerstedt,

2008), I approached the North East conscious of the struggles that young adults might face here, but committed to centring their valuable perspectives and supporting their creative and critical potential.

4.2.4. Recruitment phases and addressing circumstantial challenges

Freirean ideas of critical pedagogy have also been defined as 'popular education' ('popular' here meaning 'of the people'), seen as one of the vehicles through which the process of challenging unequal structures can be strengthened (Kane, 2001). Popular education often overlaps with participatory methods of research (e.g., PAR), that recognise the important knowledge and insights into social reality that communities and people hold (Novelli et al., 2024). However, these methods often draw on links between researchers and existing social movements, trade unions and grassroots organisations that are natural spaces and starting points for these pedagogical experiences (Novelli et al., 2024), something that slightly differs from this research project. While believing that Co-PA could be very well adapted to and improved by similar contexts (and hoping that this might happen in future), for this project I interacted with people that were outside these networks, with little or no links to similar social movements, turning attention towards the less engaged 'margins'. One youth organisation and one community centre were crucial in helping my recruitment of young adults, and I am extremely grateful to them for their support. I then carried out the project autonomously with the two groups of young adults, counting only on my – and participants' – efforts, without direct involvement of the youth workers. I felt comfortable working on my own, but I believe that future similar experimentations could also be strengthened by being embedded in already existing organisations: in my opinion, this could especially aid the final part of the project, namely the physical activity actions, in order to support hopefully long-lasting activities.

Overall, the recruitment phase was the most challenging part of the project, but the struggles turned out to have a silver lining. Initially, I had contacts with a youth organisation working in the whole of the North East. They were extremely supportive from the start and allowed me to join some of their meetings with young adults. However, some changes in their structure made it difficult to complete the recruitment and organise introductory meetings: this prompted me to look for other opportunities to start the recruitment elsewhere. Through a

suggestion of one NIHR ARC NENC member, I came in contact with a community centre that did not usually have any young adults involved but that generously tried to find some that could be interested in taking part. Finally, I also managed to recruit participants through the first original contact, which allowed me to form two groups with different characteristics, as I highlight in the following section. I was aware that monetary reimbursement would be an important incentive (£25 per hour, as recommended by NIHR guidance), and I made it clear from the very beginning for a few reasons: first, because I believe knowledge-making and community engagement should be regarded as money-worth efforts, in the current as well as future societies; second, I did not see any issue with the fact that some young adults might be attracted by the money more than the subject of the project, since I aimed to interact also with young people that are commonly disengaged, come from disadvantaged backgrounds or that do not particularly like physical activity per se; third, because I strongly wanted to avoid excluding people for which a reimbursement might be a necessary condition, therefore I asked my contacts in the community centre and the youth organisation to mention this aspect explicitly.

4.2.4.1. Pre-research meetings

My original aim was to be embedded as much as possible within one or more community contexts, joining sessions and activities before the beginning of the project and building relationships step by step. However, this part proved tricky since the aforementioned restructuring in the youth organisation paused my integration into their social fabric. Before that, I had had the chance to join some meetings of this organisation, even though none of the young adults that I met there ended up taking part in the project. I had attended some online meetings organised by them, where they gathered young adults living in different areas of the North East around different topics, as well as some in person activities in one of their centres. The first time I joined in person, I biked my way to the centre on a rainy March evening and struggled to find it at first, until I realised that the session would take place in the main room of a nursery, still adorned in toddler drawings and filled with toys. This particular session I had the chance to join was organised for young adults with an interest in music, and I remember a few details that stood out to me: some of them were very young parents, an aspect I had not considered enough until then; one person joined straight from work, in wet reflexive uniform and hands black with asphalt, visibly tired yet incredibly happy to be there

and play guitar. I am not sure whether these young adults did not join my project simply because they were not interested or because they could not, but I believe that material circumstances might have played an important part. In fact, the young adults that this organisation later helped me recruit were more academically focused, none of them had children and a few did physical jobs.

The other contact I had was established much later, and these are extracts from my first email exchanges with their community worker:

> *Unfortunately that age group isnt that interested in doing research even for money (what is the rate?) How many y/p are you looking for?*
> [05/06/2022]

> *It looks like we may have a group about 5/6 […]. I have tried to make it sound as interesting as I can - but keeping up their motivation will need all your skills. […] If I were you I wouldn't waste too much time in contacting young people as they will lose interest.*
> [10/06/2022]

At the time of my first contact, this community centre had hardly any adolescent or young adult involved. When I met the community worker in person, she opened up about her struggles to keep the centre alive. She was very critical of the council that had moved their location without consulting them, away from the sport fields and relatively far from the heart of the neighbourhood where they had built networks for decades. I recall the black and white picture of the inauguration hanged on the wall, with the founder's face covered with a sticker, since she said that he only showed up that first day and never again. This youth worker had grown up in the estates of this area and attended activities of a similar centre since she was 10 years old, to later become a community worker herself, a job she still conducted with sheer passion in the same neighbourhood. However, she could not hide her resentment towards the struggles they needed to face: she said that annual rent went up from £10,000 to £38,000 in just a few years, which forced them to spend most of their time looking for grants or ways to rent their venues. As mentioned in our email exchanges, she confirmed their conviction that no one would show up to meet me: she believed that my target age was a tricky one, since in that area most young people are part of gangs and are difficult to engage. On that note, she

asked me to leave my bike in her office and told me to watch out for my belongings since it is common to get 'nicked', and she had several cases of people breaking into the community centre to rob. Luckily, some young adults did show up, and we had a very informal conversation, mostly small talk trying to break the ice. I could sense that they were shy at first and unsure whether they fit there, but they all signed up to take part. The community worker was very surprised and her excitement was noticeable: she said that even if for a short while, she was happy to finally get young people to visit the centre, and that I could use any space at any time, even when none of the youth workers were there.

4.2.5. Participants' and groups' characteristics

For ethical reasons, in the following chapters the locations will be omitted and the participants' names will be changed, with all participants of Group A having pseudonyms beginning with A (e.g., Alex) and participants of Group B starting with B (e.g., Brian). Group A was the one created thanks to the *community centre* located in a peripheral area of a big city in the North East, and their generous community worker that helped me to find interested young adults in a short turnaround time. The six participants were all living close to the community centre, where we met for the introductory meeting and where we conducted all our workshops and later meetings (apart from the interviews that participants preferred to have via Zoom). Five of these participants were males, one was a female, and all of them identified as heterosexual. All of them identified as white, with one adding his 'foreign' origins. They were all aged between 16 and 18 years old: five of them were students, mostly at college level (of which three also worked alongside studying) and one was working full-time. The majority of the group lived in postcodes that have an estimated average household income between £11,000 and £26,000, according to the Office for National Statistics (2020), placing these areas in the lowest 20% income areas. Regarding physical activity levels as defined by Sport England, three defined themselves as active (moving or exercising more than 150 minutes per week), one as fairly active (between 30 and 149 minutes per week) and two as inactive (less than 30 minutes).

Group B was recruited thanks to the support of the first *youth organisation* I had been in contact with, which works in several places of the North East of England. Therefore, I met the nine participants for an online introductory meeting in which they decided to carry out

our workshops online, since they would have struggled to meet in person due to distances and busy schedules. Three of them were males, one non-binary and five females. Four identified as heterosexual, two as bisexual, two as gay or lesbian and one preferred not to say. Like in the other group, all participants identified as white, with just one as white-other, being born outside of the UK. Their ages spanned from 16 to 24 years old: seven of them were studying, of which two at university and one at open university, while the others were in college (two also worked while studying, one part-time and the other full-time); one of them was working and one looking for jobs. The majority of them lived in postcodes that have an estimated average household income between £26,000 and £31,000, placing these areas around the lower 20 to 40% income areas (Office for National Statistics, 2020). Three declared to be physically active, two between active and fairly active, three fairly active and one inactive.

Although internal group dynamics and characteristics were heterogeneous, some main differences between the two groups could be pointed out, the most evident ones regarding gender and sexuality, and average income of the areas in which they live. Participants in Group A were predominantly males, heterosexual and cisgender, while Group B was more diverse. While in one place I will underline the gender of the only female participant of Group A and her contribution within a male-dominated group, I will not specifically focus on gender in Group B to avoid a binary definition that would risk reflecting unfairly the participants' gender and making assumptions about the relative importance of this in relation to wider demographics. The young adults in Group A were living in lower income areas compared to Group B, even though both groups came from relatively humble backgrounds and areas that can be defined as peripheral in respect to aspects that are difficult to be captured solely by the average postcode income. For example, one of them grew up in a very rural context even if she now resides in a higher income area, although in a shared apartment. Demographics apart, throughout our conversations I noticed some differences in the way the young people expressed their ideas and the language they used, with participants in Group B feeling more comfortable using academic terms and approaching the complexity of certain topics (see Appendix 4 and 5). In general, the two groups also showed slightly different political approaches: almost all in Group A were not interested in politics but showed clear awareness of their social class and were passionate about discussing socio-economic inequalities; in Group B, many were interested in politics and some even took part in youth councils, with the majority of them holding liberal views in terms of rights and capitalist ones with regards to the economy, with some notable exceptions. Something that these groups had

in common was the number of young adults that are already working or work to support their studies, an aspect that emerged starkly during our discussions and that clearly has a significant impact on their lives. Some of them worked in physical and demanding jobs with varying working hours that make it difficult for them to build routines, and which also had an impact on the level of engagement that they could commit to this research project.

4.2.5.1. An outsider researcher: fitting in by staying different

My first approaches to the youth organisation and community centre have some things in common, one being the absolute generosity that the youth- and community-workers welcomed me with. While I did not necessarily receive substantial support after the recruitment phase (especially in one case), I was constantly shown gratitude and affection, especially from the youth worker of the community centre indicated above. Reflecting on my relationship with this youth worker and her colleague, I sensed (and hope) that I might have been perceived not much as a researcher coming to extract knowledge but rather as someone coming to spend time with and listen to local young adults. Therefore, rather than expecting or demanding help, I embraced my role as almost-community-worker and tried my best to give something back to them, as it had actually been my purpose from the beginning. In our conversations, I was repeatedly told how they would welcome more academic researchers to their facilities and how this had not yet happened. I perceived them to feel detached from the universities of the region, and I was mindful to bridge this gap through authentic and spontaneous attention to their opinions, which I hope this thesis gives value to.

Furthermore, the areas from which participants were from and in which the organisation and centre operated had a lot in common with the periphery of Rome I grew up in, which did not make it difficult for me to overcome the visible disadvantage and feel at home. I did not bring this up consciously, but I am convinced that a similar social-class background might be perceived as a bonding characteristic. This was especially evident in my interactions with Group A, where I felt that my peer-to-peer approach, a relaxed language (and similar outfit to theirs), and not treating them as gang youth but rather trustworthy adults, were key aspects to make them feel accepted and willing to take part in the project. On the other hand, my more nerdy and academic side was valuable in conversations with other participants, especially in Group B. In both cases, I did not actively try to fit in and I was always genuinely myself,

bringing my differences to the front. For example, I asked them a lot of questions about their local areas and joked about needing to improve my Geordie vocabulary, something that both groups had fun contributing to. In hindsight, I think that local researchers could have gained different insights, but I tried to make the best out of my own perspective and aimed to turn my outsider position into an empowering opportunity for participants to take charge and lead me into their reality. At the same time, I believe that being a foreigner could have been an additional aspect that helped me being accepted. When I mentioned coming from Durham University, I was told by some participants that there are many 'posh' people there: this aspect, however, was not associated with me, probably because of my national and socio-economic background which I mentioned and that was made evident by my accent, lingo and clothing style. In the following section, I consider the research assemblage and methods, which have been influenced by the choices just highlighted and which has been completed after my first approaches with the communities.

4.3. Research assemblage and methods planning

In order to capture the process of collective creation of knowledge and 'conscientisation', I planned initial one-on-one interviews, aiming to get a general idea of the participants' initial opinions about physical-activity-related and socio-political topics. However, I was not simply interested in tracking their views at the beginning of the project, but I also wanted to gain understanding in order to mould subsequent workshops and plans in the next stage of the research around them. I then designed workshops based on Freirean principles of critical pedagogy, trying to create spaces that could stimulate reflections and build opportunities for democratic and collective learning. In this part, I was curious to see how suggesting certain topics as a basis for collective reflections could aid the development of 'conscientisation', and which of these would be more or less conducive to fruitful conversations. The final part of these workshops concluded with the planning of a physical activity action led by the participants: for this stage, I had no pre-conceived idea instead leaving it open to the co-designed process.

4.3.1. Interviews: gauging participants' ideas of physical activity, community and society

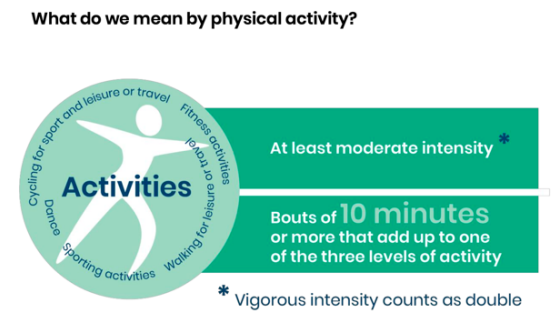
I opted for qualitative semi-structured interviews in order to maintain flexibility and allow participants to express their understanding and experiences, while also keeping a structure that would allow replicability and focus on pre-determined topics (Bryman, 2016). As a first step of the project, I thought important to gain a contextual understanding of the participants' experiences and feelings towards physical activity, as well as about their sense of community and how they perceive some aspects of society. These interviews were planned with a twofold purpose: on the one hand, to track their views at the beginning of the project, to see how later collective engagements might bring about levels of 'conscientisation'; on the other hand, I believed this stage to be important to open a dialogue and get to know the participants and their preferences, in order to centre their views and mould the following stages of the project, adapting to their contexts. I aimed to conduct the interviews with a participatory ethos, namely creating a situation where they could freely express their voice and be heard, breaking through the powerlessness they might be used to experiencing (Abma et al., 2019). This process would therefore allow me to gather information for descriptive purposes, but also to start building the terrain for mutual trust and understanding, as a basis for the following workshops and actions. These individual interviews would start with some general questions to break the ice, focusing on the place where they live and their favourite things about it, and then moving to discussing physical activity (section A), community engagement (section B) and societal aspects (section C). See *Figure 4.1.* below:

Introduction

1. Where do you live? How would you describe the **place where you live**?
2. What are your **favourite things** about the place where you live?

Section A: Physical activity

1. Tell me a little about how you usually like to spend your **free time**
2. How do you feel about **physical activity**?



a. Is there any previous experience with physical activity that makes you feel this way (in school, in a team etc.)?

3. According to these parameters, would you consider yourself **active, fairly active or inactive, or a different term**?

- **Active** (at least 150 minutes a week)
- **Fairly active** (an average of 30-149 minutes a week)
- **Inactive** (less than 30 minutes a week).

*a. What **kind of physical activity** do you normally do?*

4. How do you think people can **look after their own health**?

*a. Can people **help each other** with their health (and physical activity choices)? If so, how?*

Section B: Community engagement

1. What does the word '**community**' mean to you? *(there's no right or wrong answer)*

2. How would you **describe your community or communities**? *(if you feel like you belong to more than one)*

3. What do you think is **your role** in those communities?

4. How influential do you think you and your friends/peers can be in your communities?

a. In case it's needed, do you think you can help change things in your communities? (for example: if there is an issue in the community, do you feel like you can contribute to solving it? Think about your own example if you want)

5. Do you think that the community is important for your own **well-being**?

Section C: Society

1. What does the word '**society**' mean to you? *(big question – you can answer with whatever comes to your mind, there's no right or wrong answer)*

2. Do you think our society works well/**works for everyone**?

3. Do you think society could be any **different** from what it is now? If so, if you could change anything about our society, what would it be?

a. Do you think a world without poverty is possible? Or a world where people's well-being and happiness is put at the centre of everything rather than making money and buying things?

b. How do you think that world would look like?

4. Do you think that you can **contribute to social change** or do you think that societal issues are **too big** to be affected?

a. Could you give me one (or more) examples that come to your mind?

5. How **hopeful** are you about the future of society overall?

a. And about your own future?

Figure 4.1. Semi-structured interview schedule

These interviews took place between the 27th of June and the 4th of July 2022 with Group A, and between the 10th and 27th of October 2022 with Group B. They could have taken place in person or online, but they ended up taking place online following the participants' preference (in both groups). This allowed audio and video recordings which were later

transcribed mostly by myself, with the exception of two interviews transcribed by a professional company (one being the longest and the other containing parts in which the accent made it difficult for me to understand some details). I prepared a Power Point presentation in order to have a support and visually aid some of the questions that might otherwise sound complex. While having this structure, I would be ready to follow the participants' flow of thoughts, especially with the most talkative ones. However, I also had several prompts (in *italic* above) to support the participants that might struggle to come up with answers or to ask and show things that could facilitate the interactions (e.g., visual prompts). As previously mentioned, I believed crucial to create a welcoming environment and make the participants feel at ease by stressing that there were never right or wrong answers, that some questions were indeed complex and praising their contributions in spontaneously encouraging terms. The latter aspect is part of my preference for pedagogical principles of Positive Education Pedagogy, according to which it is not only important *what* is taught or discussed, but also *how* this happens: a positive pedagogical style is a key factor in building young people's well-being (Waters, 2021) and I argue it is particularly relevant with young adults whose previous experiences in educational and sport settings might not always have been positive. These principles were applied as a stepping stone for the collective conversations to take place in the following stage of the research, namely the workshops.

4.3.2. Workshops: merging Freirean critical pedagogy and physical activity

A foundational aspect of these workshops was to use Freirean principles of critical pedagogy with significant utopian undertones. As argued by Weeks (2011, p. 207), saying 'no' to a present situation not only opens up the possibility of a 'yes' but it is also altered by the relationship to this 'yes': 'the affective distancing from the status quo that might be enabled is different when it is paired with an affective attachment either to a potential alternative or to the potential of an alternative'. Aligned with this perspective, I created workshops that would not simply be abstractly idealistic, but that would aid a process of moving away from the current status quo (critically reflecting on the fact that things do not have to be this way) while also showing how things could be (not using blueprints but rather tools that can inform reflections and actions) (Bell and Pahl, 2018). In this way, I aimed to open a space for aspiration and desire, addressing that some of the things discussed might seem nearly

impossible at the moment, but also that this impossibility is a social construct and that collective interactions might help feeling the possibility of the impossible (Bell and Pahl, 2018; Thompson, 2011). The word 'utopia' is commonly referred to disparagingly as the 'non existing place' (from the Greek *ou*-topos), but I align with interpretations of the concept as *eu*-topos, namely a 'good place' that we should and could aspire to reach. I therefore imagined these workshops to support a process of 'conscientisation' through which participants could be empowered to think how they might live and be physically active not just in this kind of society, but also against and beyond it.

The workshops were therefore designed following Freirean principles that intend praxis as reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (Freire, 1972), which has been argued to include three progressive phases: conscientising, inspiring and liberating (Abma et al., 2019; Freire, 1990). To design them, I drew on Freire as well as the Future Workshop (Jungk and Müller, 1987; Vidal, 2006), a method originally developed for citizen groups with limited resources, which is meant to shed light on a problematic situation, generate new visions of the future, and discuss how these visions could be practically realised. The structure of the three workshops in this research project was designed to follow a similar pattern: they began with a critical analysis of the current situation, focusing on climate change, socio-economic inequalities and health/physical activity related issues (critique phase); then alternatives to the capitalist status quo were discussed, including cooperative ways to run businesses, Community Wealth Building and degrowth paradigms, before envisioning how an ideal community could look like while keeping an eye on the place for health and physical activity within it (fantasy phase); the final workshop tried to translate the issues discussed and the vision of alternatives into a practical action focused on physical activity (implementation phase). This praxis aimed to be a democratic, participatory, and collective pedagogical experience, in which it was important to create an open and egalitarian atmosphere, where directiveness can be compatible with dialogue and respect for different opinions (Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013). The workshops were designed to be flexibly applied to different necessities and ended up taking place in person with Group A (between the 7th and 14th of July 2022) and online with Group B (between the 2nd and 16th of November 2022), following their own requests. Despite this difference, the use of the online-board platform Miro proved helpful from my perspective in both contexts, acting also as a tool for data collection that aided my subsequent analysis.

4.3.2.1. Workshop 1: critique phase

For Workshop 1 I planned an initial activity to break the ice and to start familiarising with the online platform: on these boards participants could interact with prompts, watch videos, take note of their opinions, react with emojis and use many more features. Since I had already met the participants of Group A and we had introduced each other, I created an introductory frame to talk about a Sam Fenders song, the North East of England and Geordie slang words (see *Figure 4.2.*). With Group B, I opted for a simpler frame that could allow everyone to introduce themselves and say something to describe their interests (see *Figure 4.3.*), since many of them had never met earlier. In both cases, I thought important to focus on creating a relaxed atmosphere and flattening the power imbalance as much as possible through informal chats.

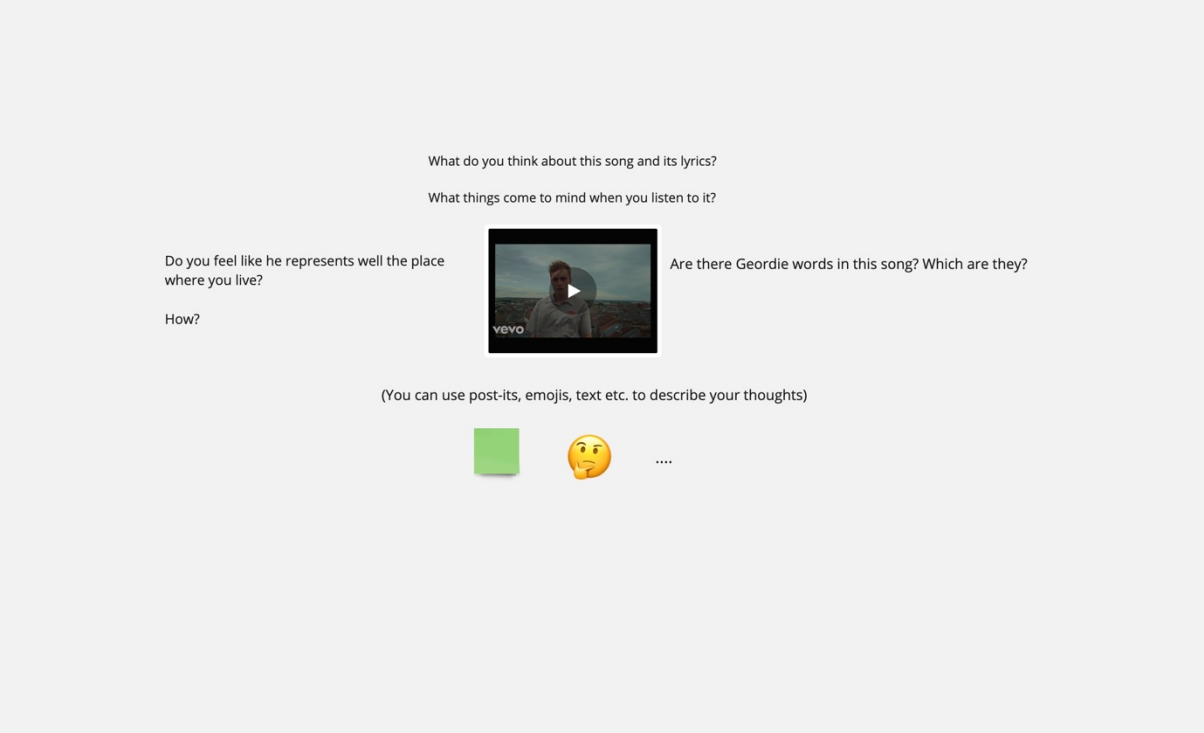


Figure 4.2. Group A's ice-breaker board

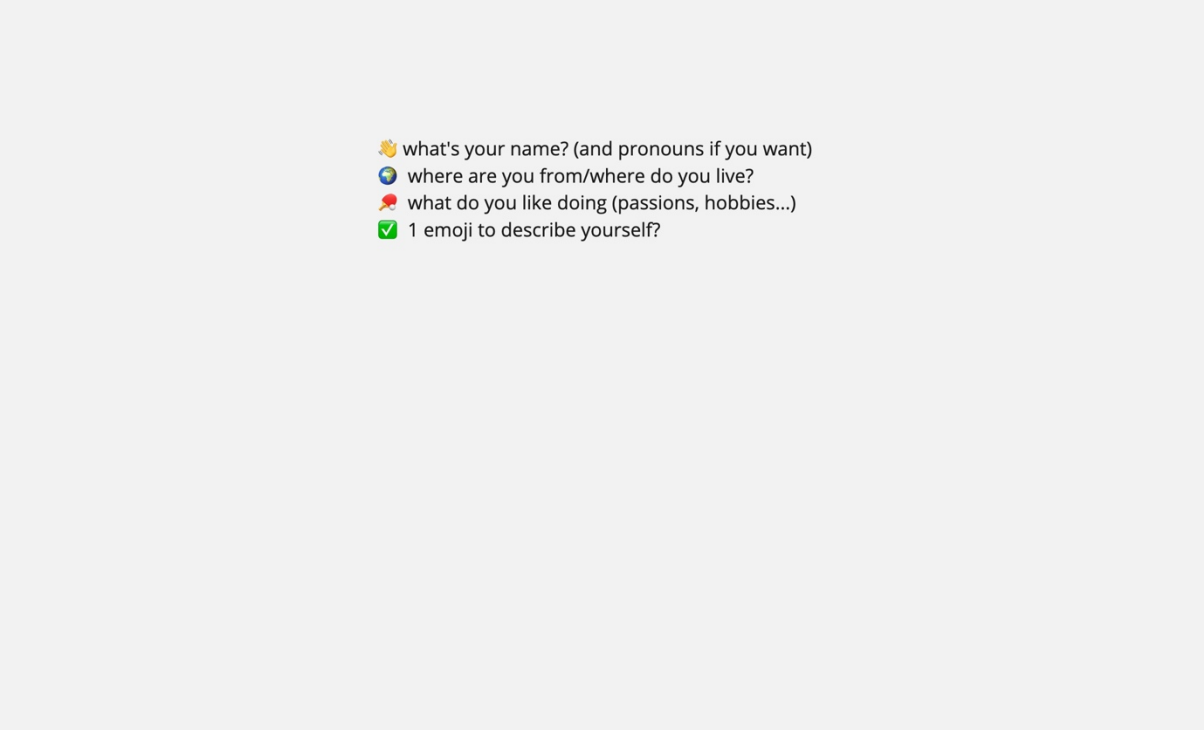


Figure 4.3. Group B's ice-breaker board

The following section was composed of two frames (word used by the Miro platform to identify one rectangular board) focused on climate change and socio-economic inequalities. In both of these, I included prompts in the form of pictures, links to articles and short videos (e.g., from YouTube or TikTok) as a starting point to aid the discussions: at the same time, I would always stress that participants should feel free to search for other sources and look further into each aspect they might find interesting or tricky. In this part of Workshop 1, I planned to divide the participants in sub-groups, allowing them to discuss just one frame in each of the smaller groups: this would allow them to talk in more relaxed ways without my constant supervision, and later have a full-group discussion in which all of them would have the chance to say something on both topics – if they wanted to – after having improved their understanding or simply having had more time to gather their thoughts. My interventions at this stage would be mostly to answer their questions and to encourage them to value their own opinions and include their reflections on the board. As previously mentioned, these boards would also serve as a complement to notes that I took throughout the workshops. In the frame about climate change (*Figure 4.4.*) I decided to include Greta Thunberg (with youth climate movements) and the film 'Don't Look Up' (just released at the time, starring Leonardo Di Caprio and Jennifer Lawrence as two astronomers trying to warn humankind of an approaching threat that might destroy planet Earth), believing that pop references might

stimulate easier and light-hearted discussion of an otherwise heavy topic. In the frame about socio-economic inequalities (*Figure 4.5.*), I opted for a satirical TikTok video that shows Jeff Bezos' wealth using grains of rice (to introduce reflections on large-scale inequalities), and a map related to wealth inequalities within the UK alongside a tweet suggesting how much money the UK could raise with a small tax on billionaires (to look at those inequalities from the perspective of the region and country that participants live in). In both frames I added questions related to what *we* could do about these issues, in order to avoid passive thinking that could easily lead to despair and to start stimulating a proactive approach.

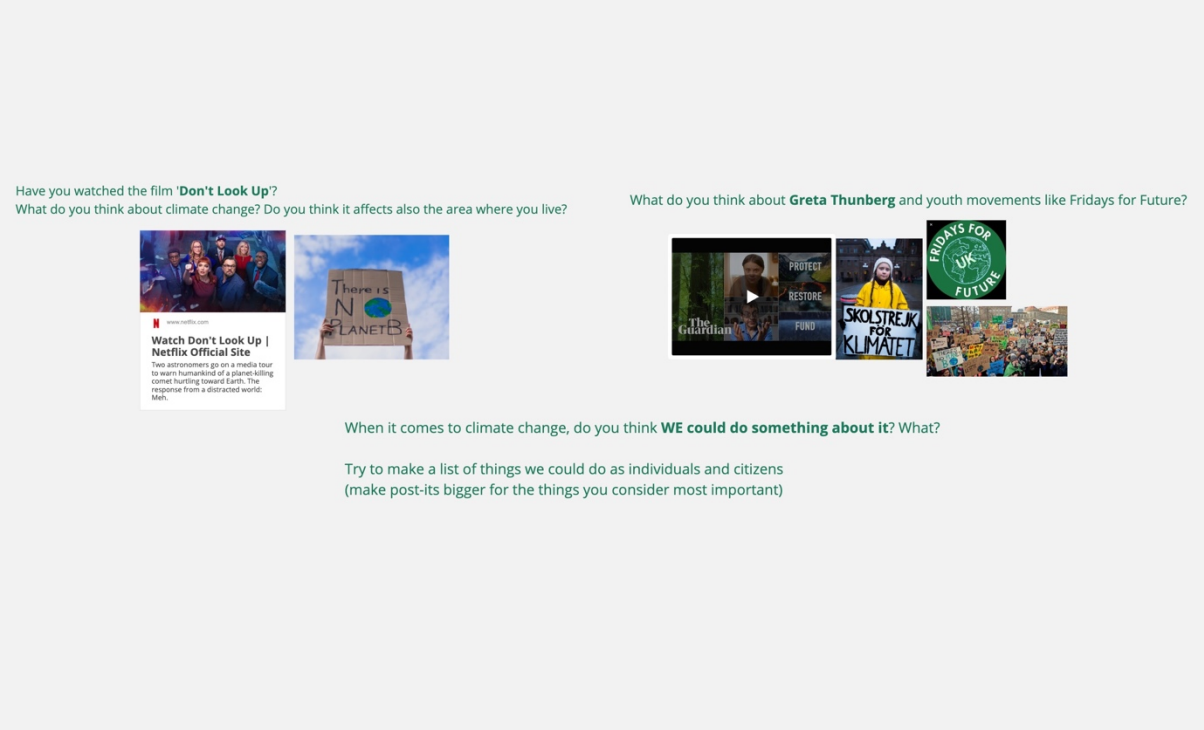


Figure 4.4. Workshop 1: Climate Change board

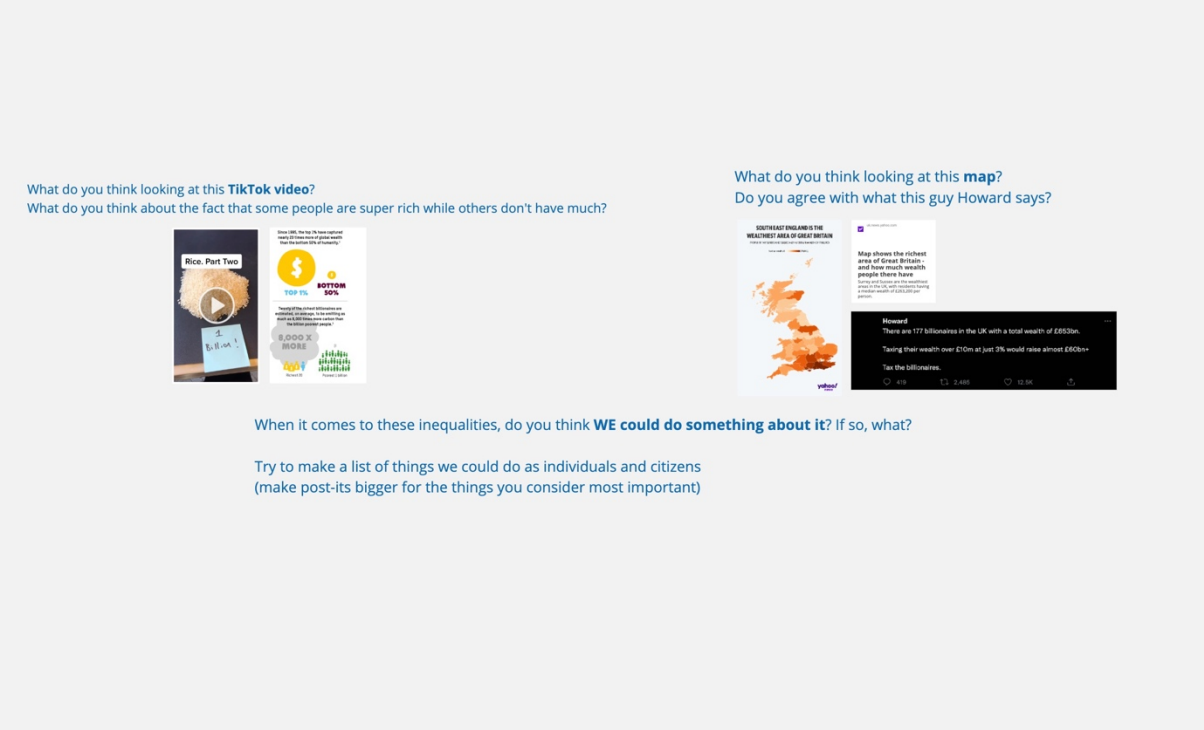


Figure 4.5. Workshop 1: Wealth Inequalities board

The following section of Worksop 1 was initially planned to include health and physical activity inequalities with a specular structure to the previous two. However, after internal discussions within the supervisory team, it ended up being slightly tilted to focus on health and physical activity related to the participants' experiences and the areas in which they live. I had planned this kind of discussions to be in a later workshop, but I followed the recommendations of the supervisory team and adapted this section, since it was feared that if participants dropped out we might be left with little interesting data. Therefore, this frame's focus turned towards aspects that could help conduct a healthier lifestyle and which of those are available (or not) in the area where participants live (*Figure 4.6.*). Then we would talk about the sports and physical activities that are popular in their areas, which of them are easily accessible (or not) as well aspects that could help young people to be more active and healthier.

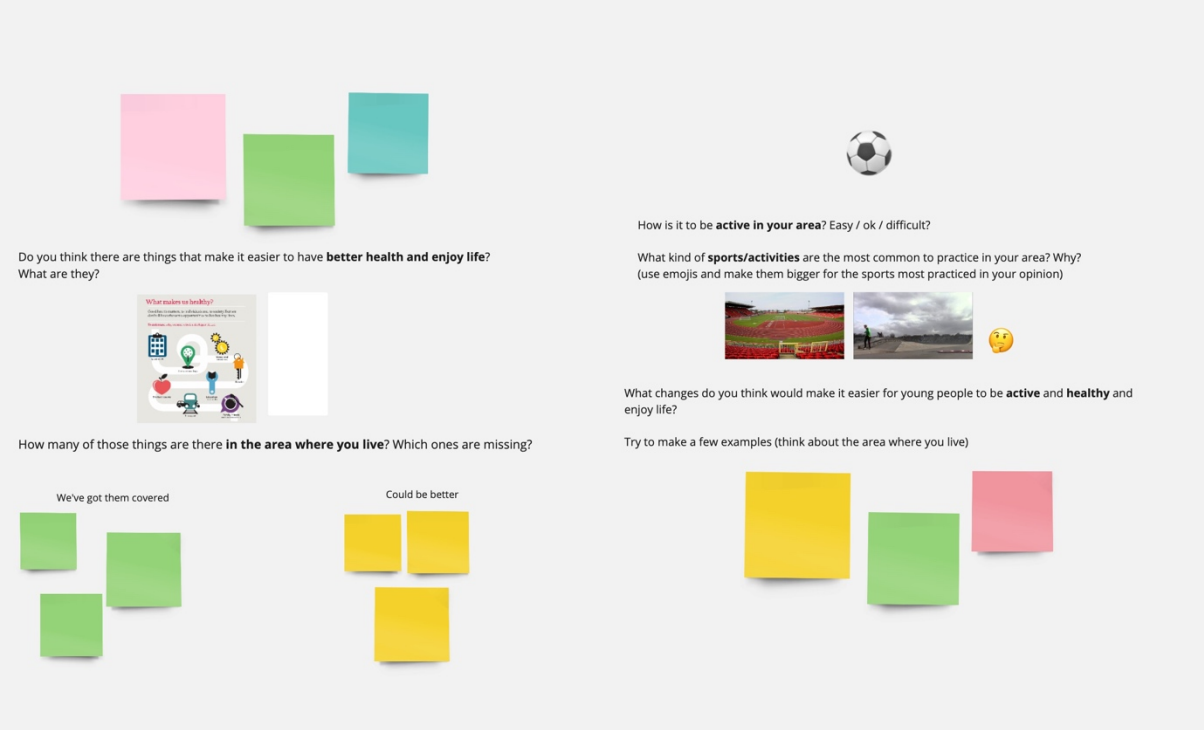


Figure 4.6. Workshop 1: Health and Physical Activity board

To conclude, I included a frame in which they could express their feelings about Workshop 1 (anonymously, if preferred) in words or emojis: this part was just planned as a cool-down moment to make sure that they would not be too distressed by the issues discussed, and I would reiterate that they could reach me (or my supervisor) for any specific request of support. I also imagined this section to leave the group on a positive and lighter note, while summarising the steps ahead and the more hopeful tone of Workshop 2.

4.3.2.2. Workshop 2: fantasy phase

For Workshop 2, I planned a first half of the meeting split in two core topics with participants discussing in sub-groups, before moving to a full-group discussion on both of them. I focused the first frame on alternative and co-operative businesses (*Figure 4.7.*), using the examples of Ecosia (a search engine that uses the entirety of their profits to plant trees), Fairbnb (a sustainable rental platform that gives back half of its revenues to support local community projects of the customers' choice) and La Pájara (a group of bicycle couriers that deliver takeaway food and receive a fixed salary, health benefits and parental leave), to stimulate reflections on how businesses could be run in fair and sustainable ways. In the second frame (*Figure 4.8.*) I included prompts about Community Wealth Building and local currencies, to

reflect on how the economy could be moulded on a community level to serve people's good. In both frames I added questions related to whether and how these concepts could be applied to their local communities as well as to sport and physical activity: in this way, I aimed to keep the conversation always grounded in the practical context and observe how applicable participants might perceive these ideas to be.

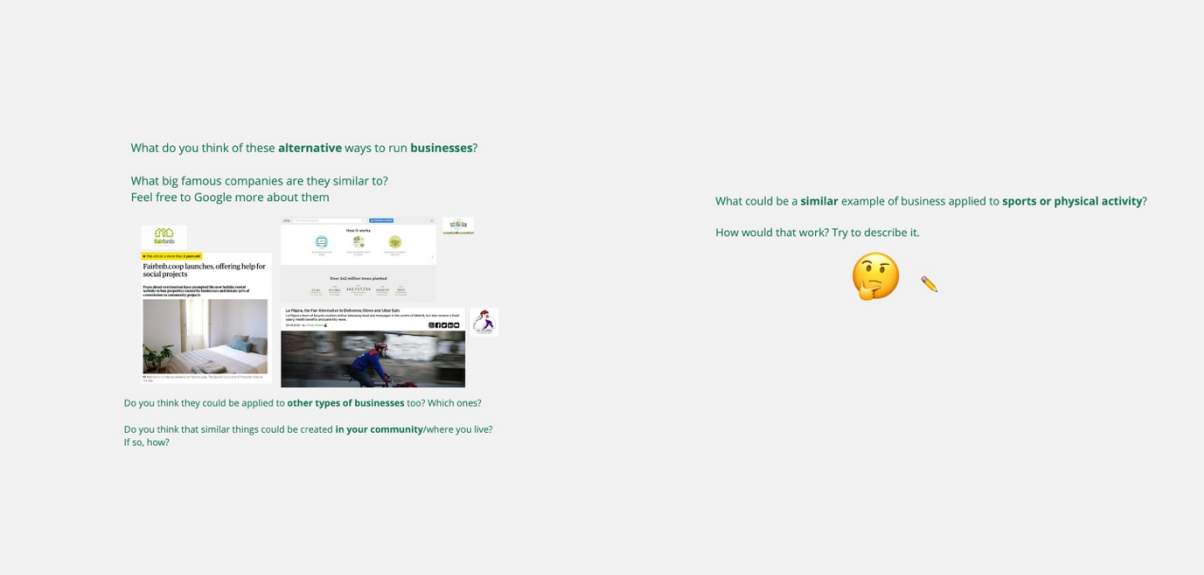


Figure 4.7. Workshop 2: Alternative Businesses board

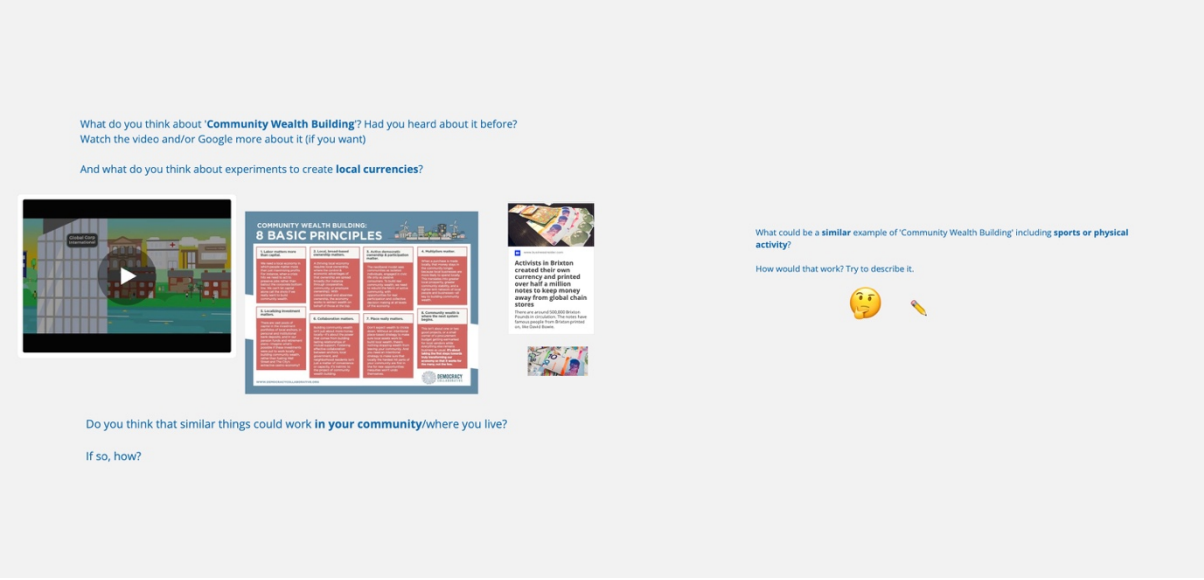


Figure 4.8. Workshop 2: Community Wealth Building board

After the first round of interviews, I thought about adding an extra frame to be used only if the collective reflections might indicate it suitable. I had noticed the struggle to grapple with one of my interview prompts, regarding the possibility of a world without poverty and one

where people's well-being and happiness would be centred in our economies. Therefore, I thought it might be relevant to introduce the concept of degrowth (*Figure 4.9.*), since this is one of the approaches that goes beyond a profit and GDP driven society, in order to see if they were familiar with these ideas and what they thought about them. To tailor this section around the interests of one of the groups, I had added an extra question specifically for Group A: 'We talked about how stress at work is bad, do you think this [degrowth] idea of economy could make things less stressful and more enjoyable?'. With this question, I aimed to address a topic that several people in the group had mentioned, and also see if it would facilitate the connection between theoretical concepts and their lived experiences. In hindsight, I believe that this frame was a good completion for this section, adding a systemic layer to the individual and community ones.

Figure 4.9. Workshop 2: Degrowth board

For the final section of Workshop 2 I planned an open frame (*Figure 4.10.*) asking how their ideal community (or society more broadly) could look like. Without setting any boundaries, I would ask them to dream big and imagine a world were nothing was impossible, while possibly finding a place for physical activity in it. As I imagined this section, they could potentially include pictures, drawings, videos, Instagram posts as well as words, but I would leave them completely free to interact in whichever way they preferred, in the belief that young adults thrive when they are left with a good degree of freedom.

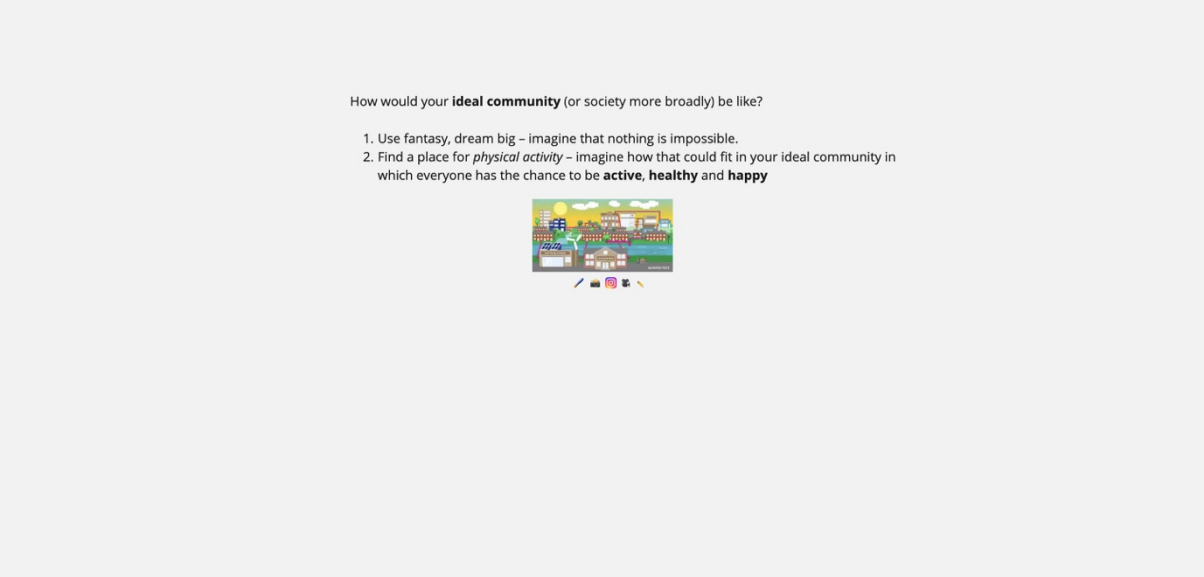


Figure 4.10. Workshop 2: Ideal Community board

To conclude, I included the same final frame as in Workshop 1, namely one in which they could express their feelings about Workshop 2 in words or emojis.

4.3.2.3. Workshop 3: implementation phase

Workshop 3 was slightly different from the two previous ones. Originally, I had planned it to begin with a section on health and physical activity closer to the frame ultimately used in Workshop 1. However, that change made me sense a lack of discussion of health and physical inequalities as well as their causes, especially in one group in which participants appeared to find no issue regarding physical inactivity levels. Therefore, I added here a frame (*Figure 4.11.*) on physical activity (its benefits, how participants define it and discussion of official definitions and recommendations) and inequalities (with focus on regional physical activity inequalities and the intersection with gender and socio-economic status, as two examples). With Group A, these topics were divided into two frames, but I realised that they might be easily merged into just one and I adapted this for Group B.

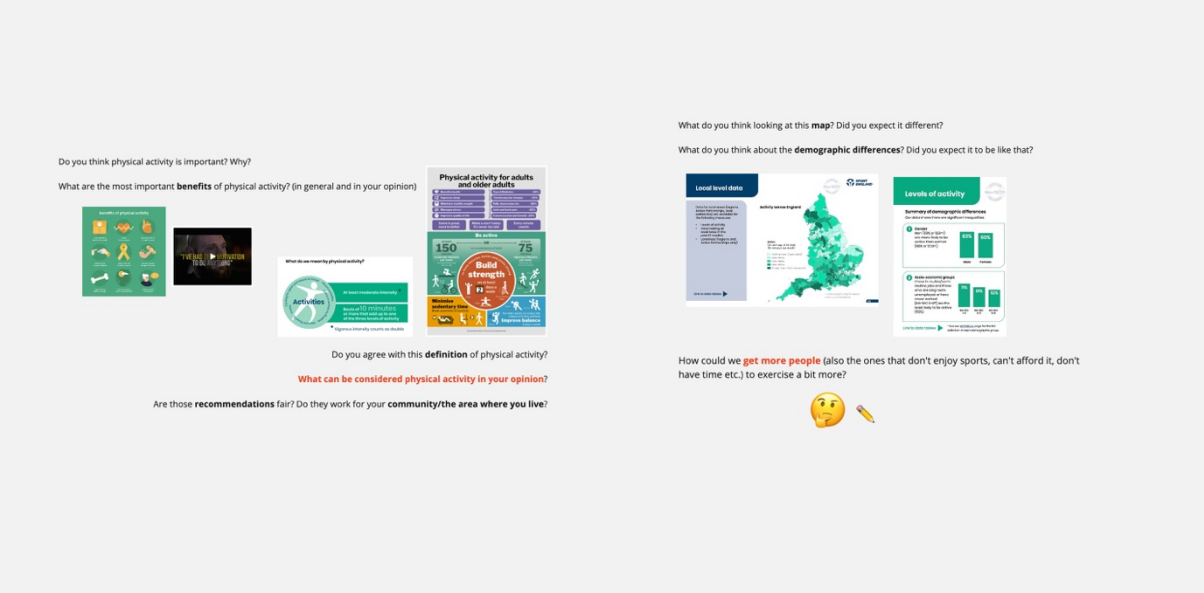


Figure 4.11. Workshop 3, group B: Physical Activity and Inequalities board

This section was introducing a discussion that would then become the focus of the final part of these three workshops, namely the potential co-design of a physical activity action. I planned to ask participants for ideas about things we (ourselves) could do to help our communities get more active. I therefore created a frame (*Figure 4.12.*) that could facilitate their organisational thinking and left them free to discuss in small groups, before reporting ideas to the full-group discussion. I believed that this part might take more than just one meeting, but I would allow participants to decide whether they could be interested to keep the conversation going and meet again to finalise this co-design or not. Thus, I would not impose further engagement that they might not be able or want to commit to.

Figure 4.12. Workshop 3: Co-designing a physical activity action board

4.3.3. Actions: similarities and differences with participatory action research (PAR) and co-production

While I am aligned with the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and co-production, this project did not fully apply either approach in their conventional forms. In this research, I tried to infuse values of PAR and co-production all along, but I applied the 'co-' aspect mostly to the final co-design of a physical activity action. While co-production can be defined and interpreted in different ways, this research project cannot be said to have been entirely co-produced, since it did not begin with collectively establishing research priorities and shaping research design (Brandsen and Honingh, 2018; Smith et al., 2023). However, I find value in what Smith et al. (2023) defined 'Equitable and Experientially-informed' co-production, namely one that centres people and communities' lived experiences, and tries to address inhibitory structures and hierarchies of power that have marginalised certain people and their needs. Similarly, PAR has been defined as an approach that prioritises the value of experiential knowledge to tackle issues caused by unequal and harmful social systems, and to envision and implement alternatives (Cornish et al., 2023). While being aligned with these approaches and their connection with grassroots activism and egalitarian values (Smith et al., 2023), I adopted a process that gradually built towards participation, using Freirean critical pedagogy as a foundation.

It has been argued that co-produced research redresses democratic deficits by providing those who are otherwise marginalised or excluded to have a say in research processes and contribute to making them – and society – fairer (Martin et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2023). However, using a Freirean lens (1973), I believe important to acknowledge that the marginalised and excluded often develop 'democratic inexperience' as a consequence of the internalisation of oppressive structures. Especially within the pervasive capitalist 'cultural hegemony' (Gramsci, 1971; Fisher, 2009), people's consciousness has been influenced to accept and perpetuate current social phenomena (Anderson, 1989). Therefore, I suggest that a critical approach should not risk enthroning people's current views and reflecting the worldview of the dominant ideology. Even though the ethos of this project is one that values the collective and marginalised people's perspectives, I structured it in order to first support a process of 'conscientisation' that could lead to developing alternative meaning structures that

can support social transformation and emancipation (Freire, 1972; Sparkes, 2012), laying the foundations for the final part in which participants would be in charge as much as possible. The co-design of the physical activity action would then draw significantly on participatory approaches and, as such, on collective, dialogical human engagement where not every aspect can and should be planned in advance, 'leav[ing] spaces for recognizing and embracing the unexpected, for finding new ways of thinking and acting together' (Abma et al., 2019, p. 153). Thus, I did not plan any aspect of the potential physical action, and decided to allow participants to take the lead while I would support them throughout the process.

PAR has been increasingly used in sport and physical activity research to democratise knowledge production, promote inclusion and support social change (e.g., Rich, Smith and Giles, 2024; Spaaij et al., 2018). However, many PAR-informed projects in this field have focused primarily on improving access, inclusion or programme design within existing institutional or policy frameworks, often struggling to fully engage with the broader socio-economic systems that shape those inequalities (Spaaij et al., 2018; Pettican et al., 2023). For example, Spaaij et al. (2018) reflected on the complexities and missed opportunities of participatory research in SFD, noting that while such approaches can enhance relevance and involvement, they often remain embedded in dominant institutional logics and may struggle to foster systemic critique. Similarly, Pettican et al. (2023) highlight the tensions between co-production and structural transformation, observing that while co-produced research can foster inclusion and empowerment, it frequently operates within the very systems it seeks to reform and can end up replicating existing dynamics of marginalisation.

In contrast, my project sought to build on PAR principles and extend them by embedding them within a dialectical materialist and post-capitalist framework, using Freirean critical pedagogy to address the structural causes of oppression and visualise alternatives. While sharing PAR's commitment to participation and action, the Co-PA approach diverges by explicitly foregrounding structural critique and the collective imagination of alternatives to the capitalist status quo. Rather than focusing on co-producing an intervention, the project aims to support a process of critical reflection and grassroots experimentation, in which participants are encouraged to interrogate the socio-economic conditions shaping their lives and to co-design actions that are both materially feasible and politically meaningful. This is not a linear process, but a dialectical one: participants move between critique, imagination and action, negotiating tensions between what is desirable and what is possible. As Chapter 7

will highlight, the actions that were created by the participants of this project – such as walking groups – were small in scale but rich in meaning, shaped by both structural constraints and newly formed critical perspectives. In this sense, the Co-PA approach offers a layered methodological contribution: it draws on PAR's participatory ethos, but deepens it through a Freirean pedagogy that centres systemic critique and post-capitalist alternatives. It also responds to calls for more radical, transformative methodologies that do not merely adapt to existing systems but actively seek to reimagine them (Cornish et al., 2023).

4.4. Methods of analysis

Regarding the analysis, I opted for a strategy to best learn from the participants' views while allowing a dialectical interaction with those views and, at the same time, making space for and reflecting critically on my own subjectivity. I tended towards an approach loosely based on principles of reflexive thematic analysis, interpreted as a method that permits to describe data while also involving interpretation (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). Importantly, considering assumptions and positionings as a fundamental part of qualitative research, I thought important to have space for reflecting on my own assumptions as a researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2019) and questioning them critically where necessary. Considering the theoretical foundation of this thesis, I also acknowledge that such philosophical assumptions have inevitably informed the process of analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Drawing insight from forms of reflexive thematic analysis, I approached the analysis considering the importance of trying to balance this project's *materialist* ontology that values social reality and participants' views in and of themselves, and the *dialectical* interaction between participants, between them and myself, as well as between them and the current social reality and potential alternatives that we critically engaged with. In this way, I aimed to value participants' meanings (even when – I argue – they could be influenced by hegemonic culture) while also going beyond, interpreting dialectically and seeking to understand how to better inform practices aiming for social change.

As Braun and Clarke (2012, p. 67) state, a mix of descriptive and conceptual/interpretative analysis 'moves beyond the data, it does not just report words – it interprets them and organises them within a larger overarching conceptual framework, [this] analysis uses data to make a point'. I applied this principle particularly to the analysis of interviews, from which I

extrapolated key themes related to physical activity as well as socio-political aspects, focusing especially on the most relevant subjects for the topic of this thesis. As it might become clear in following chapters, I found it relevant to also analyse 'latent meanings', namely the assumptions and ideas that lie behind what is explicitly stated (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p. 58). With regards to this thesis' view of 'capitalist realism' and 'cultural hegemony' in particular, I argue that it is crucial to allow space for the critical researcher to read between the lines, interpret silences and highlight where participants' assumptions might stem from. Therefore, I analysed interviews and workshops aiming to report the participants' present views while also delving into how current knowledge might be engaged with and strengthened through the pedagogical praxis aiming for conscientisation.

More specifically, all the interviews were audio and video recorded and later transcribed verbatim, and their analysis involved a non-linear mix of multiple readings, research of similarities and differences and simultaneous discussions between me and my supervisors. I started analysing the interviews immediately as they happened: I took notes at the end of each of them to remember key aspects that I found interesting, then transcribed them and highlighted key quotes. This opening analysis allowed me to familiarise with the transcripts and have a broad contextual understanding before engaging in a more specific organisation of the data in thematic categories (Roderick and Hockin-Boyers, 2024). When I finished each round of interviews, for Group A first and Group B then, I started assembling significant quotes into categories and potential themes. I did this using principles of an inductive thematic approach, namely identifying patterns across the data without using a predetermined coding framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Rigby, 2022). I then proceeded to read through the categorised quotes to have a better idea of which of these could represent a relevant theme for the topic of this thesis, and such themes were discussed within the supervisory team, after which I reviewed them for further refinement. Among these, I later chose the themes that I felt were more prominent (see Chapter 5), especially the ones on which most participants had expressed opinions but also others that a minority might have talked about but that brought about explicit or latent significant meanings. When it came to the workshops, I also took notes while they happened, while relying on the notes that participants themselves took on the online platform Miro. Some of the comments were made orally, and I asked participants to summarise them or write them down entirely. Chapter 6 discusses this part of the project, and even if I applied a similar reflexive procedure of analysis, after discussions with my supervisors we decided to report step by step how the workshops happened and what was

said and written: we did this believing that it would better aid the reader in following the collective creation of knowledge, how the participants interacted and how opinions were formed in dialectical and non-linear ways. At the same time, the analysis of the workshops presents some of my own interpretations alongside the description of those conversations, as well as critical reflections of my own positionality and influence on them. Finally, the physical activity actions highlighted in Chapter 7, are also observed and described step by step: using Braun and Clarke's (2012) words, also in this instance I analysed the data and later used it to make a point.

4.5. Ethical considerations

This project received Durham University Ethics Committee approval. Particularly as the research involved young adults aged 16 to 25, who could be regarded as vulnerable, ethical procedures were put in place to ensure that their well-being and anonymity were protected. I made sure to follow recommended procedures regarding data security and management, confidentiality, processes of consent, and seeking a Disclosure and Barring Service check. Participants were given an information sheet (see Appendix 1) that provided an overview of the project, specified what steps it would consist of, included information regarding the reimbursement, and regarding the voluntary and confidential nature of the study, emphasising that they could withdraw at any time. They were also required to sign an adult consent form to confirm their willingness to take part (see Appendix 2) and were asked to answer some demographic questions (see Appendix 3). Before beginning the project, I met some of them in person and others in introductory online meetings. During these meetings I explained the project, stressed the fact that their participation would be voluntary, and allowed them to ask any questions before signing the consent form. In order to protect the anonymity of the participants that took part in this study, their names and locations have been either replaced with pseudonyms or omitted. I believe that some details about the places mentioned throughout this thesis might have given additional context to the reader, but the participants' anonymity was prioritised as recommended by the ethics procedure.

Furthermore, I tried to apply ethical principles throughout the whole process, considering the importance of translating ethical principles in practice when dealing with issues arising while doing research, as well as prioritising an 'ethics of care', namely focusing on the participants'

well-being, building trust, making them feel valued and important (Gilligan, 1982; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). This approach was particularly relevant when addressing potentially sensitive topics related to inequality, mental health struggles and climate change, among others. I was careful to pose questions and direct the conversations to ensure that everyone felt at ease with the topics, and no one was ever forced to speak about something that they might feel uncomfortable with. However, there were still moments in which I had to deal with the circumstances and adapt to the context while trying to apply an ethical stance, as in one example that is mentioned in Chapter 7.

Another aspect I was ethically conscious of was the one regarding my position as researcher within a context of relative socio-economic disadvantage. 'Research can be quite an extractive industry and serve to reproduce social and geographical inequalities' (Novelli et al., 2024, p. 5) and I tried to pay careful attention to this issue, even if it is difficult to resolve. The final part of this research project, the co-design of physical activities, aimed also to address this aspect, trying to create something that might benefit some people in these communities and that the participants would hopefully feel able to replicate on their own. At the same time, the interactions with the young adults in this project made me reflect on the importance of a certain degree of directiveness and of discussing physical activity in collective reflections: as I talk about in following chapters, some of the participants might have happily ignored physical activity altogether had we not reflected collectively on its value and were it not the focus of this research. Therefore, I believe it important to navigate the process and be able to balance the perspectives of participants with the critical inputs brought about by researcher(s), practitioners, community workers and other professional figures that might engage in the process.

Chapter 5. Interviews findings: understanding participants' initial views of physical activity, community and society

This chapter focuses on the initial individual interviews, addressing the participants' understanding and lived experiences of physical activity as well as some broader aspects of their communities and society prior to the collective engagement. While the interviews do not address the research questions directly, they provide essential groundwork for understanding the participants' starting points. These insights helped to shape the workshops and actions explored in subsequent chapters. I start this chapter by analysing the physical activity preferences of these young adults, with focus on how walking was mentioned as a predominant activity despite it not always being considered as 'counting' (5.1.1), and how work and other material circumstances play a significant role in their approach to physical activity (5.1.2.). Then I focus on the struggles that the participants encountered within physical education (PE) and other mainstream physical activity settings (5.1.3.), as well as their preference for being active together with other people, although preferably on their own terms (5.1.4.). The second section is dedicated to the socio-political topics discussed in the interviews, and I start by looking at how 'capitalist realist' thinking seemed to affect the participants' ability to visualise alternatives to the status quo of inequalities (5.2.1.), and later delve into their political (dis)empowerment and hope(lessness) (5.2.2.). I conclude by analysing how the views expressed by the participants can relate to the post-capitalist and collective ethos of Co-PA, as well as how despite a generally strong awareness of social determinants of health and structural issues, the majority of participants seemed to individualise responsibilities (5.3.): this – I argue – paves the way for the critical pedagogical approach of the workshops that are covered in the following chapter.

5.1. Participants' relationship with physical activity at the beginning of the project

In the first part of the interviews, I asked participants how they felt about physical activity and how they would define themselves in terms of activity levels, based on Sport England's parameters. In total, among the two groups, six defined themselves as active (moving or exercising more than 150 minutes per week), two between active and fairly active, four as fairly active (between 30 and 149 minutes per week) and three as inactive (less than 30

minutes). When specifically asked about what kinds of physical activities they normally do, some participants said none and others more than one, and overall the activities mentioned were: walking (mentioned by 7 participants), football (4), gym and home workouts (3), biking (2), dancing (2), swimming (1), running (1), karate (1), yoga (1) and rugby (1).

5.1.1. 'I walk to a lot of places, if that counts': physical activity between preference and necessity

Walking was not only the most common answer to the question about which physical activities they practice, it was also an activity that the vast majority of them mentioned at some point during the interviews, even if unsure whether it would count as physical activity. In fact, some participants hesitated in including walking within the hours of weekly physical activity: Brittany said *'I walk to a lot of places, if that counts'* and Bella *'I don't know if it includes walking as well, […] because we do quite a lot of walking'*. Overall, walking was mentioned in relation to active transport, the connection with the place where they live, and mental health benefits. In terms of active transport, walking was raised as a means to go to work, school, university as well as to the shops or to meet people. For Abigail, walking as transport was the only exception to her otherwise completely inactive lifestyle, and Albert said that he does not have much time to be active outside working hours, unless he could actually count *'walking towards like… to meet someone or go to the shops'*. Having the chance to use walking as active transport was also mentioned as a significant lifestyle improvement: Brittany was used to travelling far to get to work but, since she relocated, she enjoys the fact that it takes her *'the same amount of time to walk to work as it would to get a car or bus'* and that she *'can just walk everywhere'*.

Several participants talked about walking even before the interviews started focusing on physical activity. When asked about the place where they live, having natural areas nearby or areas where walking is enjoyable was considered a desirable asset, confirming the importance of the surrounding environment (Guell et al., 2012; Rigby, Dodd-Reynolds and Oliver, 2020). Bernard said: *'My favourite thing about where I live, it's probably the walks you can go on'*; Brandon, on a similar tone, said: *'So, in terms of being able to walk and go on roams and like […] it's literally on my doorstep. So, I think that's my favourite part'*; and Brooke: '*I think that obviously I've got the luxury of living next to a beach and sort of a dene, […] and it's*

quite picturesque. It's not like walking through the streets'. Interestingly, both Brandon and Brooke have spoken emphatically about walking during their interviews but they did not include it when asked about which physical activities they normally do, a further example of how walking's currency as physical activity was not always recognised.

Of note, mental health came up often in relation to walking, as in Anthony's interview: *'In the years [when] I haven't done excellent, every day we would just go for walks and venture the countryside. […] Yeah, [physical activity] it's good for your mental health. It's really good, keeps your mind off stuff*'. This was subsequently a feature in the workshops' discussions in which some participants (especially in Group A, Anthony's group) openly spoke about their struggles with 'demons' and depressive states. Walking was also cited as a coping mechanism to deal with the stress caused by work and school, like in Brianna's example: *'A big one, which is what I do now is, if you overwork then give yourself some free time to chill. That can help your... like, mind and that, so you don't get overstressed and burn out. Sometimes I could like go for walks, it just clears your mind'*. Overall, walking appeared strongly as a recurring theme in the interviews, and it was always mentioned in very positive terms, despite participants not always connecting it directly with the physical activity sphere.

This focus on walking is perhaps unsurprising considering that the latest Sport England's (2018) spotlight on patterns of physical activity and socio-economic status (SES) highlighted how walking is the most popular activity among those with lower SES, with 33% of them walking for leisure and 30% for travel. Although other physical activities are practiced by people in low-SES groups, participation decreases significantly as we move from higher to lower socio-economic groups, with only active travel defying this trend (Sport England, 2018). Furthermore, if people walk or cycle for travel, they may not choose to do other activities as part of their daily routine (Sport England, 2018), as the example of Bella confirms: *'I [usually] do running quite regularly and a bit less regularly now that I'm doing so much walking to and from university'*. Active travel is therefore key for many people in lower socio-economic groups in the UK, as 46% who walk for travel only do this activity and can only count on it to be classed as active (Sport England, 2018). However, it is important to stress two aspects. First, the majority of literature on walking groups and related programmes confirms how these are more likely to be joined by socio-economically advantaged people (Pollard, Guell and Morris, 2020; Rigby, Dodd-Reynolds and Oliver, 2020): the participants of this thesis, on the other hand, spoke mostly about independent and necessity related ways

of walking. Second, relying on walking may not always be a choice for individuals within these groups, since other factors may prevent access to other forms of transport or there could be barriers standing in the way of doing other physical activities (Sport England, 2018). In fact, connected to this latest point, the young adults that took part in this project spoke repeatedly about the material circumstances that they perceive as barriers to their own sport and physical activity habits, which I consider next.

5.1.2. 'Would like… work count?': peripheral young adults and disempowering material circumstances

When asked about physical activity, participants discussed work both in terms of physical labour (and whether it should count as physical activity) and free time (mostly regarding the lack of time to dedicate to physical activities outside of work). For example, Albert, employed in the warehouse of a well-known supermarket chain, asked if physical labour could count as physical activity: *'Would like... work count? For like… towards minutes? Cause I have to walk around loads and like carry stuff [...] at work. So, I'd say I'm active'*. Also Beatriz asked whether she could include her cleaning job in the count: *'If I count all the activities that I do every day at work, I would say quite active. I work in cleaning, we clean like houses, […] student accommodations, restaurants, offices, so I'm always moving around'*. Beatriz spoke about how she's always been *'a very sporty person'* but now struggles to balance physical activity within her daily life. She had even started studying Sport and Exercise Sciences at university, before dropping out mainly due to difficulties during the lockdowns and not being able to afford living in student accommodations. Today, part of her job is cleaning similar student accommodations, and she tries to study alongside that: *'Normally I work since like… seven in the morning till two or three in the afternoon, and then I get home chill for a bit, and then study for a couple of hours. Now, if I have time, I normally exercise a little bit but, not too much. But yeah, sometimes how to balance everything is hard, and you end up a little bit tired'*. Several participants highlighted difficulties in balancing their commitments, and physical activity emerged as being often one of the first aspects to be left out. Brandon had a similar experience to Beatriz's, growing up as a sport enthusiast: *'Massively passionate about it! I did my degree in sports science. I used to love it, and absolutely massively passionate about it. […] It's like there's nothing better for you than physical activity'*. Yet, he was completely inactive at the time of the interview. Just a few

days earlier, he had lost his job as a builder, and this excerpt from his interview is an interesting summary of what can happen to leisure and physical activity in the daily life of a working young adult:

> *'I just lost my job, which was only just recently kind of my job. My day-to-day life would be kind of working from about seven o'clock till about four o'clock at night. So all I did was like, say, full on work, full on hard labour, a very physical job. So by the end of the day, usually pretty tired, a little bit exhausted and stuff like that. So I won't lie, a large portion of my life it's just to come back home, maybe it's cook a little bit of food and just settle myself and just watch TV until bedtime, and then that's it. You just fall asleep, and you just repeat the pattern all over again.*
> *[…]*
> *I'd say where it's a massive downfall is in terms of physical activity. I'm not really physically active at the moment. I used to be ages ago, when I was a youngster before university and stuff like that. But now, in terms of physical activity, I won't lie, I don't really do anything to be honest. I really don't. […] At the moment, [I'm] inactive. Definitely. When I had that job yeah... then I would definitely say... probably active yeah, from when I had my job yeah, active'.*

From a materialist point of view, these testimonies were a key stepping stone for this project. I had begun the interactions being open to their understanding of and preferences in physical activity, but I soon realised that the dominance of material circumstances was to take an even more central role in the project than I had first envisioned. My view of physical activity, captured in chapters 1, 2 and 3, is one that ideally goes beyond just movement, with its social and pleasurable aspects almost as crucial. But this view, from a dialectical point of view, must interact with the socio-economic background and consequent life constraints of these young adults. In fact, on top of the influence of work and lack of free time, participants mentioned other aspects related to material circumstances that affect their relationship with physical activity, including facilities in the local area, weather, and costs.

While many participants mentioned the place where they live as positively having green spaces or the beach to go for walks, other characteristics emerged in a rather negative light. With regards to physical activity, many of them mentioned the importance of facilities (Brandon: *'Obviously a big factor of them all is like… kind of like facilities. […] It'll be all*

good if you say to your mates: "Oh, let's go and play football", but like… where are you going to play?') and having them nearby (Bernard: *'you're more likely to stay more where you are, and try and like, find something you might enjoy in that area'*; Brooke: *'I think community spaces too, because obviously I had to travel to go to gymnastics. […] But not everyone has the facilities to travel every night, every other night'*). Especially the participants of Group A spoke about the quality of certain facilities in their local area, such as Anthony:

> *'I used to go to the skate park in [omitted] and I was like obviously getting better and better. And there was like more... loads of chavs coming to the skate park […] burning down [...], there was like plastic and holes everywhere. But if you just look after the environment and the community, and I mean there won't be glass, like other people can have better childhoods, to become what they want to become. […] There's loads of skate parks everywhere, that are just getting destroyed. They need to like refurbish them, just get them better. […] They burned that all up. I think they just need to fix places and make them better for younger people'*.

I found these words particularly potent, especially because Anthony was 17 at the time and had already given up on using those spaces and was just focused on what could be done better for future generations. As highlighted by, for example, Piggin (2020) and Collins, Kay and Collins (2014), physical activity experiences can be shaped by settings – be they urban or rural, natural or cultural, wild or managed, poor or wealthy etc. – that produce not only opportunities, but also barriers to the types of physical activities that are possible. The lack of facilities and public spaces, as well as run-down skate parks, mentioned by the participants, present typical characteristics connected not only to space but also to social class. This is why, in the following stages of the project, I intended to use critical pedagogical tools to strengthen the participants' awareness of the connections between socio-economic aspects and physical activity, not only in terms of critique but also to articulate credible solutions.

The weather was also repeatedly raised especially in relation to the lack of facilities to be used during the winter months when outdoor activities are less inviting. For example, Benjamin summarised this by saying that the weather in the North can be rather miserable and *'exercise is quite good to do outside, but the outside is quite unpredictable, I suppose in that situation the community spaces is something that I would think affects [physical*

activity]'. The weather was highlighted as important in their context in which most of the activities they do take place outdoors, such as walking and football, two of the most common activities among these participants and also more generally in lower socio-economic groups (Sport England, 2018). Or, rather, they *have to* take place outdoors, since the cost of gyms and other sport facilities is a considerable barrier they encounter. Nearly all participants mentioned money and costs in relation to physical activity opportunities. Bella, for example, spoke about the free taster sessions she was able to attend when she started university: *'I've tried, […] free taster sessions, doing things like martial arts, which I've quite enjoyed […], which has been really fun. And kickboxing as well, but it's quite expensive so I haven't been able to sort of keep that up at all. I'd say the cost is definitely quite a big thing'.* She recognised that running and walking can be done for free, but also that many other fun activities requiring equipment or coaching are not accessible to who cannot afford them. Entrance costs were mentioned by many, including Brittany who spoke specifically about swimming as an activity that she loves but that she can only practice in summer in open waters: *'I think that like swimming for example, if I want to swim every day of the month, I would have to pay like 30 pounds. If I just want to swim once a week it would be 5,* 5 pounds to swim *[emphasis]. It's a lot of money. So I think that's one of the reasons why maybe I don't swim'*. Like her, Andrew and then Anthony mentioned in detail the costs of gym memberships, showing how crucial this aspect is for them: *'It's just... I think it's the money. If you're over 18 and you go to the gym down the road, [name of the gym omitted], it's like 65 pounds. Just for a month. That's with swimming. But if it's just the gym, 45 pounds. Under 18 it's 25 pounds a month so I'm going to start going to another gym, because that's only 20... or 19'*. Their attention to these costs indicates that these young adults are highly interested in certain sports and physical activities, but those prove inaccessible for them. In particular, many of them start facing adult memberships costs while not having the financial capabilities to be able to afford them, at the same time as going through major life transitions that make their previous habits difficult to be sustained.

Andrew indicated greater difficulty in organising sport activities with his group of friends compared to when he was younger: *'It's just... as well as trying to get everyone there at the same time [to play football]. So everyone's got jobs and that now and... it's a lot harder than it used to be. So yeah, that's kind of dropped off a bit'*. Also Beatriz mentioned aspects related to their age group, saying that older teenagers may start preferring other activities to sports: *'I think, uh, when people are young, when they're like young kids, everyone is very*

active, and then when they get older, they sort of stop doing physical activity.[…] They rather, I don't know, like hang out somewhere, and not being like active in the sport or something'. Andrew and Beatriz mentioned two critical aspects of the multifaceted transitions that this specific age group encounters: these can include a transition from school to work, and leisure transitions (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Murray and Gayle, 2012; Raymore, Barber and Eccles, 2001) such as the one mentioned by Beatriz from organised sport activities to a preference for more informal gatherings. While many factors influence the rise of physical inactivity levels into the 16–24 and 25–54 age groups, that is especially significant in lower socio-economic groups (Sport England, 2018), the young adults in this project seemed to stress the role of material circumstances as well as a preference for non-competitive, alternative and inclusive ways to be active, as highlighted in the following section.

5.1.3. 'Do it competitively or don't do it at all': struggles with mainstream sport settings

Exploring the participants' previous experiences with physical activity, they highlighted issues related to PE in school, and more generally with settings focused on competition and lacking a feeling of true inclusivity. The majority of participants mentioned PE in negative terms, for example Brooke said: *'In school, I think that because I didn't pick PE as a GCSE, and I do it once every two weeks, […] the PE teachers don't really care whether or not we do it so... […] No one does it. No one likes doing it'*. Experiences with PE are generally identified as key aspects in channelling young people away or into sport (Coakley and Pike, 2014), and some of the participants reported particularly bad personal experiences, such as Brittany: *'Um, I* hated it *[emphasis] at school!* Really *[emphasis] disliked it. When I was younger and still now, like I'm sort of a bigger person than your average... I'm built bigger, and I naturally find physical activity harder because of that. So when I was at school I just used to not enjoy it'*. Benjamin spoke about his personal experience of gender transitioning and how the contact sports and the competitive side of PE was really distressing for him:

> *'Oh goodness, yeah! I have a unique perspective on that [physical education]. Well* when *[emphasis added] I was doing that anyway, it's like they made you do sports and it was… you're competitive, trying to do the best that you can, and it can sometimes get a bit in your face. And I get anxiety about those kind of things, so it's*

like… I'd rather not engage physically with others like that. Like football and rugby, like trying to get a ball off of people makes me nervous. But the background that I have at least is, I started transitioning from a pretty young age, so going through school, physical education was really distressing for me. And when it came through, when it was official at school, they didn't know what to do with me. So there were a lot of social pressures, but also limitations and other people being weird about it. And physically restricting stuff like, I don't know if you know about chest binders or anything like that, but it was like you're not really supposed to exercise in those, and therefore it became a choice of, do I participate in physical activity, do I hurt myself or do I not bind and then have this horrible situation where I'm with people and not binding? It's, yeah, horrible. So yeah that unique perspective on it is, it's a huge deterrent from any kind of physical activity, especially group stuff'.

In relation to PE but also to physical activity more broadly, several participants seemed to confirm a tendency found in many young people who prefer an informal focus on fun, enjoyment, socialising and being physically healthy rather than competing or becoming a good athlete (O'Connor, 2020; Neal et al., 2023; Soares, Antunnes and van den Tillaar, 2013). Brooke is an interesting example of this: she was a competitive gymnast and is now happy to have left that demanding sport for one she enjoys more. However, also in her new activity there is a competitive side, something she keeps not enjoying: *'The only thing with dancing is if you're not competitive in it, you can feel a bit like… a bit of an outsider, because obviously people are working towards competitions. And I did try and do the competitive side of it at first, but it just wasn't for me'*. Some of the participants even mentioned explicitly how negative experiences of focusing on competitive sports, led them away from practicing anything for a while, such as Bella: *'I didn't have a great experience with like sort of… sports within school and stuff. So for quite a while I didn't do any sports, and like didn't consider myself like a sporty person at all. […] There wasn't a lot of support for just having fun with physical activity in school. It was a lot of competitive sport, and if you weren't good at the sports there wasn't really a lot of support for that. It was just: do it competitively, or don't do it at all'*. Scholars have noted that many standard sport and physical activity practices, despite good intentions, can end up generating negative experiences, further marginalising disadvantaged groups or promoting inactivity among the young people that dislike or do not thrive within the imposed system based on performance and competition (Bean et al., 2014; Beltrán-Carillo et al., 2012; Edwards, 2015; Thomson, Darcy and Pearce 2010). As

mentioned in previous chapters, many inactive young people report negative feelings towards the focus on winning matches instead of well-being and enjoyment (Beltrán-Carillo et al., 2012), which is reported as a significant determinant affecting their inactivity also later in their adult life (Cardinal, Yan and Cardinal, 2013).

Beatriz, one of the least physically active participants, brought up also the importance of creating inclusive environments and going beyond rigid gendered divisions:

> *'Uh they always like… in school, in like football clubs or rugby clubs: this is for boys, this is for girls, and maybe there isn't like space for people that maybe don't feel comfortable with just like the mainstream sports, and they want like something different. Um, or maybe how do I say this... Um, maybe people from like the LGBTQ community, they don't feel comfortable in that sort of space that has always been kind of separated in sexes, […]. When I was playing football I was... I always used to play with the boys, and it was like, you know, comments like sexist comments'.*

She goes on saying that providing opportunities outside the more mainstream ones could be important to reach more people: *'I think, maybe if there was like somewhere where people could tell which sports they'd like to try. They'd like… do surveys or something like that. That people could write which non-mainstream sport they'd like to practice. Um, maybe then we could create some sort of activities that would involve those sports that are not like rugby and football'*. Interestingly, some of the participants did in fact mention examples of alternative activities, but did not perceive them as being included within the physical activity sphere. For example, Benjamin said that he feels a lot better when he's out walking with his dog, and Brooke loves walking with other friends that also have dogs like her. Overall, participants expressed a general tendency towards enjoying physical activity and wanting to find their way to be active, but not necessarily in mainstream and organised settings, as I expand on in the following section.

5.1.4. 'Do you want to come along?' and being active 'on my own terms'

Nearly all participants talked about the importance of being active together with other people, though not necessarily in the form of organised sport settings and teams. They mentioned that

being active with others gave them inspiration, motivation, support and enjoyment within a small circle of friends, as well as feelings of comfort and confidence. For example, Brooke shared concrete examples of how crucial the support of family and friends can be: *'A lot of the things I've done in terms of physical activity is because of the people I know have done it or have said "do you want to come along?"'*. Also Brandon felt that the influence of family and friends was *'the biggest factor of them all'*, and others confirmed that this support can be in the form of inspiration, involvement but also simply as a motivation, as Bernard suggested: *'If you've got people who are there to motivate you, or give you like a nice comment or something each day… I think that you're going to feel a lot more motivated, and a lot more ready to try and do something'.* It is interesting to notice how family and friends are the main form of influential social network: the influence of their larger community was not considered by participants at the early stage of this research, with support intended as being directed at and/or received by a close circle of people. For example, Andrew said: *'Yeah there is my friend group and... so, like I said, my brother and his friends will go to the gym and I get invited along […]. Again, with football, we always invite everyone in the circle, so everyone's got a chance of coming out, getting healthy and have fun'*. But if the social aspect of physical activity was considered important by almost all participants, not everyone felt comfortable in all kinds of environment.

Something I noticed as emerging distinctly (especially in Group B) was participants' emphasis on wanting to feel comfortable and how the right company can give – an otherwise lacking – confidence to practice sports and physical activities. Bernard spoke about comfort throughout his whole interview: *'I feel it's like one of those things with physical activity that if you're around people that you're comfortable with, or if you're on your own, you're quite happy to do it, and I'm like that. […] whereas if you do it with people who you're either not as comfortable with, or don't know as well it's not as enjoyable'*. Beatriz said that it's better to do things with friends because this can give a sense of increased confidence: *'So I think most people that don't do anything because they don't want to do it on their own. They're not confident enough to go somewhere and go: "So I want to do this"'*. However, not only was this preference not associated with teams and organised structures, but quite the opposite seemed to be true. Bella spoke about the importance of friendships and *'opportunities to sort of go along and just have fun with it'*, because in her opinion a lot of people get put off by standard sport environments in which people *'think they have to be like... really sporty, or like really fit to do it'*. On a similar note, Benjamin said that while competitive sports make

him anxious, other activities such as yoga and pilates can have the same sense of camaraderie but without the same pressure: *'It is still like this is your own exercise, but we are all doing this together'*. With regards to clubs, Billy said that there's no need to be in a club to play football (*'If you're friends with people, you just tell them to come down. […] Going out, play some football'*) and Beatriz mentioned how she does not feel like joining a new rugby team, even though she likes the sport, because she does not know anyone there: *'When I moved to [omitted], I know there is a club in [omitted] not too far from here, but I didn't know anyone from there, so it's a bit like... I don't know if I should go'*. And Brooke echoed this feeling of difficulty to join formed teams and established environments, especially at their age:

> *'I think that joining clubs now is scary because I'm a lot older. […] If I was to get more physically active, it would probably be stuff […] that I could do on my own terms, like sort of running or walking. Because I think the idea of joining a club now is really scary, because when I was at gymnastics I was doing it with people I'd known since I was like seven or like five. So it's just scary joining it because it's quite a close knit community in a lot of sports'*.

Overall, joining teams or other established sport settings was mentioned as a difficult thing to do at their age, with the majority of participants preferring more informal chances to exercise on their own terms while alongside peers. This aspect confirms an international trend seeing participation in informal sport becoming more popular than organised club sport, the former being a growing form of collective leisure activity that does not require a clear structure, fees, membership or strict formal rules, and which is more flexible to fit busy lifestyles (Jeanes et al., 2019; Neal et al., 2023; O'Connor, 2020). This seemed to be the case for the participants of this project: exercising alongside friends was seen as a priority, but unstructured ways of doing so were preferred. I interpret this to be connected to the importance of experimenting collectively with bottom-up physical activity practices, also in relation to the participants' perceptions of their communities, as highlighted in the following section.

5.2. Participants' views of community and society

In this section, I report some of the themes that I found most relevant among the participants' answers in relation to community and society. Here, some differences between the two

groups started emerging, which I reflect on. While giving central attention to their perspectives, I also reflect critically on how 'capitalist realism' (Fisher, 2009) and acceptance of the status quo seemed to have widely permeated their opinions.

5.2.1. 'That's how it is': perceptions of community and society, and the influence of capitalist realism

The way participants defined community was one of the main aspects differentiating the two groups. Group A, whose participants were mostly based in the same area and had no previous engagement in community centres or activities, mostly defined community from a geographical point of view. Andrew mentioned it as the *'group of people […] in and around where you live'*, and Alfie stressed how this can be composed of different kinds of people: *'In my community you've got loads of knackers and you've got like the decent people, so just it depends what you make of it really'.* Two participants identified the concept of community only with the council and formal institutions. Their views seemed closer to the more traditional definition that connects community with people in a bounded geographical area such as a neighbourhood, town or city (Bradshaw, 2008), but they might also reflect their lack of engagement with groups that might feel like a community. In that same centre where I met Group A, I had a conversation with a youth worker – originally from southern Europe – who expressed their frustration at the amount of work that needs to be put into 'making' and creating a sense of community in that area, something that, according to them, just exists more organically in their home country.

In contrast, participants in Group B – some of which are more engaged in formal settings such as youth organisations and youth councils – defined community not only as a geographical place but also as groups of people doing something together, with the latter being the preferred concept. Billy said: *'I think probably like people you do things with. For me that's more community'* and Brittany: *'I think it's about a group of people coming together, regardless of who they are and striving for one thing, […]. I don't have a community where I live, but I have a community with who I work with, and who I'm friends with'.* Some of them gave explicit examples of the community organisations they are involved with, such as Brianna: *'I work at a youth club in [omitted] and... I'm part of that community even if I don't live there'*, and Brandon: *'For me it means togetherness, and*

striving towards goals. […] So certainly when I joined [omitted name of youth organization], amazing community, I feel like I can be myself. I think my local community, I'm not too sure. But a community that I found at [omitted], absolutely amazing'. The participants' perception of community differed significantly between Group A and B and could potentially be connected with their engagement – or lack of – in community groups and organisations.

With regards to their views of society, there was more homogeneity between the two groups with a general prevalence of negative feelings and frustration. For example, when asked about their own definition of society, many participants talked about the unfair sides of it, like Brittany: *'I think society isn't great all the time. I don't think society always works by any means anywhere in the world'*. Andrew recognised society's flaws and concluded by saying: *'I think we could do a bit better as a society but... you know, that's how it is'*. Many answers conveyed an underlying tone of acceptance of the unfair status quo, which I interpret as examples of what Fisher (2009) defined 'capitalist realism', namely an atmosphere that acts as an invisible barrier constraining thought and action, making it impossible to imagine alternatives. When I asked if, in their opinion, society works well and/or works for everyone, nearly all of them answered negatively (e.g., Benjamin: *'Absolutely not!'*; Beatriz: *'I don't think it works for everyone'*), and some even said that it works well, although not for everyone, like Billy: *'I think it does work well, but it doesn't work for everyone. I think some people need more support'*. The UK is a particularly interesting case of how effectively 'capitalist realism' can work, being one of the richest economies in the world while having normalised rampant rates of poverty (Francis-Devine, 2022). Overall, I noticed that participants were strongly inclined to acknowledge inequalities when they approached the concept of society (even before I asked about them specifically), but most responses showed resignation to this situation.

Despite negative opinions on our current society, most participants showed that imagining alternatives seemed a nearly impossible task. When I asked them 'Do you think society could be any different from what it is now?', participants in Group A gave a mix of answers, most of which showed difficulty to think in broad terms. For example, Alex answered: *'Maybe like... stop people from littering, on the floor. Because it doesn't really look nice'*. Abigail said that there is no other way society could be, and when I asked if there is anything she would like to change or see different, she said: *'Not really, […] cause you don't know different'*. Several participants of Group B prioritised progressive values before any socio-

economic focus. For example, Bella said: *'I'd say it's things like racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, like these are sort of things that are like stopping society from being fair and from working for everyone. And so those are the most important things to try and change'*. Overall, I noticed this as a trend in Group B, where participants expressed very critical stances on gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity and disability while rarely including socio-economic inequalities. In my view, this might be a symptom of the capitalist cultural hegemony for which debates on inequalities often remain in the realm of cultural and other identity-related differences (Fraser, 2000), not intersecting with socio-economic issues and the core of the capitalist order. As argued by Chomsky (1998, p. 43), the limited spectrum of acceptable opinion risks keeping people passive by 'allow[ing] very lively debate within that spectrum […], that gives people the sense that there's free thinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate'.

In order to try and elicit further reflections, I used a few prompts, one being around the concept of degrowth, although I did not use the term explicitly. The question was: 'Do you think a world where people's well-being and happiness is put at the centre of everything (rather than, for example, making money and buying things) is possible?'. One of the most significant answers in this regard was given by Beatriz:

> *'I think it would be like, not a dystopic world but... if we let everyone work in something that they like, and someone could study what they like and then work, but not getting paid for it. It's like if everyone knew that they had to do a role in the world, and they would just do it, and they would get like a house and food in return. […] It's really really difficult. I don't think that would exist, […] it would be ideal but I think it is not realistic, because I don't think that that will happen. Because of the type of society and world that we live in'*.

She outlined articulately, with some very clear examples, aspects of how a post-capitalist society could look like, yet the first word that came to her mind was 'dystopic' (either not remembering or unfamiliar with the term 'utopic') and she saw it as 'ideal but not realistic'. Others expressed positive opinions but very little hope in this regard. Albert said: *'Probably not. Someone would have to like do the... someone's always gonna make the things that you're buying. Someone's always gonna make more money than you'* and Bernard: '*I think*

the way that countries in the world is just… run in general. I'd probably say no. I think like a lot of countries would much rather put their economic needs in front of other areas, especially well-being and happiness'.

The second prompt I used to see how different they could imagine society to be, was: 'Do you think a world without poverty is possible?'. Both groups were split, with many feeling it is not possible at all (Brianna: *'No, as much as I wish it was, I don't think it is'*; Billy: *'I know it's not possible. […] There's always going to be poverty'*; Alex: *'I don't think so. I don't know why but…'*). Brooke said that getting rid of poverty would be difficult because *'obviously […] society works in the way society has always worked'*. Many others agreed with the principle but thought it would be really difficult to achieve, like Beatriz: *'I think it is possible. If we want to achieve it, it's going to be very hard, because normally people who want to get rid of poverty are people who are in poverty. […] And normally the people who haven't experienced it are the ones that can make something to change it. Normally, people in charge'*. Brandon spoke about some people's greed standing in the way, and Benjamin made significant points in this regard:

> *'This is the thing, is that in order to have a world without poverty, we'd also have to have a world without billionaires. […] But the people at the top are so inherently selfish for no good reason that it would take a lot of, well it would take a lot of taxes. And in order to take a lot of taxes then you have to have less corrupt politicians who aren't directly benefiting from having the people with billions in their pockets. […] But the way things are is because that power imbalance exists and nobody at working-class level is, kind of, there's a lot of us and in theory we can do something about it, but I feel like it would have to be something so extreme that I think that would scare too many people, so we sit in our complacency rather than actively taking action. So we can make, I think we can make small changes'*.

Also Bella showed a valuable systemic perspective:

> *'I mean definitely, I think it's sort of like looked at as an idea which is like impossible but... Um, but it is possible. We have like enough money as a society to go around to everyone. We have like enough resources to sort of help everyone. I'd say, and just sort of putting a focus off of money like... giving everyone, sort of what they need to*

survive, so that the focus isn't on the constant stress around money. So there isn't constantly that kind of burden on people's happiness and on people's lives. I think that is possible, and like, contribute so much to people's happiness. I'd say it would make yeah, make [the world] a better place'.

With the few notable exceptions just quoted, most participants struggled to imagine a world without poverty or one where people's happiness is centred, reflecting the notion of 'capitalist realism', namely how it is now easier to imagine the end of the world rather than the end of the unfair capitalist status quo (Fisher, 2009). In both groups there were at least one or two participants that showed particular ability to think in systemic terms: as I return on in the following chapter, their contribution would prove crucial during the workshops in order to support critical and collective reflections. However, at the interviews stage, most participants exhibited disempowered and hopeless views overall.

5.2.2. 'No one's gonna listen to one person' and 'right now, it's not looking that good': (dis)empowerment and hope(lessness)

After having gauged some of their perceptions of community and society, I was interested in their own feelings of empowerment and ability to influence change: in this regard, the two groups exhibited very different perceptions. The majority of Group B, often part of organisations and youth councils, recognised the possibility of engaging with other people and creating small changes in order to affect bigger ones. For example, Bernard said: *'Um, I think it's one of those things that you can do as much as possible, but often it's not just you. I think a lot of the time it's about you, and it can be a smaller group like a chunk of the community'*. And Brandon said: *'Um, you can definitely play an influence. […] you can just chip away at it, and like, kind of make that big circle issue like a little bit of a smaller circle. So yeah, you can. No matter how big the issue is, you can always knock off like 0.1 percent'*. Many of them mentioned explicitly how having connections is crucial and recognised that access is unfortunately limited for many. For example, Brooke said that being part of the youth council has made a difference for her, but few people have the same chance: *'I think that because I know of stuff with the Council, I've been given that opportunity to have my voice heard, but I know a lot of people who've got a lot to say, and who don't have the opportunity, and who don't know where to go.[…] I don't think people make it obvious that*

there's them opportunities out there. I think it's sort of hidden'. Bella is one example of those people that, despite being interested, do not know where to give their contribution to the community: *'[…] sometimes it's kind of, I want to help out to be sort of a closer part of the community […]. But it can be quite hard to figure out how to do that. Like how to help, how to sort of bond with people in your community'*. Bella also added that often she feels like the power to create change is not in her hands: *'It definitely sometimes feels like, no matter what you do… It's like the people, I guess the people in charge are the ones who can make the real difference, and it's hard to sort of work out how you can make the difference with very little power'*. The lack of power of ordinary people in comparison with 'the people in charge' was a theme that emerged even more strongly in the other group, where most participants – that never engaged in community settings – did not feel like they could contribute much to making changes happen. For example, Andrew spoke about celebrities and their platforms: *'And I don't think I can do anything to affect that big scale change. However, it's the people that have like... power, that can do it really. I mean the politicians, news people, all that stuff. Take big household names […] like Will Smith, Beyonce, Jay Z and Keanu Reeves, Pitbull'*. Andrew mentioned also age as one of the reasons why they might not be listened to: *'So I think, since me and my mates are like... young adults now because we're like 18/19, I don't think we would be able to... I don't think we're given the responsibility to solve problems in the community. So, I don't think we would be able to do much'*. In general, most conversations with the young adults of this group seemed to communicate powerlessness. Alfie, when asked if he could be influential in the community, said: *'No, I'm just not given the opportunity really'*, and Abigail said: *'No, because no one's gonna listen to one person'*. Albert thinks that his role in the community is to *'try and look after it, with like putting your rubbish in the bins and stuff, not like be antisocial'*, while Alex does not think he has any role and Andrew that it is just to *'be a respectful person, not go around causing havoc for no reason, don't go around shouting at people, […] just being a standard citizen really'*. One participant even said that there is not really any issue in the community, and even if there was, they do not think people would actually listen to them.

Following on this thread, my last question was specifically about how hopeful they felt about their own future and the future of society overall. Some of them linked it with climate change, like Andrew that spoke about the possible looming catastrophe and Brittany that said: *'I think I'm a hopeful person, and I am hopeful… but I think hope is a weird thing, because you can be hopeful and knowledgeable at the same time, and realistic about what could*

happen. […] My only main concern about the future of society is the climate crisis, and people not responding to that. […] I have general fears about where our society will end up'. Overall, the optimism of the participants varied, but while taking a different stance they all acknowledged and included concrete societal issues in their perspectives. For example, Billy said that *'it will definitely be a bit hard in the future, with costs of bills, and so all the bills are increasing, interests, and I think this could mean more poverty'* but he was still quite optimistic that things are going to be ok. Similarly, Alex said that *'right now it's not looking that good, with the war with Russia and that, but I reckon it could improve'*. Other participants, in both groups, seemed less optimistic overall, like Albert that said: *'I'd say on a 1 to 10 scale I'm probably like... A 5 or... between a 4 and a 6. Quite a lot of stuff with like Russia and Ukraine and... all this stuff happening in America with like [laws]'* (probably referring to the Roe v. Wade). And both Brandon and Bernard expressed frustration towards issues that keep reoccurring and mistakes being repeated in history, with the latter saying: *'I think the way things are at the moment it's one of those things that I wouldn't say too hopeful'*. In general, it was clear how aware these young adults were of the many problems that the world presents, and how influential these were in their thoughts, even when they were not the object of my questions. However, while acknowledging the influence of structural issues on their life and society more broadly, they still expressed a tendency towards individualising responsibility and agency as well as an overall feeling of disempowerment. In the next section, I reflect on the most significant aspects found in the interviews and how they relate to both the post-capitalist and collective approach of this thesis, before considering what the participants' awareness of social determinants alongside the individualisation of responsibility might mean.

5.3. Participants' views in relation to the post-capitalist and collective aspects of Co-PA: the need to critically connect the dots

As highlighted in sections 5.1.1. and 5.1.2., since the interviews' stage I noticed how the participants presented views of physical activity strongly connected with their age, the place where they live and their socio-economic status. Having to work alongside studying, doing physically demanding jobs and managing a lack of free time, limited facilities and financial constraints were mentioned as important determinants of physical activity. In accordance with Piggin's (2020) holistic definition of physical activity, and in relation to the views that

the participants started expressing during the interviews, I found two aspects particularly relevant for my research approach. First, the fact that some physical activities – such as the most practiced by the participants, namely walking – were not perceived as 'counting': in relation to this, I was curious to observe how reflecting collectively on physical activity through critical pedagogical strategies might influence those perceptions. Second, that the topic of physical activity was strongly intertwined with their material circumstances and socio-economic background in a rather (understandably) disempowering way: from this perspective, the workshops could be a valuable opportunity for embedding physical activity within liberating and empowering political discourses and see whether these two aspects could support each other.

These interviews were an important first step in gaining an improved understanding of the social and place specific conditions that this project was taking place in. At the same time, participants' views challenged some of my initial ideas while strengthening others. On the one hand, I understood that I would have to follow their lead in relation to the physical activity actions: while I would be interested in experimenting with many and different ways to be physically active, I started realising that participants might have limited availability (of time and resources) and that the focus might have to shift towards finding empowerment in the physical activities that are manageable within their current possibilities. On the other hand, they strengthened my belief that physical activity – especially in contexts of marginalisation – should be approached alongside wider political discourses, in order to create a link between the current barriers and struggles to overcome them. In other words, if current mainstream activities are often perceived as not accessible, it is important to: (i) experiment with ways to be physically active that match marginalised people's preferences as well as material conditions, finding empowerment within the boundaries of the now; (ii) alongside this, visualise the possibility to challenge the status quo and to strive towards alternatives and wider social change. Therefore, I grew interested in observing how our later collective discussions could deal with these two aspects, and how these might interact with each other (as discussed in the following Chapters 6 and 8).

At the same time, as displayed in sections 5.1.3. and 5.1.4., participants expressed other important factors that influence their physical activity participation. Many of them struggled within competitive sport settings and expressed a clear preference for being active on their own terms, with people they feel comfortable with and possibly with a heightened focus on

enjoyment rather than performance. Bottom-up and alternative opportunities to be active could move towards addressing these aspects, especially to allow young people at the edge of adulthood to experiment with their own preferences and adapt to changing circumstances. Participants expressed nuances that were specific to their age group – their needs of comfort within certain social groups, affordability and accessibility, for example – and that could be met by giving them the chance to create physical activity opportunities themselves. From the interviews, I also gauged a need to collectively reflect around some negative ideas attached to physical activity, such as this being often not enjoyable, not inclusive, and oppressive within certain contexts. The participants of this project expressed a preference for more inclusive and alternative ways to be active together, beyond standard sport clubs and competitive settings. Their views, I argue, support this thesis' case for allowing young people to explore such alternatives without imposing practices hierarchically: this might mean going beyond standard establishment of clubs and activities, and towards providing the facilities and support for free and youth-led bottom-up experimentation. Scholars have noted how alternative physical activities tend to emphasise values of excitement, spontaneity, non-conformity, sociability, and creativity (Thomson, 2000), aspects that I suggest to be valuable in and of themselves but also in relation to the political and collective ethos of this project.

I argue that this project's pedagogical opportunities could strengthen the connections between collectively approached physical activities and the political nuances of these bottom-up opportunities. Democratic involvement and cooperation would not be seen as limited to these contexts, but rather as steppingstones for building equality and solidarity within the wider community and society more broadly. Participants highlighted how important it was for them to be active alongside other people, supporting and helping each other: I argue that, in fact, most interactions in our life are based on solidaristic principles, even though the capitalist cultural hegemony stands to convince us of the impossibility of organising our society on those same principles (Graeber, 2012). Therefore, conscious bottom-up democratic actions – within the physical activity sphere – can act as opportunities to experiment with different paradigms, allowing young people to experience collaboration and solidarity beyond the boundaries of their own social groups. However, as I discuss in later chapters, it might indeed be crucial to start from these forms of collectivism, albeit limited to small groups, because they are the ones young people might feel most comfortable with initially. But, if these come alongside critical reflections and within a larger framework, they could be the foundations to visualise collaboration on a bigger scale and start building wider community networks.

It can be noted in sections 5.2.1. and 5.2.2. how most participants showed strong awareness of systemic issues and inequalities, connected to a generalised hopelessness and disenchantment towards seeing positive changes as attainable. At the same time, especially when it comes to health and physical activity, they see responsibilities as falling mostly on individual citizens. For example, several participants brought up the influence of material conditions such as the previously mentioned lack of free time, (in)accessible and (un)affordable facilities, alongside healthy eating. However, both physical activity and healthy eating were generally connected with individual responsibility: Anthony, for example, said that *'the healthy food is getting more expensive and fatty foods are really cheap and obviously more people are putting on more weight and then doing nothing. And they're not looking after their bodies. [But] you just need to focus on yourself and go to the gym, watch your diet and all that'*. Also Alfie thought that it is up to each of us to exercise and look after our own health, and brought up one example of a friend: *'Like, if [people] set their mind upon something they can do it. I've got a pal that went to jail and that. Now he runs about 10 miles when he wakes up and that, just before work'*. Beatriz also thought that it is important to have the *'knowledge'* and *'willingness'* to look after one's own health, and it is difficult for people that might not know how to do that. And Brandon said: *'I think a lot of people don't know how, it's as simple as that […]. If you're not going to teach yourself or you're not willing to go out and learn how to look after your own health. Then you're gonna stay where you are and stagnant'*. Interestingly, these young adults from low socio-economic backgrounds clearly possess that kind of knowledge, but they imagine that most people in their communities do not. Alliott et al. (2022), in their systematic review of young people's experiences of barriers and facilitators of physical activity, found that young people from low socio-economic backgrounds have a very good understanding of the mental, physical and environmental benefits of being active, which suggests that knowledge does not appear to be the main barrier, as opposed to popular belief. Or rather, as opposed to the belief generated via the capitalist hegemonic perspective.

I argue that it is not a fortuitous discrepancy if participants presented strong awareness of how material conditions affect the chances to be active and healthy, alongside a tendency to see individuals as the main or sole determinant of their own health and prosperity. This is rather the consequence of a persuasive capitalist narrative that wants to portray individuals as free makers of their own destiny, rather than part of structures that limit significantly their

possibilities: interestingly, most participants of this project seemed to have internalised such perspective, even if coming from low socio-economic backgrounds and even while exhibiting deep knowledge of inequalities. This is why I think necessary to go beyond simply asking these young adults about their preferences and ideas, and also adopt strategies of critical pedagogy to critically *reflect* together on these topics and experiment together with how to *act* on them. These interviews strengthened my belief that approaching physical activity in peripheral contexts should come alongside deeper reflections on the systemic and interconnected nature of the inequalities faced. Otherwise, there might be a risk to not address material needs or not going far enough in empowering people against hopeless acceptance of the status quo and towards hopeful collective action. A shared and collaborative process of 'conscientisation' can aim to connect the dots: between participants' knowledge of inequalities and their (lack of) vision of alternatives; between acknowledged structural barriers and collective agency; and finally between the physical activity perceived as possible and how to make it happen. In the next chapter, I present findings from the workshops and consider how these allowed participants to reflect critically and collectively, starting to challenge some previously held assumptions. Before moving on to the next chapter, in the following section I include some critical reflections on this project's approach and summarise key methodological perspectives surrounding the interviews stage.

5.4. Critical reflections and methodological perspectives on the interviews stage

Reflecting on the interviews stage, I found it to be a revealing and sobering experience. While I had anticipated that participants would speak about barriers to physical activity, I was struck by the depth of their awareness of broader structural inequalities – particularly in relation to work, costs, and lack of free time – and how these strongly affected their physical activity habits. Including questions not only about physical activity but also about community and society I felt proved to be a crucial methodological choice. It enabled participants to articulate a more holistic understanding of the social determinants shaping their lives, not just in terms of access to sport or physical activity, but in relation to broader issues such as work, housing, education and political agency. These conversations revealed how deeply participants were aware of structural inequalities, even if they did not always have the language or frameworks to name them explicitly. At the same time, this broader scope exposed a widespread sense of disempowerment and resignation, particularly when participants were asked to imagine alternatives to the status quo. In this sense, the interviews

did not merely gather data, they highlighted the very conditions that the Co-PA approach seeks to address, namely the gap between structural awareness and the capacity to act for change. I argue that these interviews affirmed the importance of Co-PA's methodological decision to reflect collectively not only on what is, but also on what could be: an approach that does not stop at analysing barriers, but actively supports the visualisation of alternatives, infusing hope as a necessary condition for empowerment. The interviews also highlighted the internalisation of individualised narratives around health and responsibility, even among those who clearly recognised systemic constraints. This tension between awareness of structural issues and internalised capitalist framings, configured a key base on which to work with the Co-PA approach.

From a methodological standpoint, these interviews underscored the importance of creating space for participants to speak about their lives holistically, not just in relation to physical activity and health. For anyone applying a similar approach, I would suggest maintaining this breadth of inquiry. In hindsight, I could have experimented with more visual or participatory tools during the interviews to support those participants who were less verbally confident. Indeed, one of the most striking differences between the two groups was the level of articulation and familiarity with talking about complex concepts: most participants of Group B, with more experience in formal settings, often expressed themselves with ease; while some participants of Group A, though equally insightful, struggled to provide answers to some of the questions. I considered silences and struggles to provide opinions as important as other more articulate answers, especially in relation to their evolving capacity to address such complex issues observed during the collective reflections of the workshops. Rather than seeing these as limitations, I came to view them as a reminder of the importance of adapting methods to different forms of expression and knowledge. These differences would go on to support my thinking surrounding the workshops and the actions that followed, being mindful of the diverse ways and languages with which young people might engage with the world and imagine change.

Chapter 6. Freirean workshops: a link between collective reflections and actions

This chapter focuses on the workshops conducted with the two groups of young adults, and it addresses – step by step – the collective reflections that took place. The workshops address all three research questions through an integrated and participatory approach. They serve as a space to explore how the Co-PA praxis could foster processes of 'conscientisation' in both physical-activity-related and political terms (RQ1), to explore the extent to which this Co-PA praxis could support the participants to imagine alternative ways to organise communities and society (RQ2) and how these collective reflections might affect the participants' perception of physical activity and ways to engage in it (RQ3). However, beyond their research-related function, the workshops also act as pedagogical spaces where participants can begin to connect their lived experiences with broader systemic issues and collectively envision different futures. In this chapter, participants' written and oral comments intertwine with some of my own reflections, and while trying to strike a balance, I aim as much as possible to centre participants' opinions and group dynamics. In fact, more theoretical reflections on these discussions and the relation with other similar Freirean applications to sport are analysed in more detail in Chapter 8. Throughout this chapter, when relevant I specify whether a remark was written or said by participants, although in certain instances the lines between the two are blurred (e.g., sometimes I asked them to elaborate on something they had written or, vice versa, I encouraged them to write down something they had said). Images of the collectively produced boards are included to provide the interested reader with the opportunity to read through a wider range of participants' quotes beyond the exemplars presented in the text. Each board is first presented in its entirety to allow the reader to have an overview, and then in its parts so as to make all written notes easier to access. Within the text, each section proceeds by analysing in parallel the same part of the workshops in each group, and I simultaneously highlight key aspects that emerged, similarities and differences found between the two groups as well as whether the collective discussions shifted participants' views in comparison with individual interviews. I do not always mention which participant said what, unless specifically relevant, and rather focus on some of the group dynamics and how participants influenced each other during the discussions in the collective process of mutual 'conscientisation'. As introduced in Chapter 4, the workshops were in fact designed as a space for collective reflections and production of knowledge, following Freirean

principles of critical pedagogy and being structured in three progressive phases, along the lines of Jungk's 'Future Workshops' (Jungk and Müller, 1987; Vidal, 2006). In Workshop 1 (*critique phase*), issues related to climate change and wealth inequalities were discussed, alongside reflections on health and physical activity opportunities with focus on young people and their local areas (6.1.). In Workshop 2 (*fantasy phase*), we discussed alternative ways to run businesses, Community Wealth Building (CWB) and degrowth paradigms – always with a link to sport and physical activity – and then visualised how an ideal community could look (6.2.). In Workshop 3 (*implementation phase*), we focused on physical activity, its benefits and inequalities (6.3.), before planning a potential physical activity action for the community which is the subject of the following Chapter 7. At the end of each section, I summarise some key conceptual as well as methodological aspects that I found important in each workshop, and at the end of the chapter I include some practical learnings (6.4.).

6.1. Workshop 1

Workshop 1 was structured to discuss climate change and wealth inequalities, as well as health and physical activity opportunities with focus on participants' local areas. It started in slightly different ways with the two groups, since I had already met with participants of Group A in person, while participants of Group B were meeting each other – online – for the first time. Group A decided to meet at the local community centre, which gave me the chance to chat with the participants before starting the workshop. We talked informally for a while and I could sense satisfaction in receiving the £25 compensation for the interviews, particularly in one participant who said: *'This is good stuff! I planned to go fishing this weekend with them money'*. Since we had already met and introduced each other a few weeks earlier, we started with an activity to familiarise with the online platform Miro, initially split in smaller groups. Most of the participants were very quiet in the beginning, two of them barely said any words: the mood started improving when I asked about Geordie slang words, which I perceived the group enjoyed discussing, especially teaching me and hearing my attempts with an Italian inflection. Below, in *Figure 6.1.*, is the ice-breaking board used with Group A, centred around the local singer Sam Fender and aspects related to the area where they live.

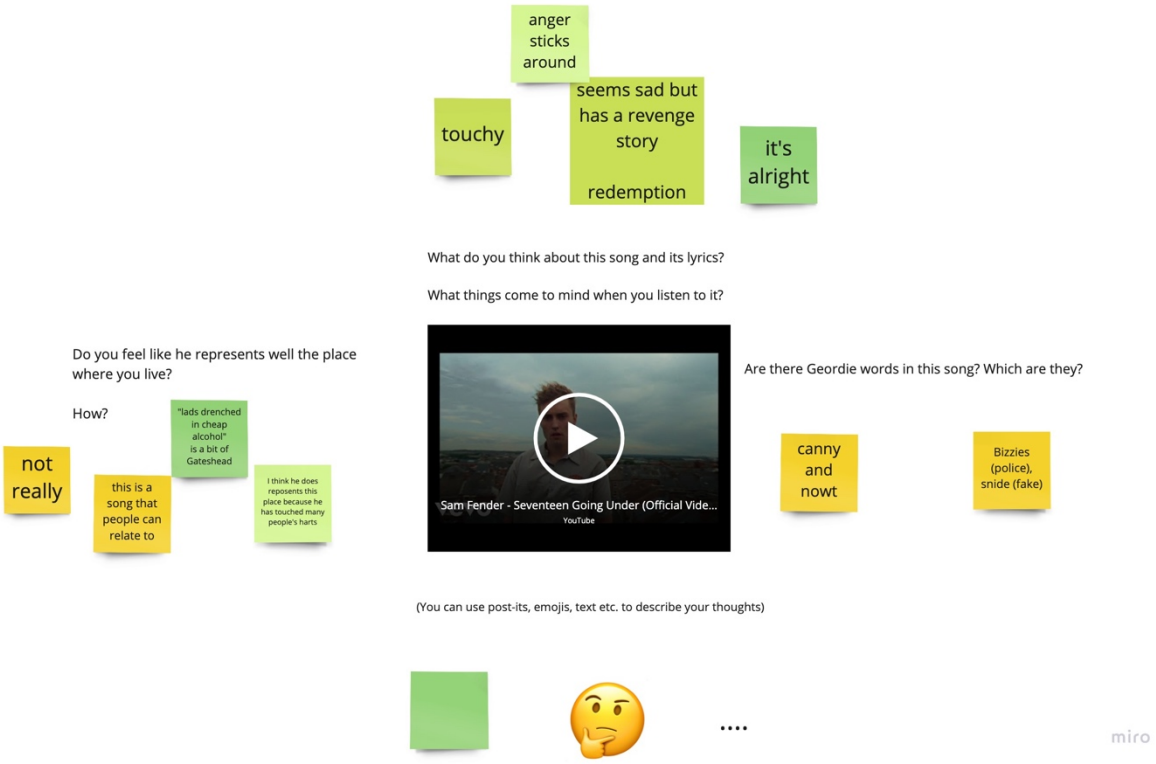


Figure 6.1. Group A, Workshop 1: Ice-breaker activity

Most of the conversation revolved around the line of the Sam Fender's song that says 'drenched in cheap drinks'. One of the participants said that *'it's a bit of [omitted name of their city]'* and this prompted laughs but also discussion: they talked about how common alcohol and drug consumption is in their local area, an issue that they raised more than once throughout our meetings. Unfortunately the internet was not working initially, and so I tried to proceed without the online boards at first, simply talking and using pens and papers, but it slowed down the conversations and I had the feeling that it was becoming too formal and school-like for the participants' taste. Therefore, we agreed to use Miro despite the poor connection, and I immediately had the impression that the platform helped making the experience more fun and interactive. On top of this, the vibe of the meeting improved and I sensed that most participants became more talkative once they started feeling at ease, expressing their ideas freely, including banter and curse words.

Unlike Group A, who I met in person, Group B expressed a preference to meet online since they were based in different areas and had a lot of work and/or school related commitments (for some, meeting online was the *conditio sine qua non*). Workshop 1 was the first time that they were meeting each other, so I opted for a simpler ice-breaker in which everyone could

introduce themselves, saying where they were from, speaking about what they do and their passions. I asked them to experiment with stickers and emojis on the Miro online board: all of them could use it smoothly and, in fact, some participants had already logged in in advance and familiarised themselves with the platform and workshop structure. Despite having had doubts about the efficacy of meeting online, I noticed immediately how comfortably they were using Zoom and the platform. I also sensed that they enjoyed smaller groups discussions within breakout rooms, which eased them into the conversations, allowing them to open up before coming back to talk with the whole group more comfortably.

Group B was composed by passionate and articulate young adults who had a lot to say on all the topics presented and did so confidently, compared to Group A whose participants were less talkative overall and needed more of my support to create the most easy-going environment possible, which seemed to be more conducive to conversation in their case. I kept the same workshop structure for both groups, although adapting timings and tone of the discussion to the needs of the groups. Reflecting in hindsight, I believe that my being spontaneously flexible and adapting to the participants' needs and flow, helped them to feel comfortable and valued: this might have also played a part in the fact that they kept coming back to our meetings, an aspect that was not taken for granted during our PhD supervisions and that, talking to other researchers, I understood to be often challenging especially with young people.

6.1.1. Workshop 1, Climate Change: 'people around our age, more or less we all agree'

The discussions on climate change reflected the two groups' different levels of engagement in socio-political topics, while at the same time conveying an overall agreement on the matter. With Group A (see *Figure 6.2.*) the conversation started around the film 'Don't look up' that most of them had seen and appreciated. Participants were all in agreement that the situation with climate change is *'fucked up'* but when answering the question about whether they felt it was affecting the area where they live, the focus shifted. When one participant said that it is clearly *'getting hotter every year'* another one commented saying *'this warmth ain't that bad tho'*. Initially I let them discuss this point on their own terms, and later tried to add a broader perspective. I used a personal example and told them that my parents in Rome were at 41°C heat that same day and they were considering going elsewhere for the summer: to

this remark one participant seriously asked *'somewhere hotter?'*. Many participants were not familiar with the other prompts, such as the one on Greta Thunberg, although some appreciated her efforts. None of them knew about 'Fridays For Future' even though they all seemed to agree with the purpose of these climate protests once I introduced them: my overall impression was that they appreciated the ideas but still felt distanced from them, not interested in joining or supporting similar movements. When it came to discussing solutions and whether we – as citizens – could do something about climate change, most of their thoughts went towards small individual actions: they mentioned installing more solar panels, using fewer plastic bags and more energy saving lightbulbs.

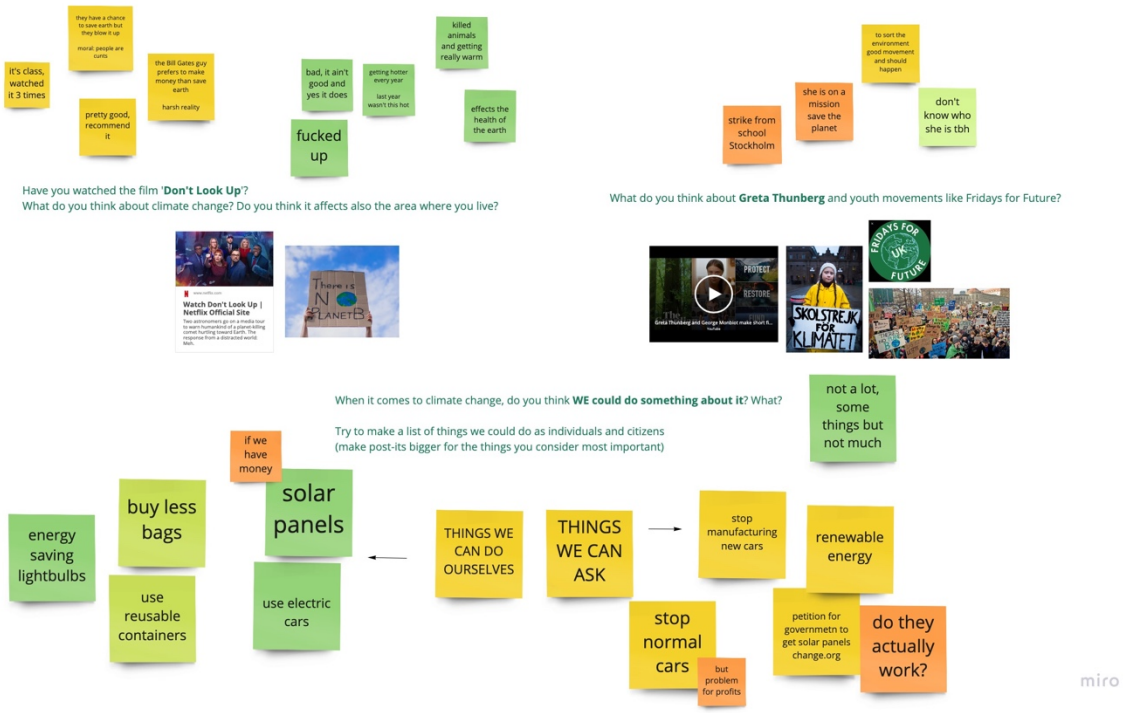


Figure 6.2. Group A, Workshop 1: Climate Change board

Figure 6.2a. Group A, Workshop 1: Climate Change board part 1

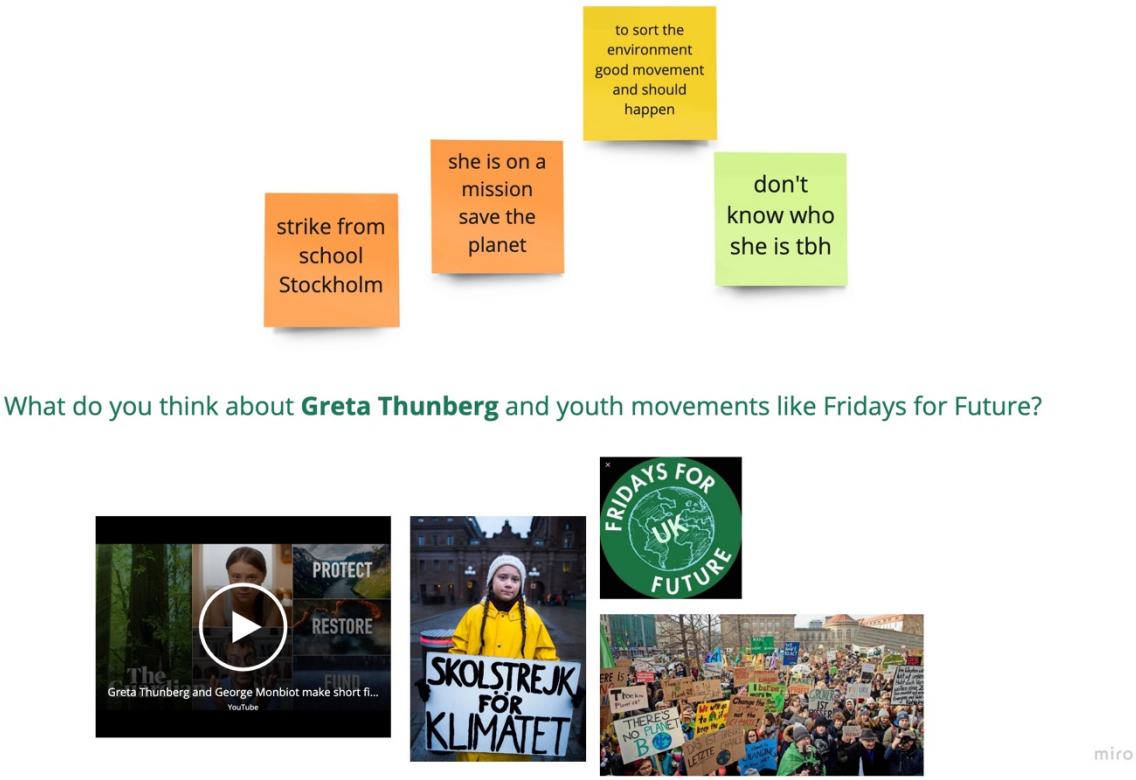


Figure 6.2b. Group A, Workshop 1: Climate Change board part 2

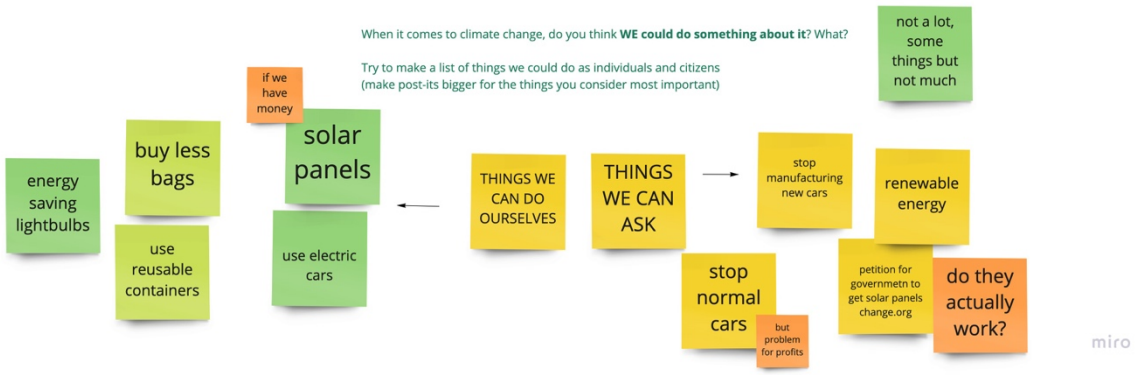


Figure 6.2c. Group A, Workshop 1: Climate Change board part 3

To try and stimulate further reflection towards more systemic changes, I suggested splitting between 'things we can do ourselves' and 'things we can ask', and some ideas started taking a slightly different perspective. For example, the solar panels that had been mentioned as important but unfortunately *'too expensive',* were moved into the 'things we can ask' section, by which they meant that citizens should push governments to finance more of such initiatives. Albert, often the one adding new nuances to the group discussion, suggested using petitions and *change.org*. He explained the concept to the rest of the group, since most others had never heard about it and some kept referring to petitions as *'polls'* during the conversation that sparked from his suggestion. Furthermore, when someone suggested to *'stop normal cars'*, another participant said that this would be good in theory but too problematic in terms of profit loss, which opened a lively discussion about whether profit for some people should be seen as more important than *'saving the planet'*. I left them debating on their own, and only jumped in at the end, asking them to imagine whether there might be ways to generate 'profit' for the many while also respecting the planet at the same time. We concluded on the agreement that we would try to answer this question further within the following workshop.

The depth of the discussion was different with Group B (see *Figure 6.3.*). Several of them had already mentioned climate change during the interviews, even though I had not asked any questions related to it, showing how relevant the issue was to them. In fact, this part of the workshop took much longer than I had predicted because they had a lot to say about it and very passionately so, and they kept challenging and educating each other in turns. For example, when someone said that climate change was not yet affecting them in their area, others pointed out that *'indirectly it does'*, through *'less food [being] available'*, *'resources*

reduced', and natural disasters that require more people to migrate. This was a first example of how the collective reflections were working, with participants moving together the bar of knowledge and finding agreement in more informed opinions. The conversation focused a lot on the balance between fear and motivation to affect change, with one participant writing down that *'scared is ok but we need to know what to do about it, people should be made conscious of the way they can help'* and someone else added that an *'healthy amount of fear is ok'* but too much of it makes us feel doomed and that only if we're motivated can we then do something about it. While I did not mention it then, these remarks were in line with my plan to go beyond discussing pressing issues and confront directly hopeful solutions as well as the wider frame of post-capitalist alternatives in which they could be made achievable.

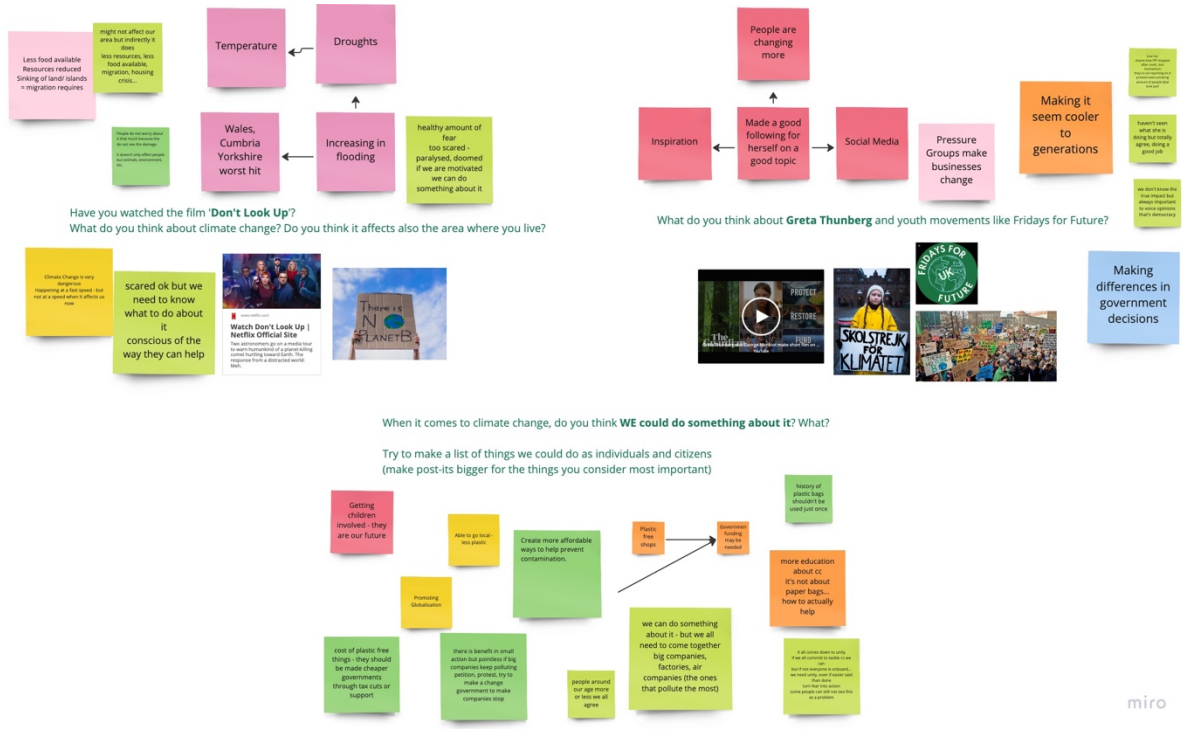


Figure 6.3. Group B, Workshop 1: Climate Change board

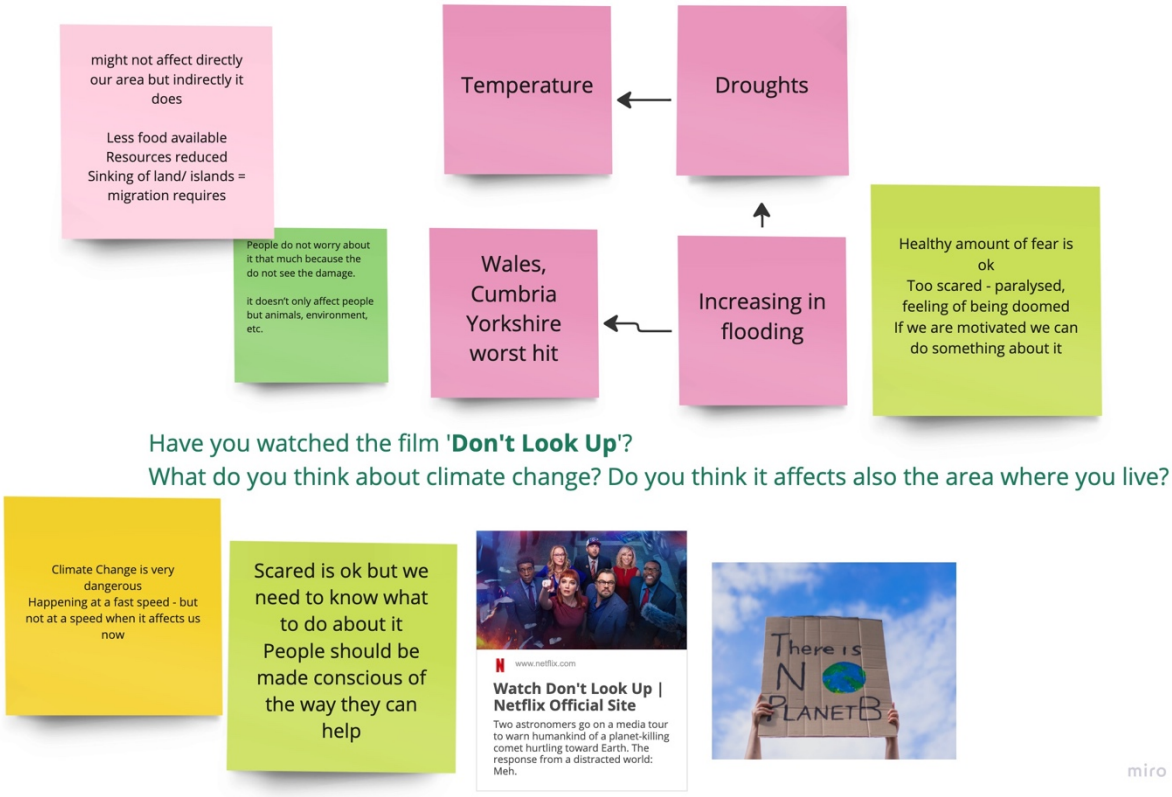


Figure 6.3a. Group B, Workshop 1: Climate Change board part 1

Figure 6.3b. Group B, Workshop 1: Climate Change board part 2

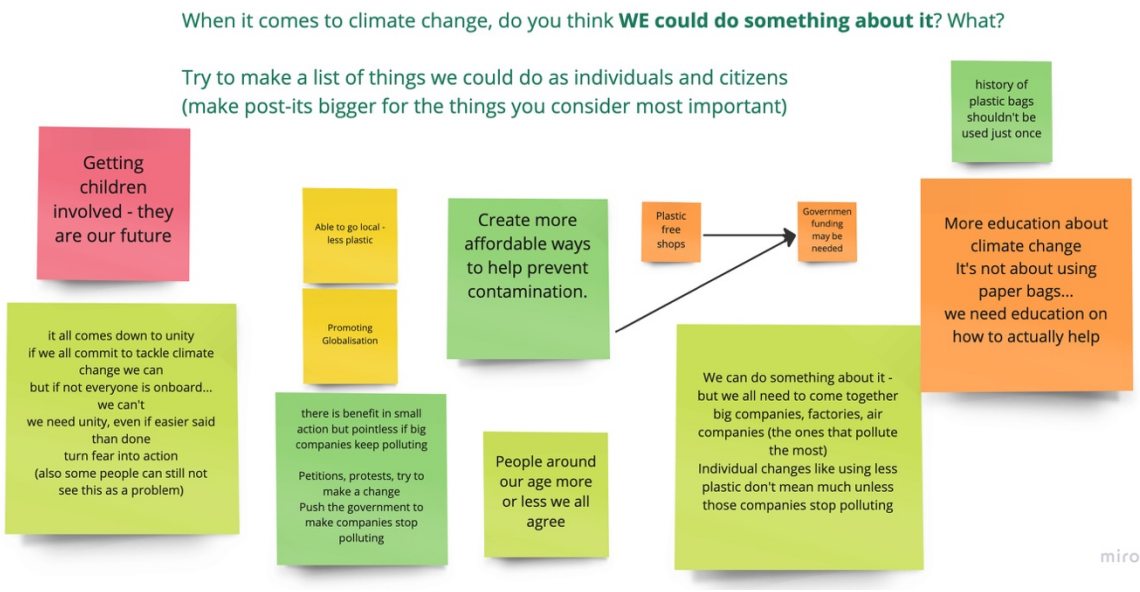


Figure 6.3c. Group B, Workshop 1: Climate Change board part 3

Unlike in Group A, in this group Greta Thunberg and 'Fridays For Future' were very popular. Most of the conversation revolved around protesting, as one written comment testimonies: *'We don't know the true impact of these protests but always important to voice opinions and try, that's democracy'*. However, the participants talked about how the outreach is heavily dependent on mass media reports about these protests, with one written comment saying: *'I love Greta, it's a shame how FFF stopped after Covid and lost momentum. Or at least they're not reporting on it. Protests were amazing, incredible amount of people that took part'*. While the first group saw petitions as the best possibility for citizens to express their opinion, the second group was more focused on protesting. However, those were the months in which the UK government was passing the 'Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022', which started a process to significatively restrict 'unacceptable' protests which has been defined as 'deeply authoritarian' by Amnesty International UK (2022). Therefore, as an activist myself I was happy to hear their thoughts on the matter but, as a researcher/educator, I was mindful to clarify that the laws around protesting are different in each country and should be taken into account.

As one participant put it: *'People around our age, more or less we all agree'*, when it comes to acting on the climate crisis. While changes in individual behaviours were mentioned, some participants brought more systemic views into the discussion, influencing the general direction: *'There is benefit in small action but pointless if big companies keep polluting'* and

'[we need] more education about climate change, it's not about using paper bags… we need education on how to actually help'. It was interesting to see how much this issue was on their mind and how strongly they felt about making bigger changes happen, as well as how they pushed each other to think systemically during the discussion. We concluded this section by saying that we would discuss more in the next meeting about how to bring more democracy in our daily life, and decided to end on a positive note summarised by one participant's comment: *'It all comes down to unity, if we all commit to tackle climate change, we can'*. Overall, both Group A's and B's participants had similar views on the issue of climate change and its importance, confirming a general tendency in this age group towards progressive politics, especially around climate change-related issues and their direct correlation with capitalism (Niemietz, 2021). While the main difference was in the depth of analysis, especially regarding potential solutions, I had the feeling that the group discussions were helping both groups to think more critically. This aspect, I suggest, could help bring about a 'conscientisation' that can be applied to their socio-political engagement as well as to physical activity, as following sections bring together.

6.1.2. Workshop 1, Wealth Inequalities: 'you can't take money to the grave'

The discussion about wealth inequalities with Group A (see *Figure 6.4.*) was very straightforward. The fact that some people can be extremely rich while most others struggle was, in their written words, *'not fair'*, *'bs'*, *'insane'*. What sparked the most interest was the TikTok video explaining Jeff Bezos' wealth using grains of rice (one grain being $100,000), a practical and visual representation that made them realise how much that is in comparison to the majority of people. Alfie, usually very quiet and detached at times, became really engaged with this topic and said assuredly: *'You can't take money to the grave'*. His comment was appreciated and quoted a few times by the rest of the group, which made him seemingly proud and more keen to contribute to the conversation from that moment onwards. At first, no thoughts were expressed on whether it would be possible to prevent this accumulation of wealth in the first place, and they just mentioned the fact that billionaires should donate more to charity. The idea of taxing billionaires was seen as fair, so much so that the focus of the conversation shifted on petitioning to tax the super-rich. Petitions came back into the picture, seemingly being what they started identifying as being the bridge between them and the people with power to make changes happen. Interestingly, there was no mention of

parliamentary politics or voting for parties that might suggest similar things, something I found understandable since none of the main parties in England officially support this idea (Crerar, 2023). Overall, Group A's participants were not engaged in politics or within their communities, but their ideas were unequivocal about inequalities being unfair and the importance of caring for other people and the community. Their approach to the matter made me recall a discussion during a seminar I led at Durham University: when talking about social class, some students defended the idea that anyone should be allowed to become a billionaire if they worked hard for it. In Group A, on the other hand, where £25 can change someone's mood, the idea that someone could earn and deserve this much money was not entertained.

Figure 6.4. Group A, Workshop 1: Wealth Inequalities board

Figure 6.4a. Group A, Workshop 1: Wealth Inequalities board part 1

Figure 6.4b. Group A, Workshop 1: Wealth Inequalities board part 2

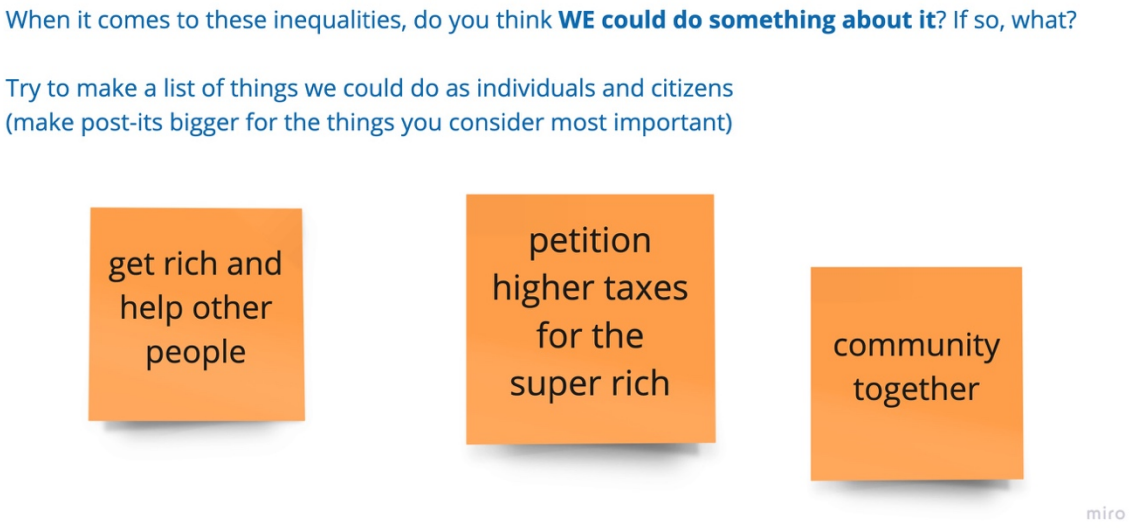


Figure 6.4c. Group A, Workshop 1: Wealth Inequalities board part 3

Group B (see *Figure 6.5.*) expressed similar levels of upset, alongside interesting systemic perspectives. Looking at Jeff Bezos' wealth 'in rice' they wrote: *'unbelievable'*, *'infuriating'*, *'it's a kick in the stomach to watch'*. While Group A had talked about charities as a potential solution, Group B discussed them critically, with one comment summarising the conversation as follows: *'Even when they say they will give money to charities they do it for tax avoidance reasons. They do it through their own charities'*. Which led to someone else commenting about how *'it shouldn't be even allowed to earn so much money'*. Bella, often the one bringing up more radical ideas, wrapped up this part of the conversation with an interesting comment that was the first mention of capitalism in the workshops: *'Unfair capitalist system keeping some people very rich and others very poor. Feels like there's no way of building up that much wealth in our current system. Have to be born into it'*. They were all in agreement about taxing extremely rich people like the ones that *'could stop world hunger if [they] wanted and prefer to fly their rocket'*, so the discussion shifted towards why it is not happening and what should be done instead. Some said that it is ok to tax the rich *'but not too heavy or they will leave the country'*, and that it's tricky because *'they know we need them'*. Others challenged the idea that rich people are needed, and one wrote jokingly that people should *'steal from the rich :)'* and when I asked about it, they said it was a Robin Hood kind of idea, but not something they would do themselves. The group discussion then focused on how important it would be to have more media attention on this issue that *'needs to be talked about more on the media we consume'*, in order to bring about the *'numbers'*, namely more

'people behind a cause'. After talking about it for a while, they recognised that the current systems in place act as barriers, and therefore started focusing on how to find hope in small and collective actions: *'Sometimes feels a bit hopeless, feels like petition and protest sometimes are pointless, but have to do something, have to try'* and *'some say protests don't get anywhere but the inspiration counts, it does make a difference, things could be even worse otherwise'*.

Figure 6.5. Group B, Workshop 1: Wealth Inequalities board

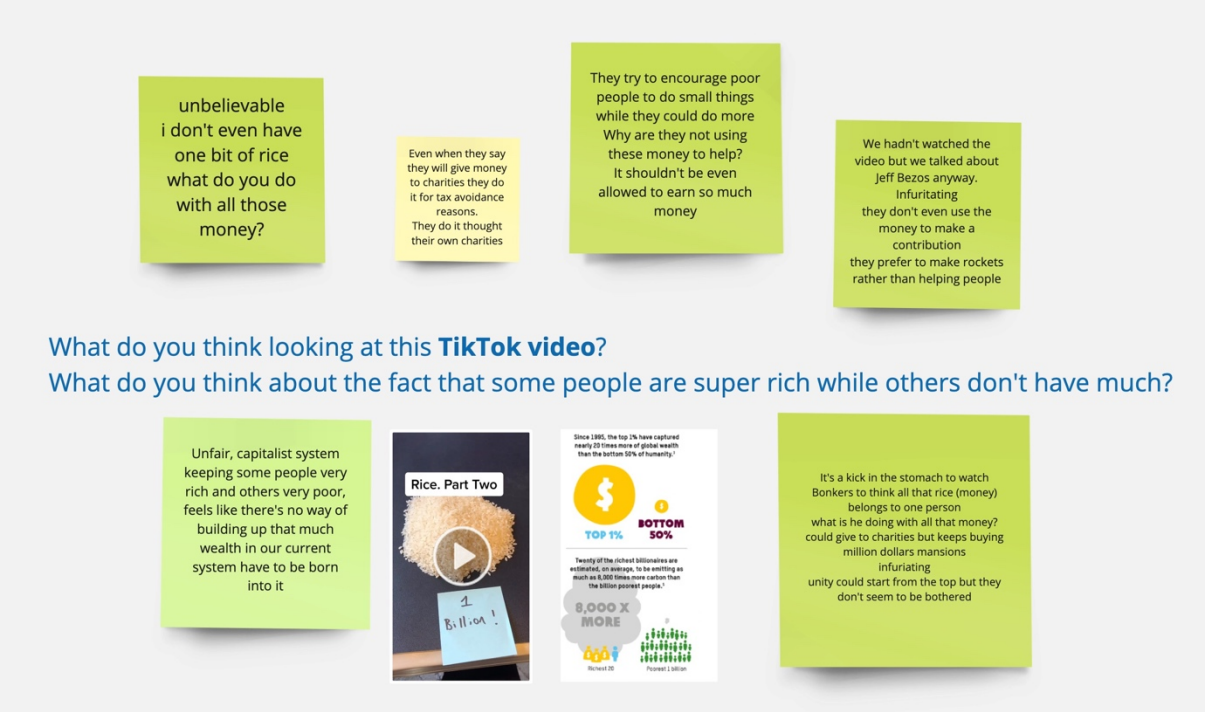


Figure 6.5a. Group B, Workshop 1: Wealth Inequalities board part 1

Figure 6.5b. Group B, Workshop 1: Wealth Inequalities board part 2

Figure 6.5c. Group B, Workshop 1: Wealth Inequalities board part 3

The participants of Group B, probably thanks to some of their experiences of engagement in community settings, had a slightly more empowered perspective compared to those in the other group. *'Small scale help'*, one wrote, *'add up to make a bigger difference'*. And another added that we should all contribute to start *'something that forms a community'*. Participants of Group B were more prone to practically visualise collective community efforts, as opposed to Group A in which the idea of helping each other was agreed upon but in rather more feeble terms.

6.1.3. Workshop 1, Health and physical activity opportunities: 'not only working to survive but exercising, meeting people'

As a continuation of discussions on climate change and wealth inequalities, I had initially planned to focus this section on health and physical activity inequalities. During the supervision, I was advised to adapt this segment to focus more on the participants' perceptions of health and physical activity opportunities in their local areas, in case the participants' potential drop-out might leave us without sufficient data regarding physical activity. In Group A (see *Figure 6.6.*), most of the answers retained an individual focus and the aspects that could be related to SDH were not always seen as enough to explain why some individuals are not active. For example, when asking 'How is it to be active in your area? Easy, ok, difficult?' the answer they all backed was *'it's easy if you try'*. Yet the North

East of England has one of the highest percentages of inactive people in the country (Sport England, 2023), therefore I decided to present these statistics later in Workshop 3. However, despite individualising agency and solutions, when asked about what makes it more difficult to conduct a healthy life, Group A did mention aspects with very structural roots. Some mentioned *'school stress'* and Albert, who works in a supermarket warehouse, added that if you *'work too much that makes you stressed'*. When I followed up, asking in which other ways can work influence a person's physical activity levels, he made the example of construction workers being tired when they arrive home and not having energies to go to the gym. Then I asked if they thought it would be easier to be active for people with higher paid office jobs, but they said that that's *'not good either'* because you're *'sitting all day'*. Their focus on stress, financial constraints and mental health issues was constant throughout the meetings, emphasising how these young adults already face enormous barriers to well-being. They also said, in relation to both costs and weather, that there should be more *'indoor places to play football and do sports cheap or for free'*.

Figure 6.6. Group A, Workshop 1: Health and Physical Activity Opportunities board

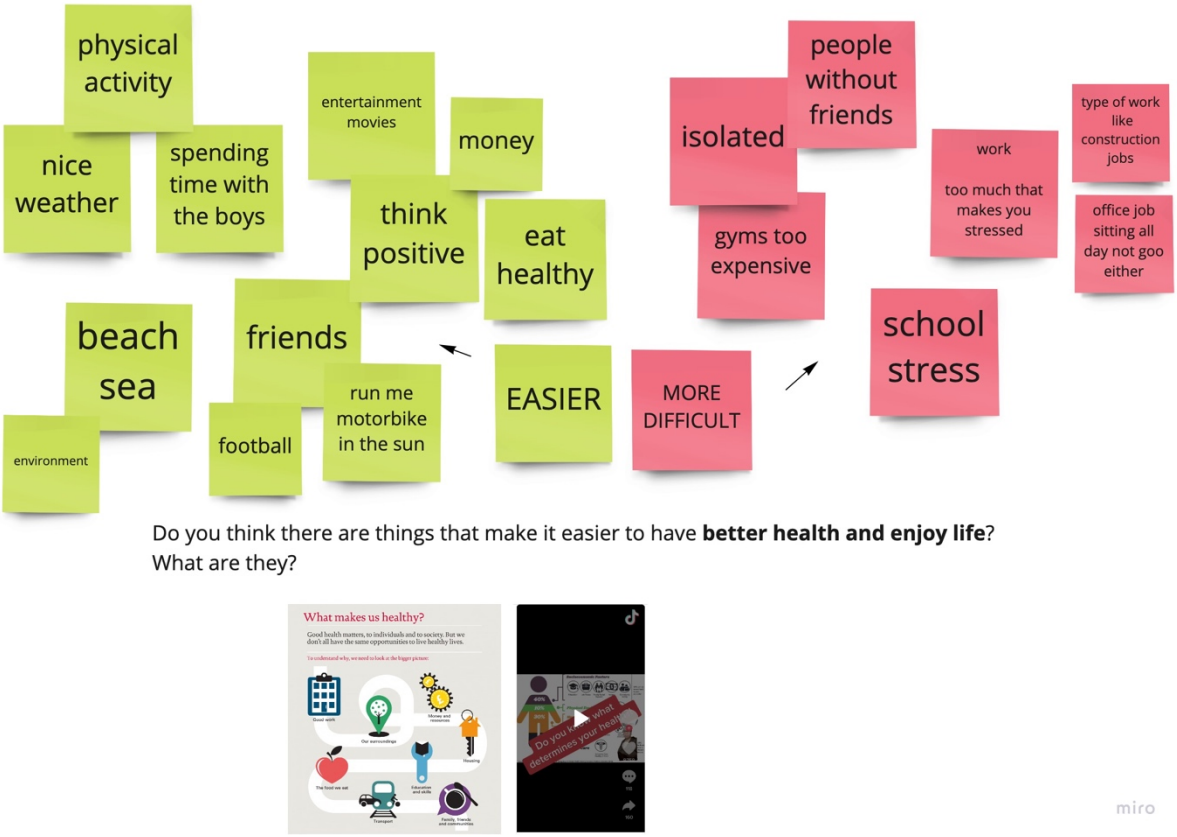


Figure 6.6a. Group A, Workshop 1: Health and Physical Activity Opportunities board part 1

Figure 6.6b. Group A, Workshop 1: Health and Physical Activity Opportunities board part 2

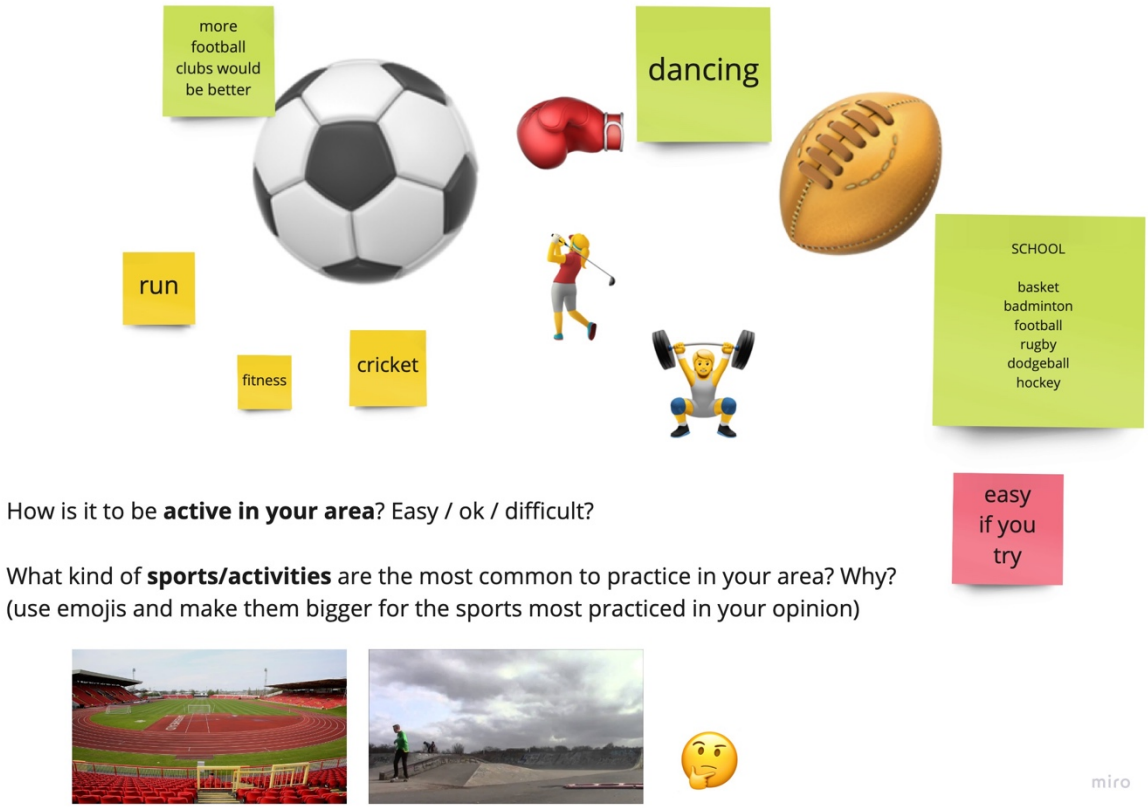


Figure 6.6c. Group A, Workshop 1: Health and Physical Activity Opportunities board part 3

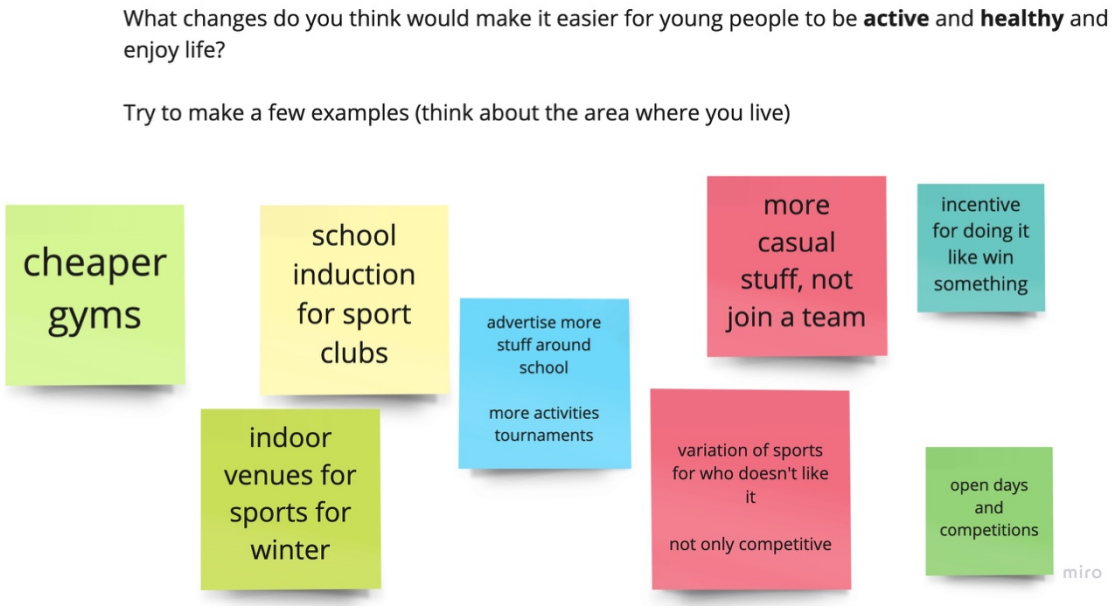


Figure 6.6d. Group A, Workshop 1: Health and Physical Activity Opportunities board part 4

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Group A's idea of physical activity had a strong focus on traditional ways of being active, such as gyms and football. Therefore, to widen the discussion, I was curious to hear Abigail's opinion – the only girl in this group – who is

completely inactive and initially said that she did not like any form of physical activity. When asked if there was at least one activity she might enjoy, she said *'hockey'* but she said that there is nowhere she can play it. Then, other participants suggested that there should be chances for *'more casual stuff, not joining a team'* and more alternatives and *'variations of sports for who doesn't like it, not only competitive'*. In this occasion, Abigail's opinion and the collective conversation that sparked from it, helped the group to shift the focus from the sports that had been considered up until then, towards a wider conception of physical activity. At the same time, I noticed that the initial idea that being active is *'easy if you try'* was leaving room for the need to be provided with fair opportunities rather than just being in the hands of each individual.

Interestingly, with Group B (see *Figure 6.7.*) this part of the workshop took the shortest amount of time – unlike with Group A – probably because the previous two sections had taken longer or perhaps because they simply found it less engaging than talking about climate change and wealth inequalities. However, similarly to what had emerged in the interviews and in the other group, the main concept discussed when talking about health was time: *'Some people have motivation'* to stay active *'but not time'*. They also added: *'We need stability to be able to take free time. And the right amount of money to make sure we can take time for ourselves. Not only working to survive but exercising, meeting people. Not everyone can do this'*. Also in terms of how they view physical activity opportunities, there was one major similarity with the other group, namely voicing a desire for *'alternative sports'*. While several traditional sports were mentioned, participants said that this is because *'mainstream sports are easier to access while it is hard to find a group of people who practice less popular sports'*. While in Group A Abigail – the only female – was the first to bring up examples of alternative sports that had not yet been considered by the male participants, in Group B – a more demographically diverse group – these were considered straight away. When one participant said that *'there's many sports out there we don't know about, it's not only running and football'*, I asked all of them if they had any examples in mind and they mentioned lacrosse, Gaelic football, hockey, badminton and handball. While these are noticeably all team sports, my interpretation is that less popular ones might carry a less competitive and performance-related aura, one that makes less active young people feel more at ease taking part without necessarily having to be good at it. One participant wrote: *'Usually we can only try the same sports. There is no chance to experience other sports. Also sports can be off putting for some and costs are off putting too. Some sports are only*

accessible to certain social classes'. Lack of opportunities, especially for people that cannot afford, feel excluded or live far away from the opportunities that exist was a recurring theme throughout both groups. When discussing what could make it easier for young people to be more active and healthier and enjoy life, this group's participants started from the assumption that it is *'quite expensive to do different activities that aren't running or walking'*. Therefore, they suggested increasing accessibility of sport facilities by making them *'cheaper for 16-25's'*, and creating *'more outdoor activities and more variation of activities, mak[ing] use of parks and green areas to exercise for free'*. This comment was appreciated by many other participants and is in line with mounting evidence of the multi-layered benefits on our well-being of exercising outdoors and in contact with nature (Barton et al., 2016; Donnelly and MacIntyre, 2019). Other comments focused on improving education and social media promotions, to improve people's motivation. However, there was also recognition of a need to have *'more […] chances to get together, doesn't have to be a team, just people you like to surround yourself with'*, confirming a trend emerged in the interviews and in Group A, namely the will to be active with other people but not necessarily in organised settings. Someone also added that there should be *'more community engagement, making young people want to join in'* – a point which was leading very close to what would be the focus of Workshop 3 and the physical activity action we would aim to create.

Figure 6.7. Group B, Workshop 1: Health and Physical Activity Opportunities board

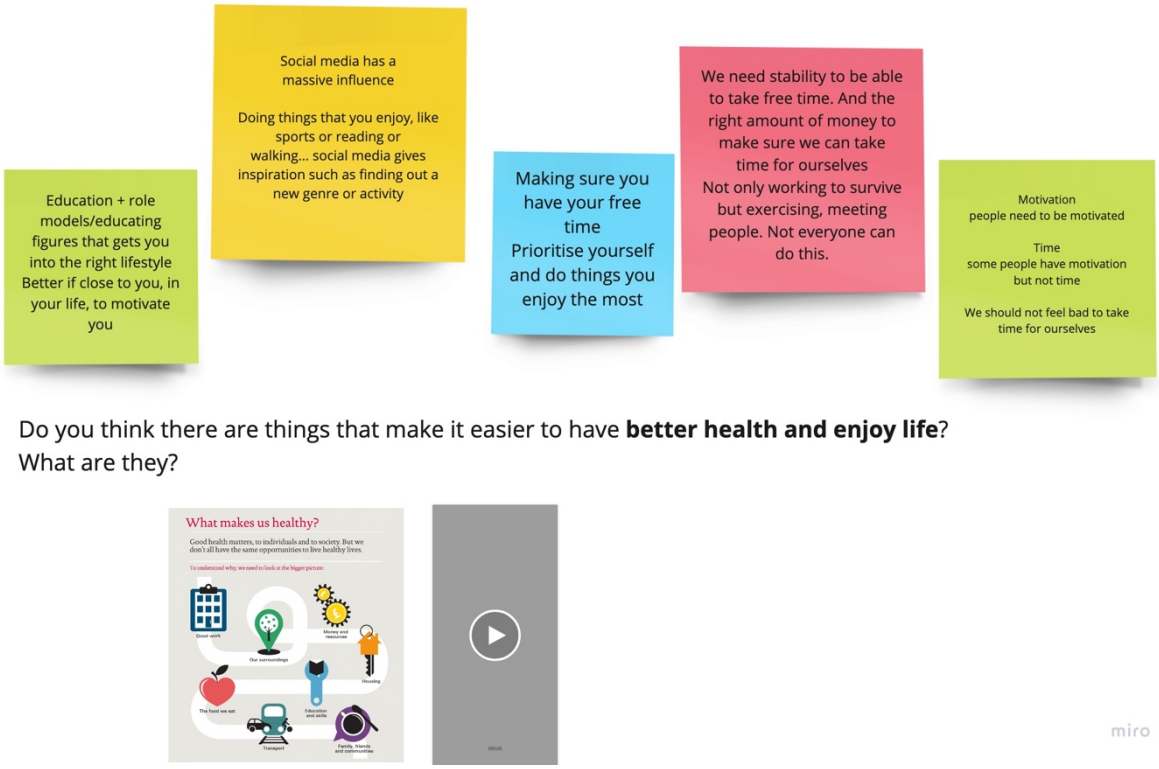


Figure 6.7a. Group B, Workshop 1: Health and Physical Activity Opportunities board part 1

Figure 6.7b. Group B, Workshop 1: Health and Physical Activity Opportunities board part 2

Figure 6.7c. Group B, Workshop 1: Health and Physical Activity Opportunities board part 3

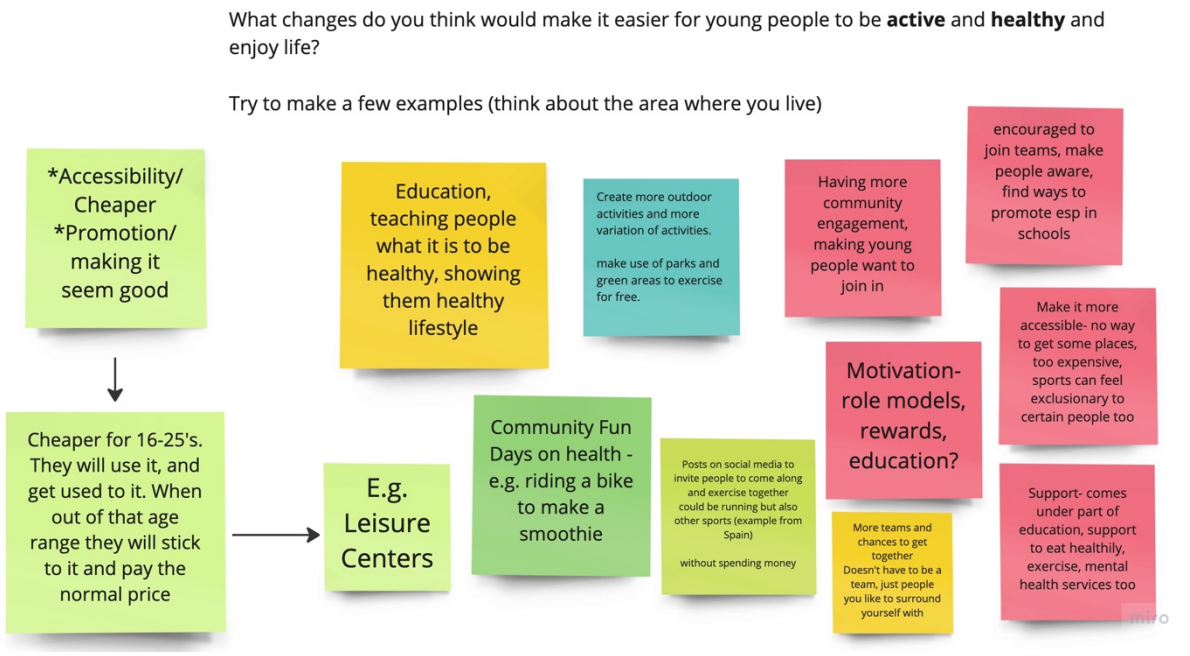


Figure 6.7d. Group B, Workshop 1: Health and Physical Activity Opportunities board part 4

Both groups discussed aspects that had started emerging during the interviews, namely the relevance of material barriers and the will to experiment with new ways to be active. This section of Workshop 1, however, was seemingly bringing a solution-driven perspective to the fore. Albeit to different extents, the prompts were supporting both Group A and B in

critically analysing current physical activity opportunities (and lack thereof) while also articulating potential alternatives that could allow more people to be active.

6.1.4. Final reflections on Workshop 1

Workshop 1 followed slightly different patterns and depth of analysis between the two groups, but overall I observed a similar trend to that emerged during the interviews, namely a very strong awareness of societal issues that came alongside a need (latent in Group A and at times directly expressed in Group B) to visualise hopeful solutions. Specifically regarding physical activity, participants of both groups insisted on the lack of time, financial resources and accessible opportunities to be active: I perceived their perspectives to be in line with this project's core theoretical stance, namely that in the current economic system most of our lives revolve around creating profit and working for survival, which forces the majority of people away from not-commodified forms of leisure, movement and enjoyment more generally (Hickel, 2020; Soper, 2020). I found this to be felt by the young adults in this project that struggle to make ends meet and often cannot *'prioritise [themselves] and do things [they] enjoy the most'*.

From a methodological point of view, I observed how some of the aspects discussed kept informing subsequent opinions and once participants raised the bar of critical thinking – even slightly – they would keep thinking in those terms. This happened with concepts that they raised themselves (e.g., the petitions in Group A) as well as with prompts from the boards (e.g., the TikTok video about Jeff Bezos' wealth: in fact, pictures and short videos seemed to be the most effective and recurrently mentioned prompts). At the same time, Workshop 1 (especially with Group A, the first in chronological order) helped me confront the need to balance between valuing participants' opinions and prompting further critical reflections when these were needed. In this process, I was helped by one or two participants that either built on my prompts or spontaneously brought up arguments to deepen the discussion, a valuable aspect for the kind of egalitarian yet critical pedagogy I strived for. At the same time, I also noted how my interventions proved important in some instances, even though I tried to limit them, especially with Group A. For example, I briefly mentioned my experience living in Sweden, when I could access most sport facilities for free and I received the *friskvårdsbidrag* a contribution equivalent to £360 that every working citizen gets each year

to spend in sport activities. Later in the discussion, the group suggested that introducing financial incentives to take part in physical activities could help people become more active: thanks to this example and the discussions that followed, the group had started moving from their initial *'it's easy [to be active] if you try'* to conceiving the need of structural support to influence individuals' lifestyles. In the following workshops I therefore kept in mind that, even if I strongly wanted to avoid what Freire calls 'banking education' (1972), I should still play my part in the collective production of knowledge.

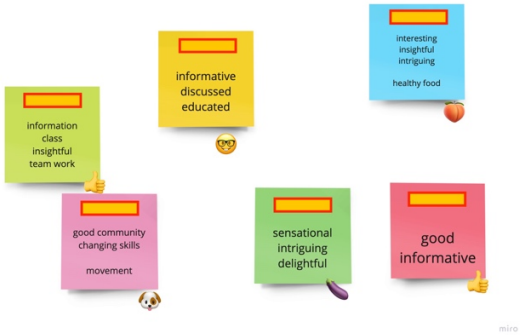


Figure 6.8. Group A, Feelings about Workshop 1

Figure 6.9. Group B, Feelings about Workshop 1

To conclude Workshop 1, I told both groups that, whoever wanted to, could summarise how they felt about it in three words and one emoji (see *Figures 6.8.* and *6.9.*). Participants of Group A wrote: *interesting, insightful/informative (x4), intriguing (x2), educated, teamwork, good community, changing skills, good and class*. While Group B wrote: *interactive, interesting (x4), enjoyable, great ideas, in depth thoughts, thoughtful, thought-provoking, affirming, curious (x2), motivating and educated*. I recognise that my presence did not ensure complete impartiality, even though they could choose to be anonymous or skip this feedback altogether. However, in both instances, participants seemed to find the conversations informative while also enjoyable and motivational. I found the overall feedback and mood to be positive, considering how emotionally loaded the topics discussed could have been. This aspect might be related to the environment we co-created, namely a relaxed and open one, and it shows how the participants felt comfortable discussing these topics.

6.2. Workshop 2

After having focused on structural issues in Workshop 1, I designed Workshop 2 to introduce alternative ways to organise the economy and society more broadly. I was interested to observe how post-capitalist, hopeful and utopian concepts would be discussed and whether they would influence participants' ways of looking at physical activity within their communities. Here, we approached cooperative ways to run businesses, Community Wealth Building and degrowth paradigms, with a link to sport and physical activity, and then participants had the chance to depict their ideal community.

6.2.1. Workshop 2, Alternative Businesses: 'can't believe all businesses aren't like that'

Each of the workshops took place on a different day, and when I met Group A for the second one, I could sense immediately that participants felt more comfortable with me and each other. Group A (see *Figure 6.10.*) had never heard about alternative business models, such as cooperatives, but the more they read about them the more positive they seemed to feel. The prompts I had included were very brief, but they got interested and started googling more about it on their own, showing a growing engagement compared to Workshop 1. In general, they liked the fact that the businesses taken as examples were paying attention to the environment as well as their employees: *'Tree plant[ing] one is cool, like Google but better, it's neat'* and *'La Pajaro is similar to other food delivery services like Uber Eats and Deliveroo, though this La Pajaro is better for the environment and it's employees'*. Participants focused particularly on La Pajara, since the delivery companies were something they felt close to and they discussed how mainstream ones usually do not pay their employees nearly enough. On the contrary, La Pajara provides *'better benefits as well as a fixed salary'* and they also *'use bikes so there is less environmental impact as well as keeping the employees in better physical health'*. As the participants themselves summarised it, all these business models *'try to help the communities'* and have a *'low carbon footprint',* in other words they're *'similar to famous companies but improved'*. This conversation seemed to support participants in looking beyond the dichotomy between a greener economy and fair work opportunities, where both concepts appeared to be possibly achieved simultaneously. Participants appreciated how these businesses were *'good for everyone'*, but thought that there is not many of them yet *'because they don't make enough profit. Corporate greed, bosses want to make all the money for themselves'*. With these remarks, I could perceive their attention going towards the critical core of a capitalist economy, namely generating profit for

the few, at the expense of the many and of the environment. I noticed a further step of their critical engagement when they started spontaneously thinking about how these principles could be applied to other areas as well: *'Ecosia could be used with more things other than a search engine. For example, every time you buy food from a shop, they could use a small part of the proceeds to plant trees'*. When I asked whether these principles could be applied to sports and physical activity, they mentioned gyms that could also do *'activities for the community and share some profits for the community'*, and that could *'make more activities free or affordable'* especially for *'the people that can't afford it'*. This section seemingly interested participants since it presented small and apparently easy shifts that businesses could make to act more ethically and finance charities or existing community projects related to physical activity.

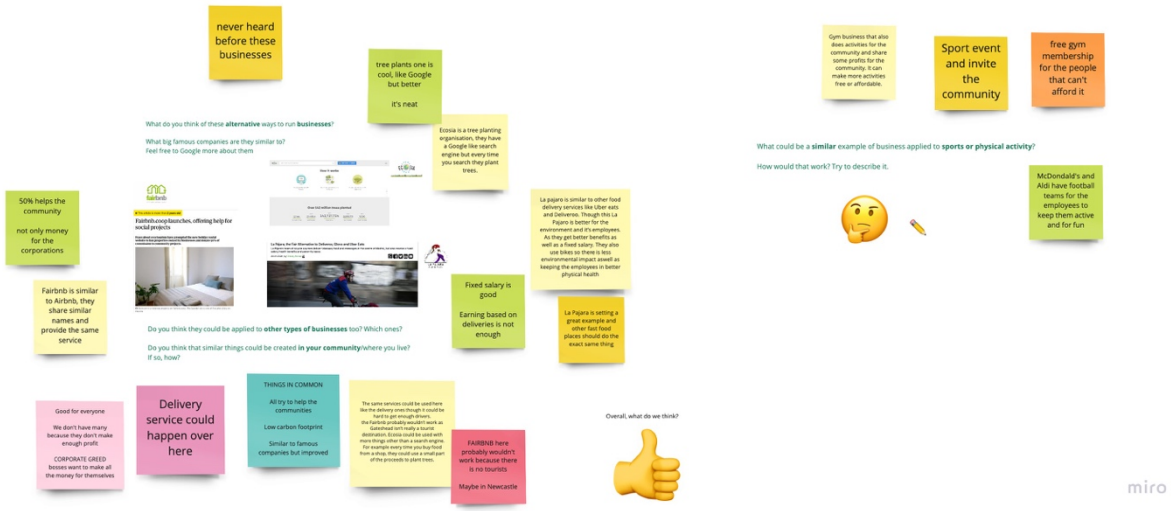


Figure 6.10. Group A, Workshop 2: Alternative Businesses board

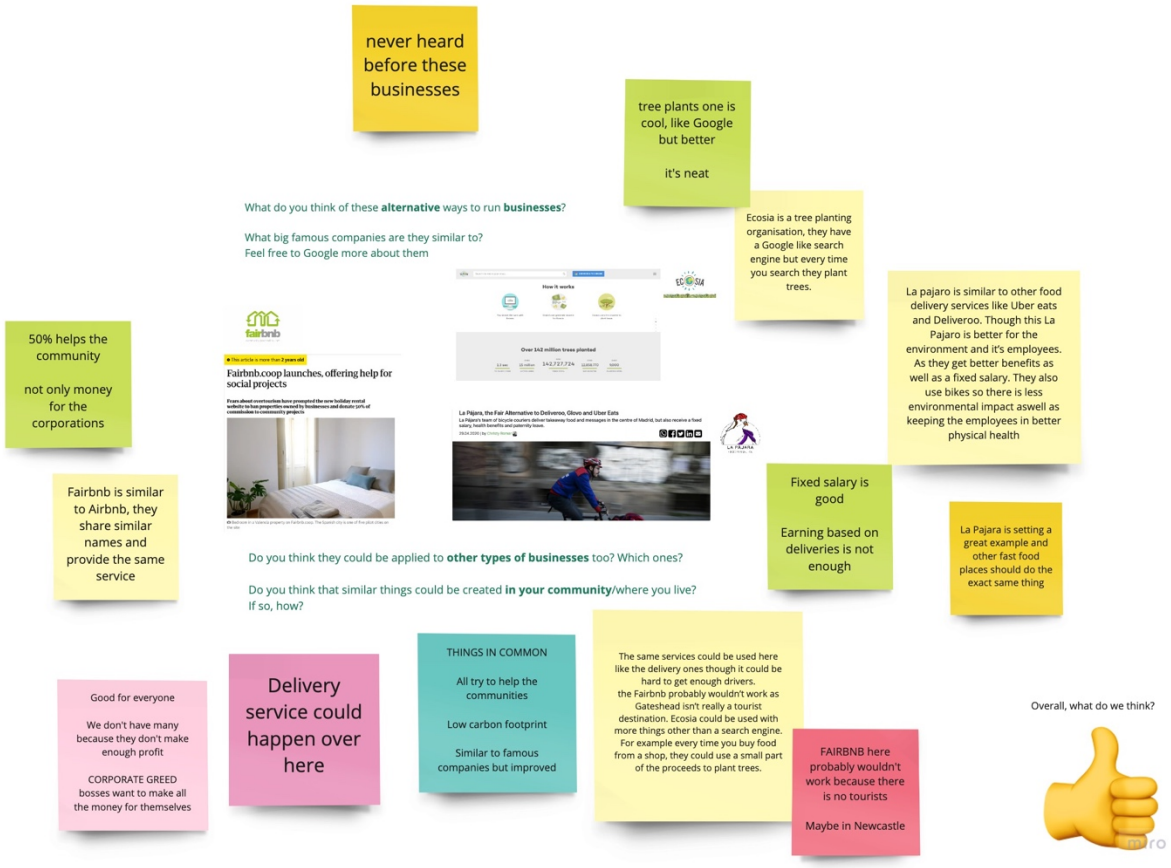


Figure 6.10a. Group A, Workshop 2: Alternative Businesses board part 1

Figure 6.10b. Group A, Workshop 2: Alternative Businesses board part 2

Similarly to Group A, no one in Group B (see *Figure 6.11.*) had ever heard about these kinds of businesses, despite several participants being interested in political and economic matters. One participant was bringing forward sceptical reflections, such as *'Do they really tell the truth? Do they actually plant the trees?'* which sparked lively debates. While I was fairly sure that Ecosia, FairBnB and La Pajara are legitimate in their intent, I took the opportunity and asked everyone to express their doubts – if they had any – and encouraged them to research information on their own. Some said it would be *'easier […] for companies thriving but difficult for smaller companies'* and that some companies *'might use this topic just to make their company bigger'* or for *'tax avoidance'* like *'Jeff Bezos' charity'*. I encouraged this kind of critical reflection, because I empathise with their lack of trust towards particular companies aligned with the capitalist system that adopt greenwashing whilst making significant profits. On the other hand, Beatriz wrote that it is a *'good initiative to keep money local rather than sending money to one person/managers'* and elaborated giving an example from her Southern European home country of a locally owned bakery in which nothing has a price and everyone can pay what they can afford. I found this plurality of perspectives very important when collectively creating knowledge, especially since different cultures have different relationships with the capitalist system. On this note, I also noticed that most of the English participants, even when they criticised the status quo, struggled to visualise small local businesses and kept referring to big chains: *'Big businesses have a responsibility to help out the communities they're in, not all about profits for bosses'* and *'bigger businesses have power to offer more support to community projects'*. Initially, their solutions were focused on making those big companies more socially and environmentally aware, rather than questioning the very existence of such a business model and visualising alternatives. This applied also to the physical activity sphere (as it was the case also in the other group), where most of their suggestions revolved around *'big businesses'* such as McDonald's *'putting money into sports clubs and facilities'*, *'businesses […] helping out community projects'*, *'help[ing] charities and sporting events'* and donating money or equipment to *'grassroots [projects] and communities'*. Overall, Group B responded positively to this section and to the idea of cooperative companies with a focus on sustainability, and concluded that *'everyone can do it'*. As summarised by one participant's comment, *'can't believe all businesses aren't like that, why can't everyone follow same footsteps'*.

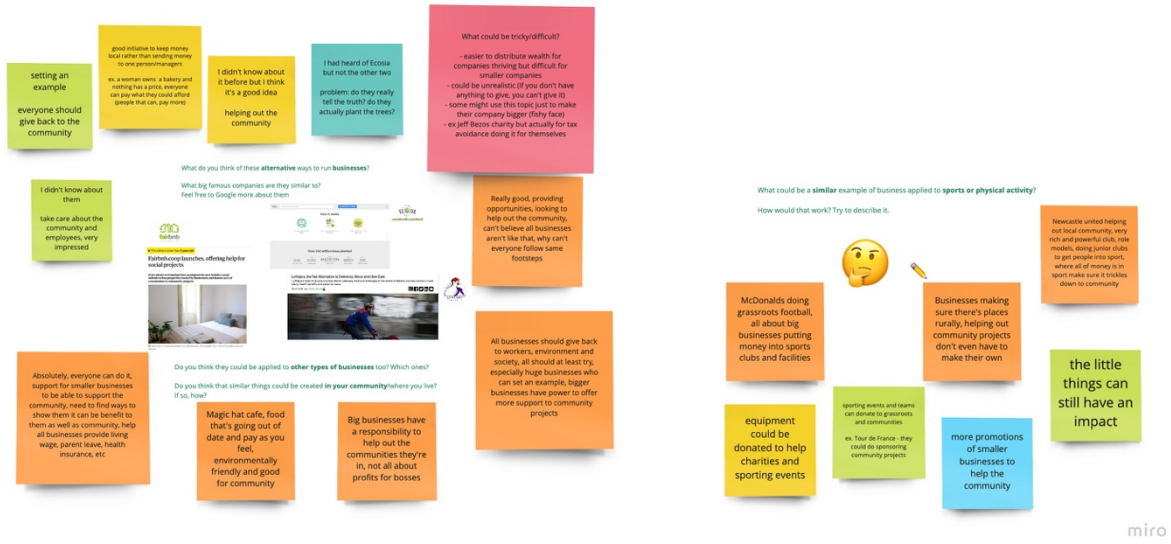


Figure 6.11. Group B, Workshop 2: Alternative Businesses board

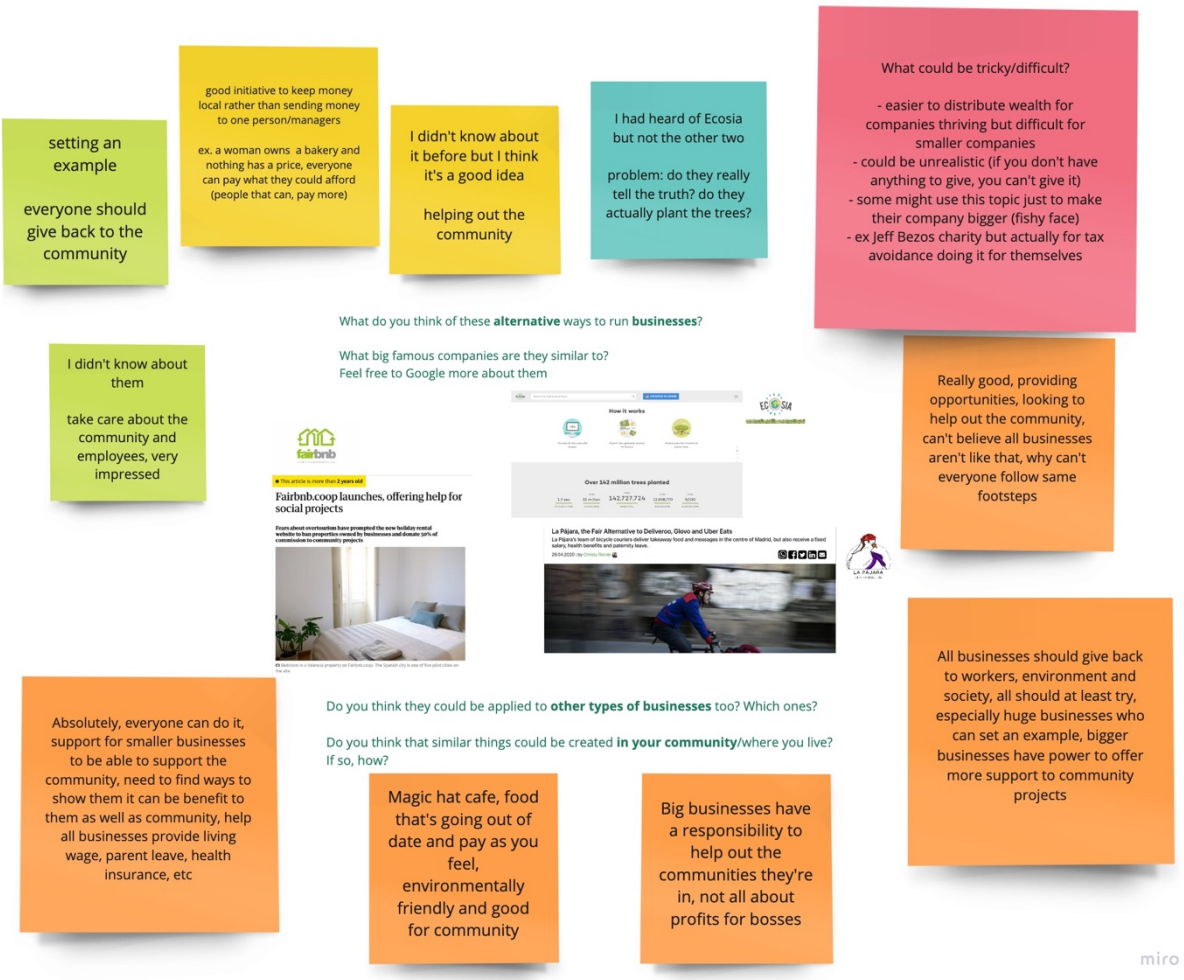


Figure 6.11a. Group B, Workshop 2: Alternative Businesses board part 1

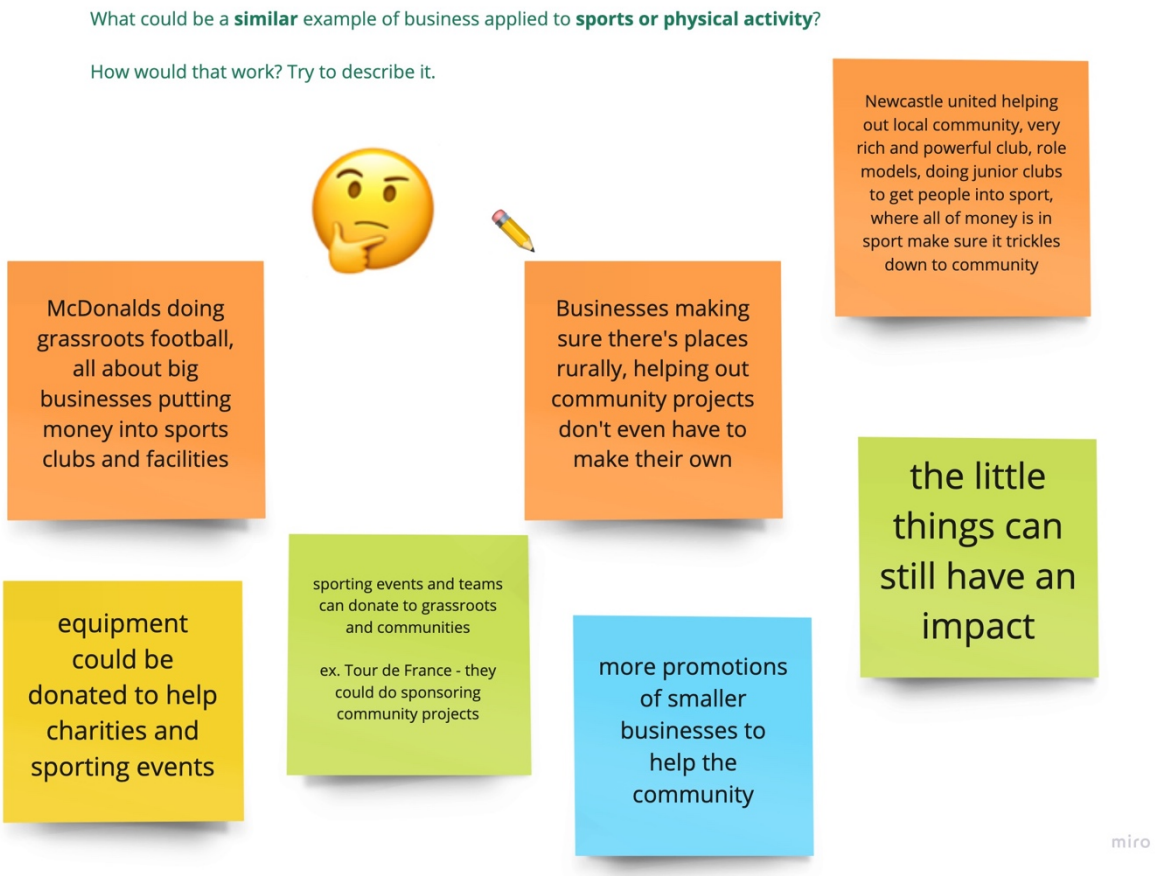


Figure 6.11b. Group B, Workshop 2: Alternative Businesses board part 2

6.2.2. Workshop 2, Community Wealth Building and Degrowth: 'work less, play more'

With Group A, this part of the workshop, focused on Community Wealth Building (see *Figure 6.12.*), ran much shorter than the previous one. The example of local currencies took all of their attention before we could delve deeper into CWB itself. They thought that the idea *'sounds alright but hard to start your currency'* and *'if you do it without creating your own money maybe it could work better'*. The topic of money catalysed their attention and seemed to put a halt to the discussion, so I took mental note and decided to move on, skipping the part in which they would talk about how CWB could relate to the sport and physical activity sphere. In hindsight, this section might have been better off focusing only on CWB: I had included practical examples of cities in the UK that are already putting it into practice, and starting by watching the short video 'What is Community (a.k.a. Local) Wealth Building?' might have eased participants better into the discussion.

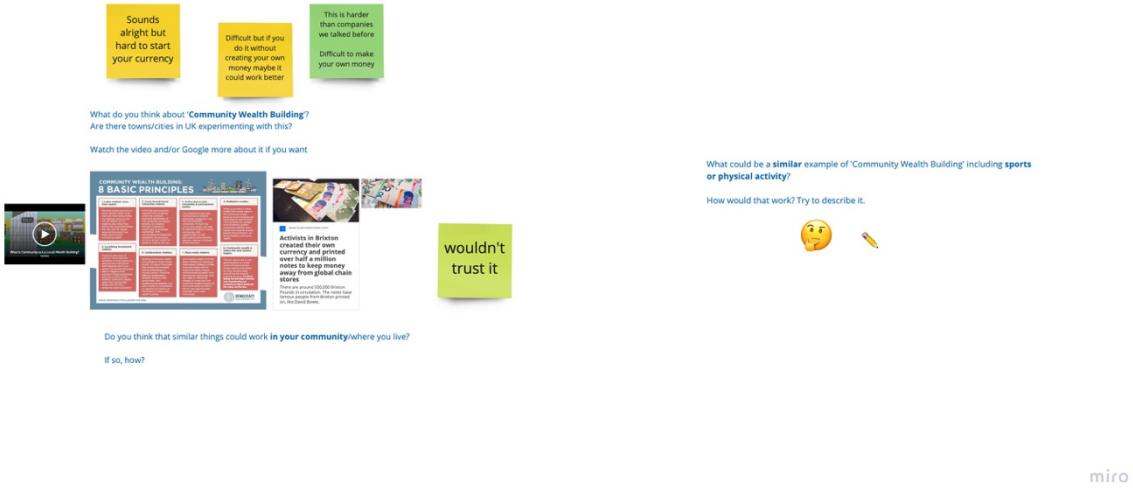


Figure 6.12. Group A, Workshop 2: Community Wealth Building board

Figure 6.12a. Group A, Workshop 2: Community Wealth Building board part 1

Since the CWB section had run short, I decided to use the board introducing the concept of degrowth (see *Figure 6.13*.) that I had only prepared as a back-up. Their response was unexpected, especially after how the CWB section had just been quickly dismissed: they had never heard of degrowth but they were really enthusiastic about its principles. Similarly to

what they had said when looking at alternative businesses, they liked how the *'eco-friendly'* and *'the importance of the community'* went hand in hand, showing again a tendency to see environmental and social issues as equally important. They particularly appreciated the *'work less, play more'* principle, confirming what had emerged during the interviews and in Workshop 1, namely their discontent with their jobs, the stress that comes from them and the way this affects their work-life balance. Furthermore, while they were reading and googling about degrowth I saw them starting to think more systemically, and mentioning aspects connected to capitalist principles in a critical way: *'I think that degrowth sounds like it would be good for the planet as we use so many resources and consume so much'*. They recognised that *'global warming [is] caused by released gasses into the atmosphere from factories and other man made things'*, therefore they welcomed the idea to *'cut down consuming'* and not making *'things that you're not gonna use'*. Even if capitalism was not mentioned directly, its consumeristic core was questioned and an alternative that moves beyond it was seen as undoubtedly better. I expected them to have more mixed feelings, and in fact I asked if they had any doubts and left them time to think about it, but they did not find any criticism. At the end, I concluded this section by saying that it is important to stay curious, and I invited them to keep reading more about topics they might find interesting, beyond the information I was providing them. I noticed how the discussions were starting to open a crack in the 'thick fog' of 'capitalist realism' (Fisher, 2009), seeing changes and alternatives as less impossible.

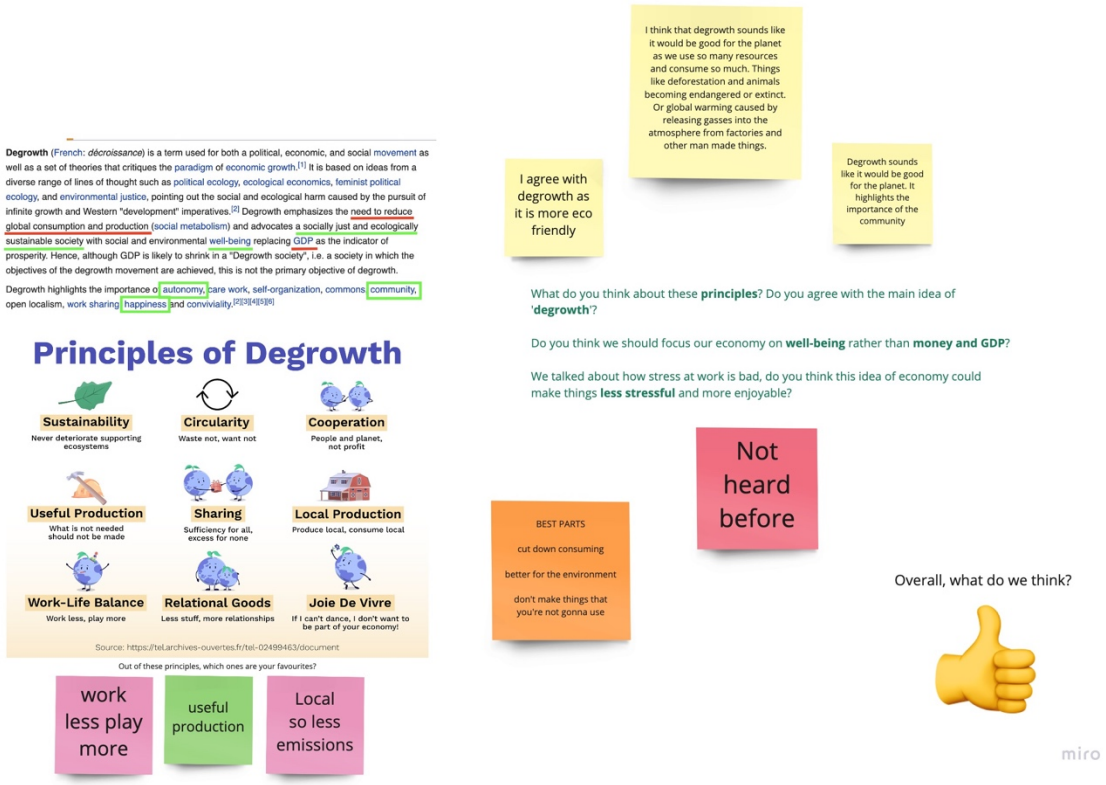


Figure 6.13. Group A, Workshop 2: Degrowth board

Again, in Group B (see Figure *6.14.*) no one had heard about CWB. In the beginning of the conversation many doubts were raised, and the concept was seen as a nice idea *'in theory'*. Similarly to the other group, the local currency was considered *'too extreme'* because it might *'put off visitors'* and *'investors'* and would be *'too costly'*. Someone also added that *'it's impossible to have everything being local, imports are necessary'* and that *'outside investment is necessary for quicker growth'*. Most of these remarks were made by one participant (Bernard) who is very politically engaged and showed progressive values throughout the project: his points with regards to the economy, however, were an interesting representation of the capitalist hegemony that portrays growth as a positive and unquestionable concept, even if it is not fairly shared and clearly unsustainable within planetary boundaries (Raworth, 2017). Respecting their opinion but still willing to stimulate deeper engagement, I asked whether those outside investors would automatically be beneficial. Someone answered that *'communities do better having money in the local area'*, and others started agreeing and saying that we should *'support local business as much as we can to create better local wealth'*. They also focused on whether this might help *'bridging [the] gap of upper and lower class'* and between the wealthier and less wealthy areas of the country. Even though participants saw these things as pretty difficult to be realised, the

majority thought that we should strive to *'create [a] good balance'* with *'not only big companies and big cities thriving'* but also local and small ones doing so. Someone tried to summarise the discussion and wrote that *'we should experiment more with these'* strategies that can reduce exploitation, since *'big companies took over everything [and] local things are too expensive'*. Someone added that they *'would like to buy meat from the local butcher but it's too expensive, they should be made more affordable'*. Then, Beatriz – originally from Southern Europe – helped the group discussing how in other countries buying local is not as difficult and often less expensive. Her intervention helped the group think beyond the capitalist realist boundaries of the known and close the circle with the topic of outside investors mentioned earlier: they agreed that those outside investors might pay low wages, which then forces people to buy cheaper meat in the supermarket instead of higher quality one at the local butcher.

Figure 6.14. Group B, Workshop 2: Community Wealth Building board

Figure 6.14a. Group B, Workshop 2: Community Wealth Building board part 1

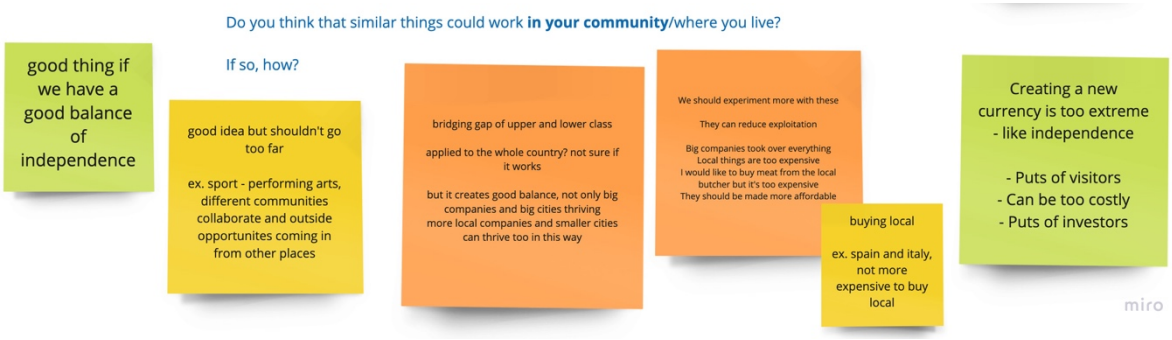


Figure 6.14b. Group B, Workshop 2: Community Wealth Building board part 2

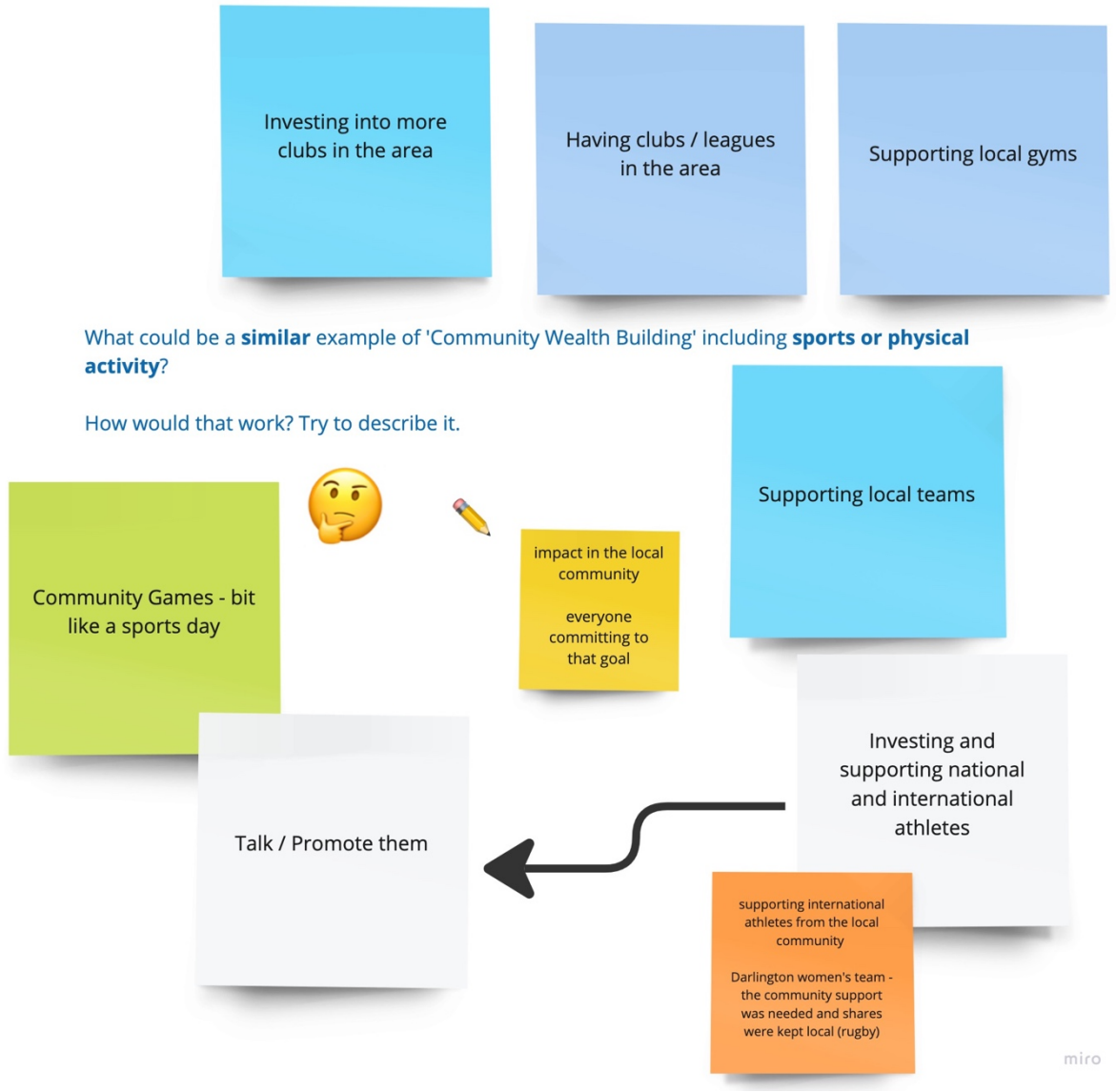


Figure 6.14c. Group B, Workshop 2: Community Wealth Building board part 3

When we focused on how CWB could apply to sport and physical activity, they suggested *'community games'*, *'supporting local gyms'* and *'teams'*, but this part did not spark as many reflections as previous ones. In hindsight, I believe that this question might be best suited for Workshop 3, instead of creating a repetition of similar topics.

As with Group A, everyone said that they had never heard about degrowth before. Therefore, I introduced the board in *Figure 6.15.* saying that I would not expect them to have a clear opinion immediately, and that they could read more about it to form a more informed view. However, like in the other group, it seemed straightforward to them: one participant wrote *'I agree with all the principles, makes sense […]'* which was agreed upon. This group, in a

similar way to Group A, focused on how important it is to combine attention to sustainability *'especially now with climate change'* with *'sharing'*, *'helping people'* and *'going local'*.

Figure 6.15. Group B, Workshop 2: Degrowth board

In both groups, I noticed the contrast between the individual interviews – when nearly all of them had thought impossible to base communities and societies around people's well-being – and this section in which they started visualising these principles as actually applicable. In my view, the flat and critical pedagogical discussions were substantially shifting participants' opinion, and I noticed them enjoying articulating languages of hope and change. Therefore, I was interested to see if any of the ideas discussed so far would influence their view of an ideal community and how to be an active part of it.

6.2.3. Workshop 2, Visualising an Ideal Community: one where 'people always help each other, [and] things are naturally shared'

When starting this section of Workshop 2, I stressed to participants that they could dream as big as they wanted, without any limits. Most of Group A's suggestions (see *Figure 6.16.*) were humble, did not include anything luxurious or extremely complex, and mostly related to solving the issues they faced in their daily lives. Safety was a core topic: when I followed up asking whether it is safe or not in the area where they live, they burst into a *'not at all!'*

almost laughing at my question. *'Drugs'* and *'smack heads'* took a significant part of the discussion as well, since they said that the issue is widespread in that area. When I challenged them to think about solutions for these issues, at first they talked about increasing *'cameras'* to improve safety and making *'all [drugs] illegal'* to stop people from becoming addicted. Then Albert started bringing a different depth to the discussion, saying how criminality cannot be stopped with more cameras but rather with a *'living wage so that people don't have to steal'* and that drug addictions actually call for *'more therapists, more places to meet and spend time'*. The most striking aspect of this conversation was how humble the participants were in taking on board the suggestions that others were making when they thought they were better. Once they started thinking in more structural terms, they kept applying this lens to other aspects as well. Their ideal community in which *'no one would be hungry'* started becoming not impossible to visualise – as it had been described by most of them during the interviews –, since it could use *'government support and funding'* as well as *'benefits for people that need it'*. Making a more *'sustainable'* community was also identified as important, and it could incorporate the *'things we discussed last time'* such as *'community things, recycling, more bikes'*. It was noticeable how previous conversations left a mark in how they imagined an ideal community to be. They also mentioned *'free public gyms'* and *'affordable facilities'* such as *'gyms, leisure centres, swimming pools'*, stressing their importance for people's well-being. When I followed up asking whether and how we could contribute, they focused on the idea of a *'walking club'* as something easier to achieve but that could, at the same time, bring similar benefits. As mentioned earlier, walking was already a recurring theme throughout the interviews and it continued to be so in the workshops, also going on to influence the action we later planned. Overall, Group A did not imagine anything particularly fancy for themselves, just a community in which people can have a decent life, based on solidaristic principles: everyone should be *'paid fairly and on a living wage'* and *'no one [should be] homeless'*, we should have *'nice public spaces'* and everyone should have the chance to *'be happy and healthy and feel safe'*.

Figure 6.16. Group A, Workshop 2: Ideal Community board

In this segment, Group B (see *Figure 6.17.*) seemed to think slightly bigger compared to Group A. This might be due to different reasons, including the fact that their daily lives might be less influenced by issues such as criminality and drug addictions. For example, they mentioned *'giant free libraries'*, *'plenty of walking and cycling paths'*, chances for everyone to try *'different things'* and to experiment with *'arts for fun and mental health'*. As with Group A, I could see how the topics we had previously discussed were having an impact on their imagination. Things such as not being too dependent on *'modern technology and capitalism ideas like owning expensive brands'* were followed up by ideas connected to a *'community based society, [where] people always help each other, [and] things are naturally shared'*. They also discussed how this might look like in more detail, as summarised by one note: *'shorter working days, only three days a week well paid, everyone has time to be part of [a] community and volunteer, as well as exercise, see friends and do what [they] love'*. I observed how the 'capitalist realist' thinking prevalent during the interviews was starting to make way to alternative ideas, that in Freirean terms can be considered a first step towards moving beyond 'limit situations' (Freire, 1972). I believe that even if participants' predisposition towards these ideas was not entirely created during the workshops, the knowledge-based group-conversations were supporting the development of their ideas, making hopeful views look possible and less unachievable. Participants talked about their

ideal community as something like a *'second family'* where everyone is *'caring for each other'*, cars are shared, everyone is *'friendly'*, there are lively *'town squares'*, *'markets'* and *'community hubs'*. Arguably, a less profit-driven and more collectivised community.

Figure 6.17. Group B, Workshop 2: Ideal Community board

Figure 6.17a. Group B, Workshop 2: Ideal Community board part 1

Figure 6.17b. Group B, Workshop 2: Ideal Community board part 2

6.2.4. Final reflections on Workshop 2: 'if people have more free time, being healthy and active comes natural'

If the interviews and Workshop 1 had shown the participants' awareness of inequalities, Workshop 2 showed how relevant it was to discuss hopeful and empowering solutions. Even when dreaming big, the groups maintained awareness that some of the changes mentioned might be difficult to be realised in the short-term: nevertheless, I noticed their thoughts starting to shift from the hopeless 'capitalist realism' of the interviews, towards being open about alternatives. Regardless of how they might (or might not) make use of this knowledge in the future, they had the chance to widen their horizon beyond the hopeless and limiting narrative that there are no alternatives to the current unequal status quo. Nearly all of the participants had never heard of the topics discussed in Workshop 2, and not only did they engage with them favourably, but they also started taking those perspectives on board and included some aspects into their view of an ideal community. In Group B, I was struck by Bernard, a participant who was politically engaged, held very progressive values but struggled to think beyond the limits of the socio-economic status quo. His sceptical opinions were largely influential at first, but the conversation remained lively and his stance was challenged by other participants in a respectful manner, which helped the group see different sides of the topics discussed and ultimately brought even him to assume a more possibilist stance. In this process, I found crucial the interventions of Beatriz, the only foreigner in that group, which challenged what others considered to be the norm from a UK perspective, as well as Bella, who contributed informed and deep analyses. In Group A, it was mostly Albert contributing more structural perspectives, such as in the example of a *'living wage'* as the best way to stop criminality and *'more therapists'* and *'places to meet and spend time'* to combat drug addictions. A striking aspect of these conversation was how humbly participants disagreed with each other and took on board new ideas: the flat pedagogical style seemingly allowed them a space to educate themselves in positive and respectful ways.

I found very interesting a particular interaction that happened in Group B. In one of the initial breakout rooms, Brandon and Beatriz asked me jokingly: *'What do you want to know from us? Do you want us to save the world?'*. I answered saying that later on in the project we could try to answer that question together. However, minutes later, when discussing the ideal community with the whole group, Brandon himself wrote a comment (see *Figure 6.18.*) that summarises the theoretical stance behind this project better than I could have done myself:

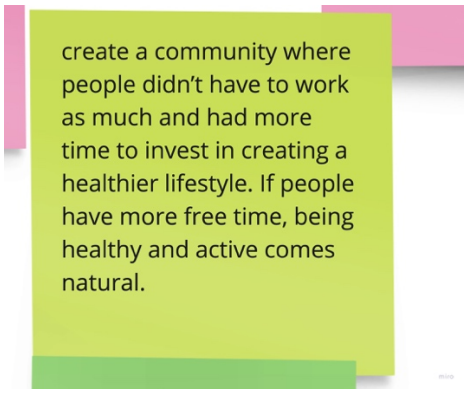


Figure 6.18. Group B, Workshop 2: Brandon's view of an ideal community

His comment epitomises how the workshops' holistic approach was shifting the view of physical activity and healthy lifestyles, which were seen from a different perspective after having discussed structural issues as well as structural alternatives. As Brandon wrote: *'if people have more free time, being healthy and active comes natural'*. Both in Group A and B, the more individualised responsibility indicated in the early stages was shifting towards systemic solutions, and what was visualised in wider political terms was also applied to physical activity, as Brandon's comment summarises. The critical reflections were apparently bringing participants to see the possibility or need to confront health and physical activity inequalities in structural ways. At the same time, they talked about creating small community actions and starting from *'the little things'*, showing how utopian thinking can inspire practice. Furthermore, just discussing these ideas seemed to bring an inspiring and positive mood, as reflected in Group B's feedback at the end of Workshop 2 (see *Figure 6.19.*).

Figure 6.19. Group B, Workshop 2: Feedback about Workshop 2

Participants of Group B seemed to find the utopian thinking of Workshop 2 very uplifting, and on top of some recurring words (such as *insightful* and *interesting*) wrote: *inspired (x3), hope, excited (x3), laughing, motivated, enjoyable, curious (x2), wonder*. I report here only Group B's feedback because, for logistical reasons, I could not collect it for Group A at the end of Workshop 2.

6.3. Workshop 3

Workshop 3 was designed to revolve around physical activity, its benefits and inequalities, as well as exploring how participants' reflections could translate into potential physical activity actions. Inspired by the 'Future Workshops' (Jungk and Müller, 1987; Vidal, 2006), this phase would try to bring about a synthesis between the critique phase of Workshop 1 – that analysed current issues – and the fantasy phase of Workshop 2 – in which alternatives were discussed. In line with the scope of this thesis, this implementation phase was introduced with a focus on physical activity and discussions on its benefits as well as inequalities.

6.3.1. Workshop 3, Physical activity and its inequalities: 'make the whole community where exercise is normal'

The board about physical activity inequalities had initially been planned to be in Workshop 1, before being removed in accordance with supervisors' recommendation. I later decided to reintroduce it here in the beginning of Workshop 3 (see *Figure 6.20.*) since I was sensing that some participants of Group A did not perceive inactive lifestyles as being an issue. My perception was initially confirmed by the fact that, after a first glance at physical activity statistics – showing regional, gender and socio-economic inequalities – they thought that *'a lot of people exercise'* which is *'not bad'*. However, when I asked them to focus on the map and tell me what they noticed, they immediately recalled and made the connection with the map about wealth inequalities that we had observed in Workshop 1. What grabbed their attention most was the North East faring worse than other areas: *'Around London is more active because there is more money, similar to map about money'*. When talking about why men are more likely to be active than women, this group – composed of mostly young men – started by finding explanations in the fact that men are socialised as *'hav[ing] to be strong'* and many of them care more about *'build[ing] muscles'*. They also mentioned some stereotypes about women being *'stronger mentally'* and *'endur[ing] things better'* which, according to them, would explain why women do not need to exercise as much as men for their mental health. I prompted further reflection to challenge some of the things mentioned, and when I asked if there could be more practical reasons that put women in a position of disadvantage, the conversation shifted on the *'gender pay gap'*. This section is a good example of how the workshops and the creation of knowledge was not always a straight and linear process. While participants were showing propensity towards critical thinking, they still retained hegemonic thought patterns: however, what I believe to be most important was their openness towards challenging their own beliefs, something that the flat conversations, some of my interventions and the support of pedagogical prompts appeared to aid.

Figure 6.20. Group A, Workshop 3: Physical Activity Inequalities board

Interestingly, if participants initially did not consider physical inactivity levels to be a concern, they were perfectly aware of physical activity's physical, mental and social benefits (see *Figure 6.21.*). They deemed the UK Chief Medical Officers' physical activity guidelines to be fair in terms of time and amount recommended, but someone added that it *'does not work if one has no money and time'*. Someone else brought up the example I had made in Workshop 1 about Sweden – where most people get a yearly sum to spend in physical activities – and said that the UK Government should not only recommend that people are active but also give *'bonuses to encourage people'*, especially the ones that need it most. Furthermore, when discussing the amount of physical activity recommended, Anthony said that quantity and intensity should not be the most important thing, and that it's rather a *'good excuse to just get out of the house'* even if one does not work out much. He added that *'it's better than to stay home with your demons'*, and shared how walking and working out had been his main therapy to deal with anxiety and depression. The topic was discussed in a very open and thoughtful manner by all participants, which I supported sharing my own experiences dealing with depression. I found it very interesting how strong their focus on mental health was, so much so that only towards the end they mentioned the benefits on physical health. Two participants, Abigail and Alfie, that have repeatedly stated their dislike

for physical activity, said that they *'can't be arsed'* and Alfie even added: *'if not moving was a sport, I would be the king'*. However, they got more interested when we started thinking about potential activities that could also involve food and other forms of socialising: those same participants were also the most involved in the action we decided to do, which might highlight the importance of the collective and fun engagement surrounding physical activity.

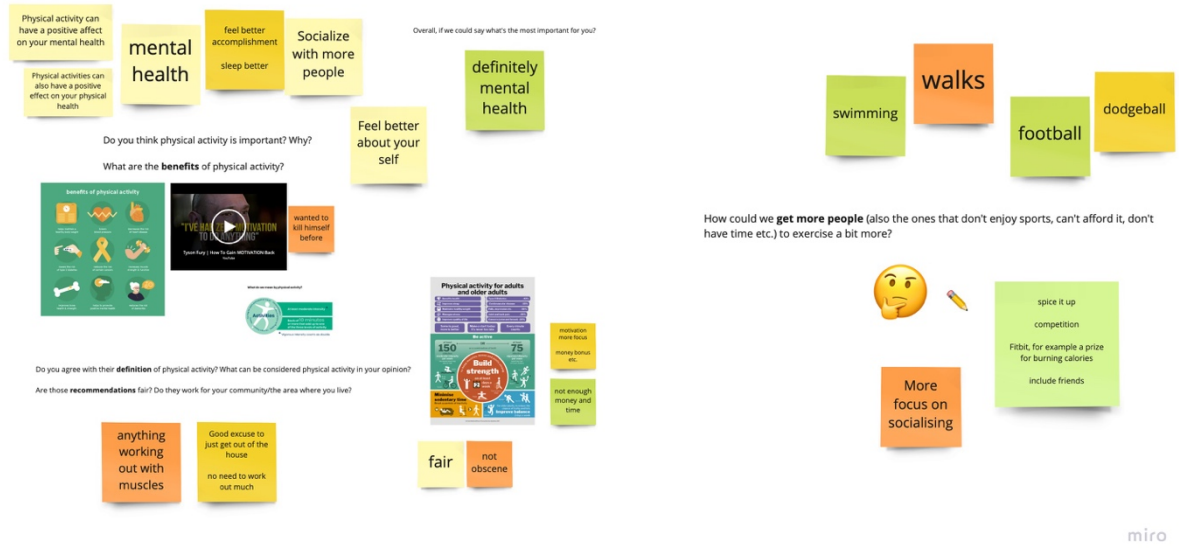


Figure 6.21. Group A, Workshop 3: Physical Activity board

Figure 6.21a. Group A, Workshop 3: Physical Activity board part 1

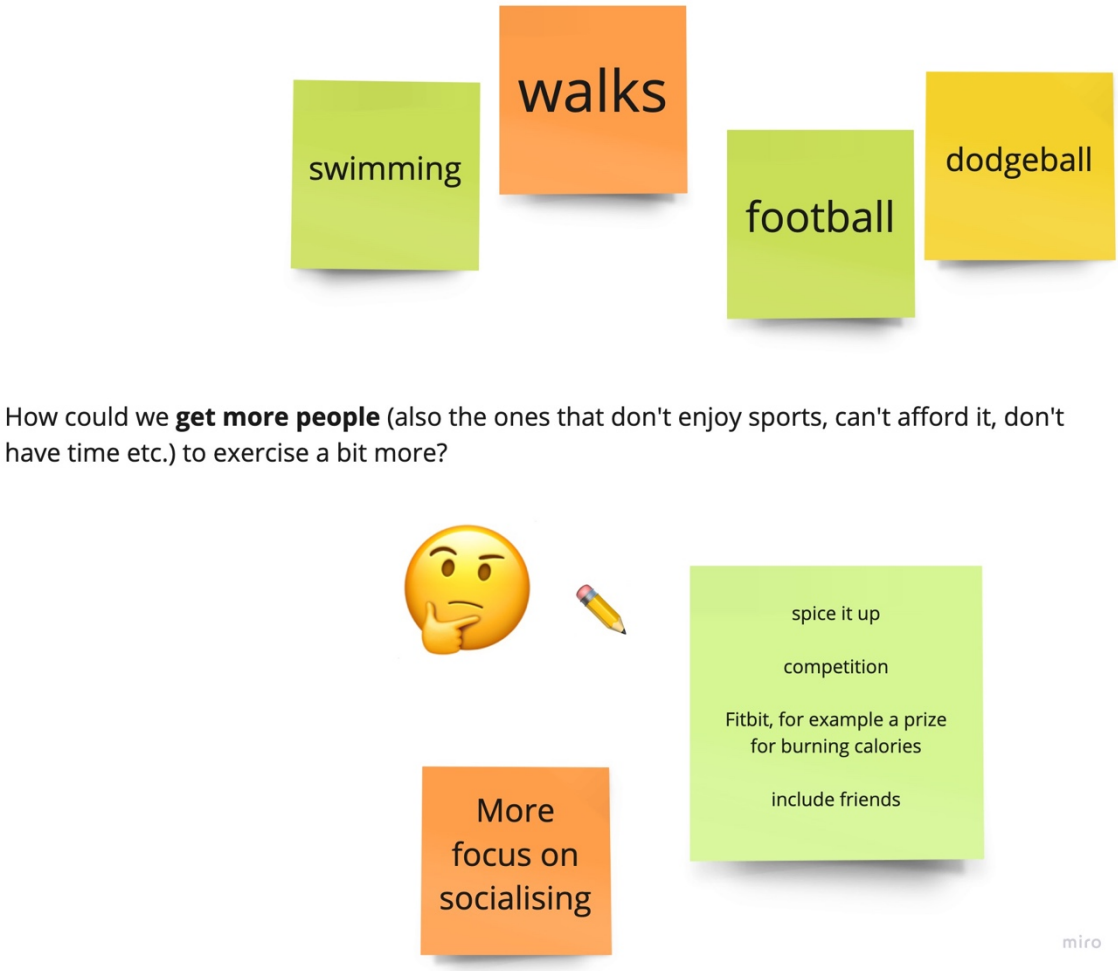


Figure 6.21b. Group A, Workshop 3: Physical Activity board part 2

The participants of Group B showed impressive awareness of all the physical, mental and social benefits of physical activity, in a similar way to the other group but with even more detail (see *Figure 6.22.*). They too recognised that the UK map of physical activity *'fits with data about social class, more deprived areas have less physical activity'* and thought that *'maybe people [are] too tired after stress of work'*. They supposed that it might be because *'the South is richer, so they have more money and free time to go to the gym and buy equipment'* and *'facilities and leisure centres are better'* there as well. They made an example from one city in the North East, where the *'leisure centre [...] has closed and the swimming pool is expensive, there isn't a cheap place for adults to exercise'*, and they added that here in the North *'unless you go for a walk, there are no facilities'*. They demonstrated a very good awareness of how social determinants affect physical activity levels and confirmed that costs and lack of facilities play a big role in their opinion. Walking was named once again as one, if not the only, doable activity despite all the barriers, and some of them insisted

on the importance of also recognising the value of low intensity walking. Participants appreciated the fact that walking was included in the Sport England definition of physical activity, but they were critical of the wording surrounding 'moderate intensity'. According to them, it would be crucial to recognise nearly any walking as moderate intensity – as it can feel for some people – or include it in the count also when done at low intensity. In their opinion, such a broader and more inclusive definition could be less off-putting and could bring more people towards active lifestyles, seeing walking as more conducive to those lifestyles than costly memberships or taxing activities like long-distance running. When reflecting specifically on what could get more people to exercise more, they mostly came up with ideas that showed systemic thinking. They thought that exercising when *'one doesn't realise it'* is a good strategy, therefore stressing the focus on promoting active transport such as *'cycling to work'* or *'walking and cycling groups'*. They talked about this while recognising that it would require *'creating cycle lanes around the city'*, *'improved park equipment'* and that *'it has to be a societal thing, not encourage individuals but encourage workplaces to do something about it'*. For example, they thought that there should be specific *'breaks at work that encourage people to do exercise'* or *'incentives [like] giving money to people to be active'*. Overall, they thought that more could be done to *'make sure [being active] is fun'* and to promote *'different sports'*, but the main focus was on a necessary *'societ[al] shift'* to *'make the whole community where exercise is normal'*. This discussion was further corroboration of how thinking critically and systemically was widening the participants' view of what is possible, allowing them to see beyond individual responsibility and connecting the wider socio-political frame to physical activity.

Figure 6.22. Group B, Workshop 3: Physical Activity and Physical Activity Inequalities board

Figure 6.22a. Group B, Workshop 3: Physical Activity and Physical Activity Inequalities board part 1

Figure 6.22b. Group B, Workshop 3: Physical Activity and Physical Activity Inequalities board part 2

Figure 6.22c. Group B, Workshop 3: Physical Activity and Physical Activity Inequalities board part 3

Figure 6.22d. Group B, Workshop 3: Physical Activity and Physical Activity Inequalities board part 4

6.3.2. Final reflections on Workshop 3

Similarly to the first two workshops, the depth of the discussion differed between Group A and B, but they both showed similar tendencies. With regards to physical activity, Workshop 3 confirmed what Alliott et al.'s (2022) systematic review has found, namely that young people from low socio-economic backgrounds have a good understanding of the benefits of being active. However, as brilliantly summarised by one participant, physical activity recommendations are fair but they *'do[…] not work if one has no money and time'*. These conversations provide further support for this thesis' approach to strengthening the spotlight on material circumstances within physical activity research and interventions. As highlighted in Chapter 5, these marginalised young adults often have to work physical jobs alongside studying, have a limited amount of free time, and cannot afford most sport facilities: these barriers, I argue, should be addressed as much as possible. From a methodological point of view, I was struck by the influence of the topics discussed in previous workshops: I could see the participants analysing physical activity inequalities through a similar lens used to look at wider inequalities, as well as applying some of the ideas discussed in Workshop 2 to visualise solutions. Furthermore, the way in which most participants tended to individualise agency and responsibility during the interviews was being replaced by a more systemic outlook, where people were indeed seen as agents but rather towards influencing societal shifts.

I argue that the role of critical pedagogy in this project was clear at this stage, where critical reflections showed to be significantly boosted by the group workshops in comparison to what had emerged during the individual interviews. The reasons might be multiple and intersecting each other. I suppose that the flat, pedagogical, group reflections might be conducive to the participants thinking deeper and more critically than they might had done during the individual interviews. At the same time, the topics discussed and the pedagogical prompts were clearly informing some of their opinions, which was showed by their constant referring to previously mentioned examples or conversations. While it can be argued that the participants' desire to align with what they perceived to be my views might have played a part, I believe that this aspect was not the prevalent one. Several participants actively questioned some of the prompts, which I welcomed encouraging no hierarchy among opinions: what seemed to be the most effective route to shifting opinions was their agreement with sources and with other participants' views. However, I also believe that no researcher can be completely neutral, since a supposedly neutral stance can rather reflect the status quo or allow it to be reproduced. Therefore, as highlighted in previous chapters, I do not shy away from the role of activist researcher, although I tried to be directive without ever being authoritarian. In these workshops, the participants had the chance to interact with concepts that they had never heard before: none of the young adults that took part, in either group, had previously heard of cooperative businesses, CWB projects nor degrowth paradigms. And I suggest that the sole fact that none of them had ever been given the chance to hear about these alternatives, might make the case for the need for similar pedagogical opportunities. And, as Weeks (2011, p. 207) argues, 'the affective distancing from the status quo […] is different when it is paired with an affective attachment either to a potential alternative or to the potential of an alternative'. Furthermore, these workshops were foundational to the hopeful ways in which participants started visualising how communities could work as well as influencing how they collectively planned their physical activity actions. In fact, Workshop 3 culminated in a section dedicated to planning potential actions to promote physical activity in their communities: this part is covered in the next chapter, since it is closely related to its focus on the actions organised, and later interactions that followed the workshops.

6.4. Methodological and practical considerations on the workshops for future adaptations

The way I built the workshops was strongly linked to the overall theoretical approach adopted for the research and was loosely adapted to the context and people I was interacting with, but these workshops are not here presented as a fixed or finished entity. In fact, I adjusted some aspects of my initial ideas along the way and there are other things that I (and others interested in similar experimentations) might do differently in future. Regarding Workshop 1, I have already mentioned how the adaptation had been decided in fear that participants might drop out and we would be left with little relevant material on their physical activity preferences. In future I would create a Workshop 1 in which those discussions on climate change and socio-economic inequalities lead directly to a similar one focused on health and physical activity inequalities, in order to more directly connect the dots. This is especially the case as I sensed in both groups that health and physical activity inequalities seemed less obvious than socio-economic and climate change issues. Another aspect I have reflected on was the introduction in which the ice-breakers could be adapted in many different ways according to the levels of familiarity with participants. However, I did notice that some participants loved discussing Geordie slang and this proved to work really well to flatten the power imbalance: a similar result could definitely be achieved through diverse and personal strategies by other researchers and educators, but I would generally suggest that investing time in breaking barriers is crucial before moving on to complex topics. Ideally, I would suggest allocating more time to all the workshops, when possible, but adapting to the participants' availability and levels of attentiveness would be necessary either way. Another aspect that I noticed was how an informal language has helped especially one group (A) to feel more at ease: the participants of this group were not very talkative in the beginning, until they noticed that I allowed curse words and banter; we had also started using pens and papers since there was almost no internet connection in the area, but this was making the workshop too school-like for their taste and I sensed an important shift when we decided to use the online platform (regardless of the bad connection) which made it more fun and easy to interact with the topics. Overall, I would say that being open to changing registers, balancing formal and informal, analogical and digital, has proved helpful: the online platforms seemed to work particularly well with the young adults of this project.

With regards to Workshop 2, I had not originally planned to talk about degrowth explicitly, but this frame proved much more important than I had imagined. Both groups appeared slightly doubtful about how CWB could work in practice, compared to how convincingly they embraced the idea of co-operative businesses: however, the principles of degrowth appeared to be useful for them to make sense of all previous information, to find a framework within which fair businesses as well as alternative communities could thrive. These interactions made me reflect on how I might have underestimated the importance of discussing theoretical aspects directly with them, instead of using practical examples from which to extrapolate values and general ideas. In future, I would recommend experimenting with even more ways to centre these theoretical reflections in similar approaches. Similarly to what I had done in Workshop 1, also in this case I followed their flow and tried to be receptive of what was working and what was not. While I think that strategies are difficult to generalise, I argue that in these instances the right mix of directiveness and following participants' flow has helped avoiding boredom or losing their attention completely. For the same purpose, I changed and mixed the smaller groups trying to match participants with their friends or acquaintances (when I valued comfort to be more important) while also challenging them to talk to other people (when the topic allowed easier discussions or when I favoured having more outspoken people supporting quieter sub-groups).

Workshop 3 had also been adapted as a consequence of the changes in Workshop 1, and I used the experience with Group A to merge the first two boards and make it more smooth for Group B. This workshop was also the beginning of the co-designed part of the project, and I was committed to enabling participants to lead as much as possible. For example, in my original idea participants might have been encouraged to conduct short surveys among their peers and communities in order to understand what type of physical activity actions might be favoured. However, when I saw that they would rather engage in light ways without committing too high amounts of time and effort, I decided to follow their flow and levels of commitment requested. When applicable, I would suggest adapting the aftermath of Workshop 3 to retain higher participation, especially if similar approaches were to be applied in contexts where young people are already engaged on a regular basis and might have more time to dedicate to the co-design and co-creation of physical activity actions. Nevertheless, as I focus on in the next chapter, with both groups we managed to create some physical activity actions, and they did so by centring their own preferences and making the best of their

available time and resources, which I believe to be an important aspect from a materialist standpoint.

6.5. Critical reflections and methodological perspectives on the workshops stage

Reflecting on the workshops stage, I consider it to be the pivotal moment in which the principles of the Co-PA approach began to take shape in practice. Looking back at this stage, I consider it a very valuable part of the project, both for the participants and for myself. While the interviews had revealed a strong awareness of structural inequalities and a widespread sense of disempowerment, the workshops provided a space in which these perspectives could be collectively unpacked, challenged and reimagined. The workshops' triadic structure of critique, fantasy and implementation proved particularly effective in guiding participants through a process of 'conscientisation', not only in relation to physical activity, but also to broader socio-political issues. I was struck by how quickly participants engaged with unfamiliar concepts such as cooperative businesses, Community Wealth Building and degrowth, and how these ideas began to influence their thinking about their own communities and lifestyles. The workshops did not simply deepen their understanding of inequalities, they also opened up a space for hopeful and pragmatic alternatives to emerge. In this sense, the workshops were not just a methodological tool, but a transformative pedagogical space, one that allowed participants to move from critique to possibility, and from resignation to a renewed sense of agency. Although this move was part of the pedagogical process that I had in mind when creating the workshops, I was still surprised by how powerfully the dialogical process enabled participants to shift toward a more systemic yet hopeful outlook. In hindsight, I see the effectiveness of the Co-PA in holding space for both critique and imagination, for a pragmatic look on the present and hope for the future.

Facilitating these workshops was also a deeply personal experience. I often found myself moved by the participants' openness, their willingness to engage with unfamiliar ideas and their generosity with each other. At times, I felt a sense of awe watching them challenge each other respectfully or take a concept like degrowth and begin to apply its principles to their own lives. I also felt a sense of responsibility: to hold the space with care, to avoid slipping into what Freire calls 'banking education' and to trust the process even when conversations took unexpected turns. There were moments when I questioned whether I was doing too much or too little, whether I was fairly guiding or unfairly steering. But I always tried to be

present, responsive and willing to learn from the pedagogical process as it unfolded, embracing my role not as neutral facilitator but as activist researcher in a process of collective learning.

Methodologically, I believe that these workshops affirmed the importance of creating dialogical spaces that can be both structured and flexible. The Freirean phases of critique, fantasy and implementation provided a useful structure, but it was the participants' own contributions – their stories, doubts, jokes and also slight disagreements – that gave the process its depth and vitality. I also found confirmation that critical thinking does not always emerge in linear or predictable ways: sometimes it passed through a joke, a moment of silence, the reading of an article or an openness towards someone else's point of view, and sometimes it took time to emerge. I also believe that a lot of the mutual trust between the participants and I was built through a non-hierarchical approach, the use of informal language, indulging in moments of banter and willingness to let the conversation breathe without replicating school-like manners. These elements, while not always possible to make visible in written form throughout this chapter, played a significant part in the workshops' development.

Finally, the workshops highlighted the adaptability of the Co-PA approach across different groups and contexts. Participants of Group B, with more experience in formal education and community engagement, often articulated abstract ideas with ease. On the other hand, participants of Group A, while initially quieter, showed a remarkable capacity for growth when supported by the right environment. I tried to see these differences not as challenges to be overcome, but as reminders of the diverse backgrounds and ways in which young people engage. I approached these workshops not as a fixed method, but a rather dialectical and relational practice, one that should be naturally attuned to the participants and contexts. In this sense, the workshops were not only a key stage in the research, but also an embodiment of the very principles of this thesis' approach.

Chapter 7. Post-Workshops actions and methodological reflections

This chapter examines the final stages of the project, namely the co-design and realisation of the physical activity actions, additional meetings and other post-workshops interactions between myself and the participants. In doing so, the chapter primarily addresses the third research question: namely 'to what extent can collective reflections affect participants' perceptions of physical activity and their ways of engaging in it?'. However, the actions were also seemingly influenced by the critical reflections happened during the workshops, therefore helping to respond to the other two main research questions in an integrated way. In this sense, I interpret these actions as a synthesis of the project's overarching aim, namely to explore how post-capitalist reflection(s) and physical activity action(s) might support each other. They offer insight into how participants began to translate critical awareness into practice, through small bottom-up activities that were shaped by and responsive to their material realities. These actions, while limited in scale, reflect the participants' evolving agency and their capacity to reclaim physical activity as a personally meaningful and collectively empowering practice.

As highlighted in the previous chapter, Workshop 3 culminated in a section dedicated to planning potential physical activity actions. In this part of the project, I aimed to initiate a collaborative process in which participants could be in charge of the co-design and organisation of physical activity actions that could involve themselves, their peers and/or their wider communities. Both groups came up with several ideas before converging towards similar actions focused on walking (and partially running). Here, I present Group A's (7.1.) and Group B's (7.2.) actions separately, before reflecting on learning across both groups, focusing on how these actions relate to the previous stages of the project and the theoretical stance of this thesis (7.3.). Alongside the empirical presentation of these stages, the chapter includes methodological reflections, interpretations of the participants' engagement and perceptions as well as some perspectives from youth workers.

7.1. Group A: first steps of the co-design and the influence of barriers

By the end of Workshop 3, I perceived participants of Group A to have become more proactive in the conversations compared to our previous meetings, and they came up with

several ideas regarding potential physical activity actions. As *Figure 7.1.* shows, I had prepared this board asking 'What could we do to make our community more active?' and suggesting to reflect on *what* kind of activities we could organise, *who* could be targeted participants, *when* and *where* to make it happen, as well as other additional ideas. I had added these hints as a starting point to initiate the co-design and support the participants in case they might struggle to come up with ideas, as had been the case in some previous conversations, and I stressed the fact that those categories were not binding. In hindsight, I believe that this section could have worked even better with less structure, leaving participants even more free to brainstorm ideas in whichever way they preferred. However, I did not perceive these hints to have a significant influence, in fact the group did not follow the order but rather discussed freely and later wrote down main points related to each activity.

Figure 7.1. Group A, Workshop 3: Co-designing Potential Physical Activity Action(s)

The group started by discussing a sport event whose target would be young people in their last years of school: they thought that such an event could allow young people to pick up a sport that they might keep practising later in their adult life (see 'annual sports event' in *Figure 7.1.*). The focus on this target age seemed to stem from reflections that the group had made during the workshops: according to them, being active is easier for school-aged young people and becomes significantly more difficult after school, when they must work and often cannot afford memberships. Participants also talked about a potential 'fitness festival' (see

Figure 7.1.), as an event that could be held monthly, including competitions and prizes to make it more fun and attract more people. In both these initial ideas, participants' conversations appeared to prioritise two aspects: first, physical activities that could be inclusive and feasible for all age groups; second, a strong focus on their local neighbourhood around the community centre. However, the more they tried to visualise these ideas in practice, the more they saw locations, equipment and funding as barriers potentially complicating the events' organisation. It was also notable that, when refining their ideas, they were still influenced by the pragmatic and accessibility-related barriers they had initially discussed in relation to their own physical activity. In fact, they recognised that such events and festivals might still not address the issues that they had previously identified, namely the need to find affordable activities that could be feasible within the lifestyles of working people like them.

In fact, when considering which of the ideas they preferred and would like to translate into practice, they picked a third option, namely 'running and walking groups' (see *Figure 7.1.*). This idea was initially mentioned as running groups only, with one participant taking inspiration from similar groups that they had heard of. Then they decided to add walking to make it more inclusive of different types of people and levels of fitness, underlining again their focus on creating something as accessible and welcoming as possible. Participants discussed and later wrote down that this option was the best one because it could be *'held once a week'* at *'the local park'* and it could mostly be kept *'free'*, especially if people volunteered to help. Regarding the financial aspect, they considered different ideas like a very low participation fee of £1, a raffle, crowdfunding or applying for public funding, but all these options were seen as optional since the activity could still work without money. The two participants who disliked physical activity suggested adding food and other non-sport activities to allow more socialisation, such as games (*'like [bean] bag toss'*) and music. Facebook and Instagram were considered the best social media to potentially spread the word, since they recognised that Snapchat – despite being their favourite – might not reach people of different demographics. Participants' choice to focus on walking showed a shift towards perceiving this activity as legitimate physical activity, unlike how many of them had talked about it at the first interview stage. Walking was also discussed as an activity within their reach, since they could add walks into their routine even in busy days. At the same time, this type of action would not require specific resources nor major planning efforts on their part, aspects that – in my interpretation – might have played a significant role.

7.1.1. Further discussions in Workshop 3: the importance of open conversations

In addition to the ideas that feature in *Figure 7.1*., the conversations also touched other topics, including online and home workouts that were recalled alongside other memories of their life during the lockdowns. In these conversations, I noticed that participants were very eager to discuss their experiences during those peculiar months, and the debate took a turn when one of them – among the youngest – said that he spent most of that time smoking weed at home, even though he was not doing it anymore. A few of the older participants were thoughtful and kind towards this younger peer, but firm in their recommendation to also quit smoking cigarettes altogether. This conversation was carried with honest and understanding care for each other, so I just stepped back and allowed them to carry on. In hindsight, I later recognised how much more comfortable those participants were feeling with each other (and arguably with me) compared to our first meetings, and how also their contributions to the workshops had become more committed and engaged. Later that day, the youth worker of the community centre told me that, in her opinion, it was a *'miracle to get those young people engaged and get them to sit like that'*. As mentioned in Chapter 4, I had aimed to engage with disengaged young adults, and as the youth worker's comments testify, participants of Group A fit that description. What might have brought participants to engage more than expected could be due to different reasons, including the remuneration. However, in my opinion, these participants mostly enjoyed the project's critical and democratic pedagogical style (in which their contribution was highly valued) as well as the informal atmosphere we had created, one in which everyone could freely express their opinions without being judged or evaluated. I argue that this approach was fundamental especially because these young adults had mixed experiences in formal education settings, and a move away from traditional 'banking education' methods (Freire, 1972) presented a novel way to learn collectively. Furthermore, some of them kept referring to my research and their presence there as a duty towards the community that they were happy and proud to contribute to. In fact, at the end of Workshop 3, one participant approached me and – visibly disappointed – asked: *'So, no meeting next week?'*. Unfortunately, the majority had decided to continue after the coming summer break, and we ended Workshop 3 agreeing to meet again in September to continue from where we left, namely with the idea of walking (and running) groups. Since some participants seemed eager to meet again, I suggested a kickabout if they wanted to see some 'proper' Italian

football skills, an ongoing joke within the group. Unfortunately, the weather was terrible on the day we had agreed to play, and I had to leave for the holidays soon after, but some of them met and played football another day.

7.1.2. Planning the action: challenges and feasibility

In September 2022 we had the first meeting post-workshops, where all participants were present apart from one, who had been accepted to university and had moved to another city. We chatted about the summer, and – while I had only gone home to visit my family – I was immediately aware of my privilege since none of them had the chance to go on holiday and most participants spent the summer working. The discussion started around a potential *'football tournament'* and asking *'a football club for space'*, although I perceived that participants spoke about this option as one which might require too big efforts. When we started recalling what we had talked about in Workshop 3, participants moved to discussing the walking (and running) groups (see *Figure 7.2.*).

Figure 7.2. Group A, Action Planning Meeting 1: walking (and running) groups

One participant said that also the running and walking groups could be a *'good idea but could be a lot of work'* and another said that it *'could be hard to get numbers in'*, which in their opinion would mean reaching between 20 to 30 people. I believe that the time gap between Workshop 3 and this post-workshops meeting had resulted in a loss of momentum and weakening of their conception of what was feasible. I then tried to encourage them with suggestions to make the action sound more doable, such as initially starting with targeting a smaller group. At the same time, I was sensing that they struggled to commit consistent

amounts of time and effort, therefore I reiterated that they should feel free to contribute (or not) to whatever extent they preferred. In fact, the group soon discarded the idea to schedule monthly or fortnightly meetings to catch up, to possibly undertake exercise and to organise other activities. They instead agreed to start asking around their friends to gauge interest for walking (and running) meetups as well as football, and decided that we would catch-up with an online meeting in a few weeks. At this stage, the group was already short of one participant, and we would soon lose the most engaged and proactive of them, due to a Covid-19 infection that left him feeling unwell for a long while; he was also the one most keen to organise football activities, hence this option falling through. When we met online in October 2022, only two participants could make it and they agreed to stick to the idea of walking (and running) groups that they perceived as a good action that also did not require significant organisational effort. I felt that it was getting increasingly difficult to elicit more engagement from the remaining participants of Group A, therefore when one of them suggested creating a walking (and running) challenge on the free app Strava, we agreed to start with that. Despite believing in the importance to be active together in person and wary of Strava's commercial and capitalist ethos, I allowed participants to take charge and supported their decisions. I believed that the Strava option could serve as a preliminary stage for potential future activities or, at the same time, a good activity in and of itself to try and kickstart a habit of walking (and running) regularly. Furthermore, as van Sluijs et al. (2021) have argued, there is emerging evidence on the efficacy of eHealth (internet-based) and mHealth (mobile phone apps) physical activity interventions, especially when targeting young people outside formal education settings. This, coupled with known effectiveness of walking groups in bringing about wide-ranging health benefits (Hanson and Jones, 2015), indicated good potential for this activity.

At this point, two of the remaining participants struggled to keep engaging, because of their study and work commitments as well as probably waning interest. The other two participants, who were more involved in the planning, took charge of most decisions regarding the challenge, such as: (i) which activities to include (walking, running, hiking and biking; they later added more inclusive options such as handcycle, skating and skateboarding and removed biking); (ii) whether to have a prize (one of the two participants that took charge at this stage had been repeatedly suggesting the importance of prizes and rewards, therefore they opted to have one for the individual walking the most, and I volunteered to cover £25); (iii) whether to invite only people in the 16 to 25 years old age bracket or widen the net (they

opted for anyone below 30 years old); (iv) whether the challenge should have a distance target or a timeframe (they opted for a timeframe slightly longer than one month, in order to try and build a habit, from the 22nd of October to the 30th of November 2022). We also created a WhatsApp group chat to coordinate with each other and an Instagram page to promote the activity, even though the latter ended up not being curated. The Strava group challenge was then created, as *Figure 7.3.* shows:

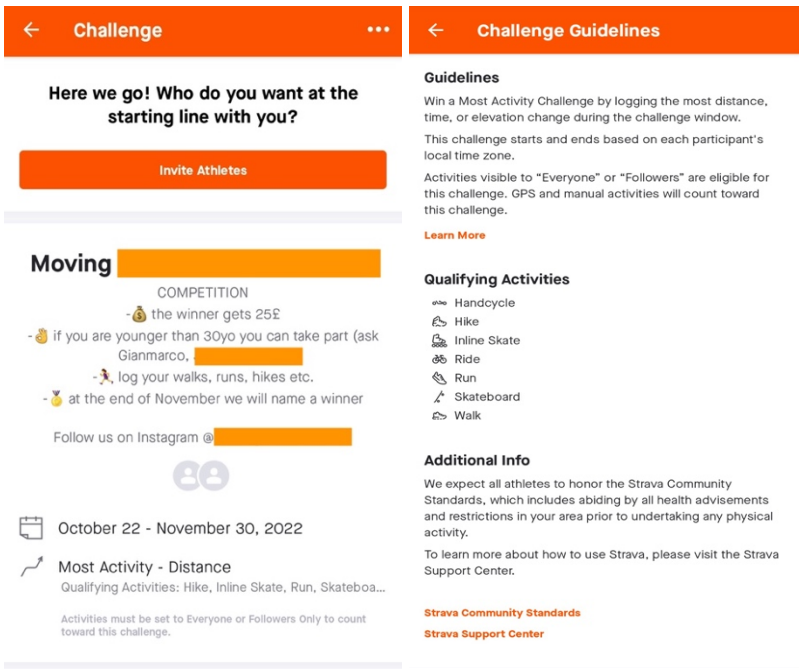


Figure 7.3. Group A: Strava Challenge Description

7.1.3. The walking (and running) challenge

Once the challenge was active, although most participants were not contributing much to the organisation, most of them were engaging in the challenge itself. The two participants that had repeatedly said how much they disliked physical activity and had defined themselves as inactive, were constantly logging walks. Abigail, the only girl in the group, had initially admitted to being completely inactive and hating physical activity (including walking) but I could see from her Strava activities that she was joining her friend and fellow participant in the project in frequent walks. In her case, the prize was unlikely to be the motivating factor, since other participants were soon logging bigger distances and made it clear that she did not have many chances to win. However, Abigail kept walking regularly for the whole length of the challenge, both with her friend and on her own. In total, 8 people took part in the

challenge (including some friends and family members), covering a group distance of 755.4 km and a group time of 128 hours and 26 minutes, between the 22nd of October and the 30th of November 2022. Even though they had included several options in the description of the challenge, the overwhelming majority of activities logged were walks, with just a very small proportion of runs and no other activity. From the kind of routes that I could observe on Strava, most of the walks that were logged appeared to be taken for leisure rather than to commute: for example, these could be slow rounds that covered multiple times the circumference of a park, or that would follow a riverside back and forth, ending in the same place where they had started.

By the end of the challenge, some participants had almost entirely stopped engaging in the WhatsApp group chat. One participant texted me a few times regarding adding a charitable aspect to our activities. The first time he texted: *'we could put a walk from [location omitted] all the way to [location omitted] and back for a wear ness of strokes'*. Sometime later we had another exchange of texts, where he asked when the next meeting would be and suggested again that *'we could to a fundraiser avent table top sale'*. When I asked who could potentially join us in the organisation, he said: *'My mam at hopefully ppl from cumunity'*. Eventually, even though some of the participants kept logging walks and occasional runs into the Strava app after the challenge had ended, we did not manage to organise further activities together. I had not come into the action stage having a predetermined idea of how and when the project could be considered concluded, but when participants stopped answering in the WhatsApp chat, I thought it could be time to draw to a close. While I would have gladly organised more activities together, the youth workers expressed gratitude for what we had managed to do, and they seemed content with having had young adults join activities at their community centre for what they considered to be a long time. To make sense of these different feelings, in the next section I include some of my interactions with the youth workers in charge of the community centre (going back in time chronologically) and I reflect on what the challenges encountered in the action might mean from a methodological perspective.

7.1.3. Group A-related methodological reflections: engaging with disengaged young adults in disadvantaged contexts

As briefly mentioned in Chapter 4, in the first exchanges of emails with the youth worker in charge of the community centre (in June 2022), she had expressed doubts saying that if she were me, she *'wouldn't waste too much time in contacting the young people'.* Eventually, she had invited some young adults that might have been willing to join an introductory meeting, even though she hopelessly told me that *'keeping up their motivation will need all your skills'*. The first time I went to the neighbourhood for the meeting, the area struck me as one of the most deprived I had been to in the region, at the edge of a big city facing the countryside, with many shops' shutters indefinitely closed and groups of young people hanging out in motorbikes. While I was wearing the same kind of tracksuit as many of them, the bike and longer hairstyle probably identified me as an outsider. I walked through the local park, and noticed the football and basketball fields, as well as the skatepark: these facilities were in fact as run-down as participants described them in the interviews and later workshops. I then spent about one hour chatting with the youth worker while she showed me around the community centre and opened up about the struggles to keep the centre alive, as highlighted in Chapter 4.

The day after my introductory meeting with the young adults, the youth worker emailed me to say that she had received positive feedback from them, and that she was happy to support me with anything I might need. I then realised that already that first step, namely getting some young adults to meet up at the community centre, was considered as an achievement. In fact, the youth worker had mentioned that she runs the centre with other two *'old ladies'* and they would need younger youth workers or someone with my energy, according to her impression of me. With time, I built a friendly relationship with her and had the chance to meet one of her co-workers, people I grew to admire and feel deep affection for. They were making me feel at home and considering me one of their own, something I will always be grateful for. At the same time, from a research perspective, the young adults and I were mostly acting as an independent entity within the community centre as most of the participants had never interacted with the centre before, and I was running the meetings on my own. I did not think this was an issue, but in hindsight I think that this might have played a part in the final stages' diminishing engagement and I believe that if the project had taken place within a slightly more networked and financed community centre, we could have more easily connected with the existing structure and more people. The participants were the only young people there that I had knowledge of, which meant that they never met other peers, and the facilities did not permit many activities such as indoor sports. Given the circumstances

that I had the chance to witness, I deeply admire the youth workers and their efforts, trying to offer spaces, activities and support to a disadvantaged community without having enough financial and human resources, having to swim against an increasingly strong current of decreased funding and increased rents and bills. With regards to the theoretical proposition of this thesis, these interactions made me reflect on how difficult it can be to create opportunities in disadvantaged communities, especially when the few networks in place struggle to survive, let alone reach disengaged young people.

I have also reflected on the extent to which our workshops and subsequent action might have empowered the participants. Constraining circumstances and feasibility were always in the participants' minds when we organised the action. However, as I expand on at the end of this chapter and in the conclusions, their perspective appeared to have slightly shifted. In other words, after having reflected on inequalities and on alternatives to the status quo, the subsequent discussions and action were aware of the limitations but not completely disempowered. In the early stages of the project, Group A had started by agreeing that being physically active in their area *'is easy if you try'*. But by the end of the workshops, they were articulating the need to create affordable opportunities, to improve facilities and to promote accessible activities like walking: they had engaged with the structural reasons behind many people's inactivity and started visualising that things should and could be different. At the same time, they adapted this vision to their current possibilities and organised an activity that was within their reach, finding a synthesis in truly dialectical materialist terms. The time and effort that they could commit to the organisation of walking (and running) activities was mostly limited by their material circumstances and working lives: the majority of them, however, had taken part in the workshops with dedicated participation and committed to the walking challenge too. It is also important to note where this group had started from: they had never joined the community centre or any similar activity, and they had expressed very disempowered and hopeless views of their communities and society alongside a strong sense that things could not be any different. Therefore, reflecting back, I saw value in the steps that the group had managed to take.

With regards to the struggles that the community centre was facing, I now include a few excerpts from significant emails that I received from the youth worker (that she wanted me to include and for which she gave permission), in which she expresses frustration towards the circumstances they have to work in:

'[…] if you still want to do an interview to get a real front line understanding of how we work then just let me know - we are a dying breed and so is the way we work - there are only a handful of centres and youth workers in [omitted] left working in a similar way to us which means young people are being left without the experience of coming through a youth centre/club which is local to them, resulting in more anti-social behaviour, lack of information/support and bottom line missing somewhere to go just to relax and have some fun, in a safe and friendly environment!

[…] young people and adults need to be part of their local community not just feel part of it... And without professional/experienced adults to work and guide young people and help them try out their idea's thats never going to happen, in health, in education, in their social life and in their community etc.

On one hand we do a really good job here at the [omitted] with the resources we have and on the other hand we are unbelievingly failing, not only young people, but those that want to work with young people.

Ah… the chat could go on and on and it should. Everyone working with young people should have the opportunity to see what is working/not working locally and nationally, and they should speak to people that will be honest with them, too many professionals and their services just want to pat them selves on back and get credit when in reality other services like ours are trying to support a very broken system, without support [from] themselves either financially, morally or otherwise!

Soap box noise over…'

This email expresses a feeling that I had noticed in most of our conversations, namely a passionate willingness to communicate their needs and improve their contribution to the community, alongside the frustration for feeling abandoned. In fact, in April 2023, months after our project had ended, we kept in touch and she told me that they were forced to move because they could not afford the rent anymore:

'Well we are keeping above water as they say. We will have to move soon to the local church, as the rooms here are too expensive. It's sad but it's change and I like that challenge for me its means you are alive, it scares you, and you have to re-think old ways. […] Our [omitted] community association, is the people not the venue/place, so as long as we work and stay together does it matter where we do it [?] - I don't think so!'

Her positive mood, however, had been replaced by a more discouraged one exactly one year after, in April 2024:

'The new venue is absolutely pants… unfortunately we went to the church (bad move and expensive) but hayho we are still cracking on do our bit for now. So much has changes and so many disappointment's which I [really] didn't foresee coming - I suppose i'm getting old and I'm still seeing things with my rose coloured glasses, thinking people will play fair and honourable haha…"

I have included these email exchanges and reflections to provide a bit more insight on the context in which the project took place with Group A. The time I spent in that area and my interactions with participants and youth workers strengthened my view that within capitalist societies it is extremely difficult for the majority of people to overcome material circumstances, especially in the most disadvantaged communities. This is why, I argue, it is important to create new and alternative opportunities for critical reflections aiming to empower people to take collective action within the physical activity sphere and possibly beyond, especially where existing institutions and organisations struggle to do so.

7.2. Group B: co-designing activities with a preference for the outdoors and non-mainstream settings

The action part of the project was probably the one in which the two groups mirrored each other the most. In my view, this could be the result of a mix of factors: on the one hand, their practical thinking focused on actions that could be feasible despite limited resources; on the other hand, while both groups discussed sport events to try new sports, this idea seemed to lack a clear vision (or past experiences) of truly 'alternative' sports. During the preceding

workshops, participants in both groups highlighted the need to experiment with less competitive and alternative sports, but they often could not come up with concrete examples and tended to fall back on activities that they were already familiar with but that could also be practiced in more inclusive and non-competitive ways, such as walking. While Group A had mentioned several ideas before landing on walking (and running) groups, these were the first to be mentioned by Group B (see *Figure 7.4.*).

Figure 7.4. Group B, Workshop 3: Co-designing Potential Physical Activity Action(s)

The ‘walking groups’ were initially suggested as a lunch break activity that could be done several times a week, which could target primarily – although not only – working adults (see *Figure 7.4*). They thought it could be advertised with posters in specific office areas as well as through Facebook, a social media recognised as useful to reach adults. Following up on this idea, ‘running’ and ‘cycling groups’ were also considered, with some necessary adjustments: for example, one participant noted that not everyone has a bicycle so it could be good to partner up with a local bike shop, which could help with equipment while gaining some publicity. This example shows the participants’ attention to material limitations throughout this whole phase of the project. This group was enthusiastically coming up with different ideas and dreaming big at times, while never forgetting that not everyone in their respective communities have the same capabilities: this applied to financial circumstances (e.g., thinking about who cannot afford a bike) and fitness levels (e.g., keeping in mind activities that can be scaled and accommodate beginners). In fact, the next idea brought up

for discussion was that of an event to try new sports (see 'sports day event' in *Figure 7.4.*), which was seen for its usefulness to allow people to kickstart new habits. However, they recognised that this event would require hiring facilities and spaces, and costs that might have to be covered by grants. Therefore, immediately after, they thought about creating groups to make use of outdoor gyms in local parks: once again, a feasible alternative that they identified as potentially equally beneficial.

Outdoor gyms were also discussed as a good alternative for people that would like to work out but feel intimidated by the gym environment or for the ones that cannot afford them. The use of public outdoor spaces was very popular within this group, where the majority of participants showed a preference for activities that could take place in parks rather than in mainstream and pay-per-use sport facilities. When one participant pointed out that outdoor activities would be weather dependent, the group thought about adding one additional option to the list, consisting of mostly 'summer programs' (see *Figure 7.4.*) of physical activities to take place in parks. The more they discussed, the more they agreed that indoor alternatives could be complicated because they would require funding or the support of local authorities that they perceived as difficult to reach. Then one participant suggested that, although the weather can sometimes complicate things, it can also be good to promote outdoor habits in order to get people used to getting active all year round despite adverse weather conditions. Eventually, when I asked them which of the options they would like to prioritise, they easily agreed to start with their initial idea of walking groups (*Figure 7.5.*). While Group A had only thought about walking groups at the very end, Group B started from this idea and – while brainstorming several others after my suggestion – finally decided that the initial plan to create walking groups was still their favourite one.

Figure 7.5. Group B: Walking groups

Walking groups were considered the most inclusive type of activity that would not require special fitness levels and could allow socialising, as well as an option that does not request complex logistics. Since the group was thinking about it as a lunch break activity at first, they thought that Strava could be a good option to gather people and to have groups or internal competitions, such as among friends or office colleagues. However, one participant said that it would be important to *'make sure it's not too competitive'*, and the group agreed: this is also why they prioritised walking, since they saw it as an activity that can be done with less focus on performance, speed and comparisons. If non-competitiveness was part of the theoretical orientation of the research from the beginning, both interviews and workshops highlighted how important this aspect was for many of the least physically active participants. In fact, they decided to start with a Strava challenge, but keeping it limited to people they knew, in order to make sure that they were creating an atmosphere more focused on mutual support and enjoyment rather than competition. In this aspect, Group A and B differed slightly: Group A was keen to reach people outside their circles, even though they did that to a very limited extent; Group B instead, decided consciously to reach out only to people close to them. Group B then converged around the idea that one participant had advanced, namely to *'start small and see how it goes'*, potentially seeing if it could be possible to organise more after the Christmas holidays. I found it interesting to observe how in previous workshops' discussions they thought about the need to reach out to large groups of people within their communities, but when it came to the actual organisation of our action, they preferred to start small and create an inclusive and friendly environment. Since the interviews stage, several participants had stressed the importance of being active with people they felt comfortable with, a concept that resurfaced in this final phase. I believe that, in this co-designed action, they tried to merge their initial – and always relevant – need for comfort and familiarity with the community aspect that the workshops had fuelled: this resulted in their conception of a collectivist approach that would start from closer circles while slowly reaching out for more adjacent people in ripples. Similarly to Group A's choice, I recognise here a dialectical materialist approach in bringing together and making a synthesis of apparently conflicting aspects.

7.2.1. Post-workshops planning: enthusiasm vs. logistical constraints

In the final moments of Workshop 3, we had agreed that we could start with the Strava challenge and then take it from there. Some participants thought that creating big walking groups from scratch might not be easy, therefore the Strava challenge was spoken about as an activity to test the waters and still start to get physically active. Furthermore, many in the group still wanted to organise more outdoor activities in the summer months (we were in the beginning of winter then) but thought that we should keep this option open for later. When we proceeded to create a WhatsApp group chat to keep in touch and organise the activities, I sent a text summarising the three steps plan they had agreed on: step 1 *'NOW'*, organising the Strava challenge and possibly meet each other to walk/run together; step 2 *'JANUARY'*, organising more walk and run groups or activities; step 3 *'LATER ON'*, potential spring activities (e.g., sports day or outdoor gym groups) hopefully with the help of the youth organisation. We then had some polls in the chat regarding smaller details of the Strava challenge – which they initiated, I set up and they answered to – in order to decide: when to do it (1st to 31st of December was agreed on); which physical activities to include (they decided to focus on walking and hiking, but also running was allowed); whether to have a prize (yes); and whether we should use Facebook to promote the challenge (also yes). They also decided to meet again via Zoom to finalise the planning and to make sure that *'everyone is on the same page'*. Participants of Group B, similar to Group A, could not commit a lot of their time. However, as *Figure 7.6.* shows, the majority was very enthusiastic about meeting up and organising activities:

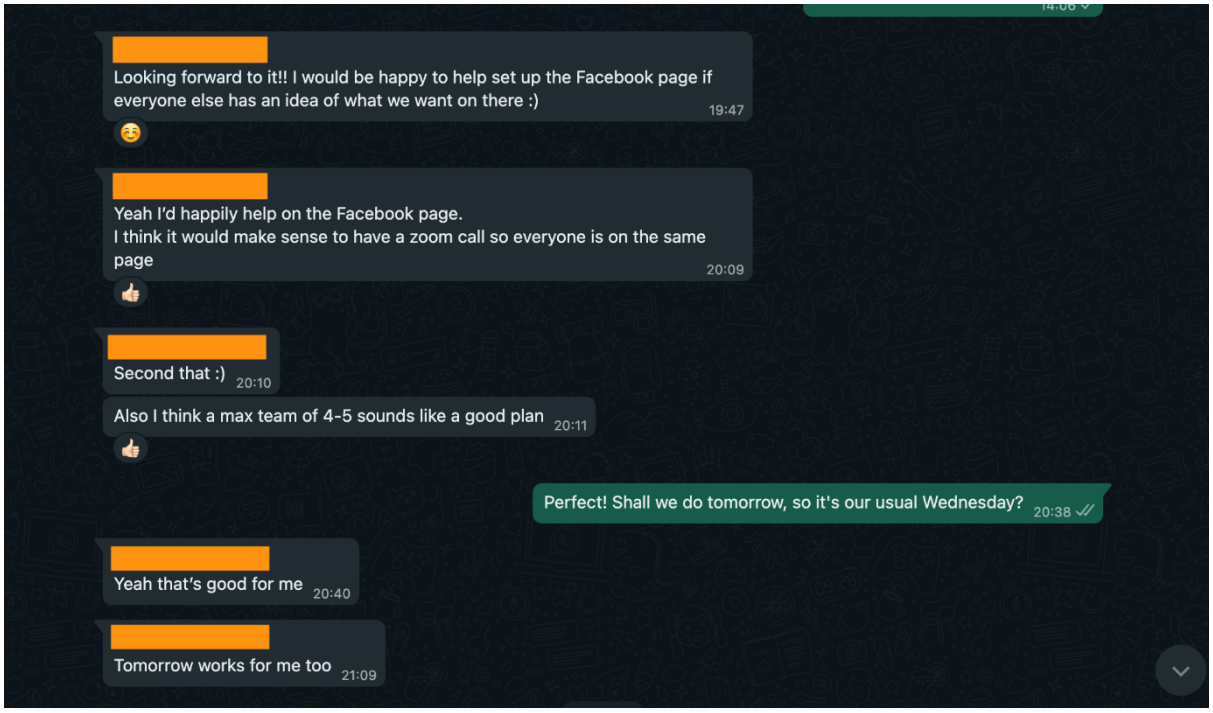


Figure 7.6. Group B: WhatsApp Group Chat

In the first online meeting post-workshops, we mostly discussed logistics regarding the idea that one participant suggested, namely to have a team challenge within the challenge itself. They decided that each of them could serve as captains inviting friends to join their team, so that the focus would be more towards supporting friends to be active rather than walking individually to win a prize. Therefore, they decided to have one prize for the individual walking (or running) the most kilometres, and one for the team collectively walking the most. One participant suggested that the latter should be donated to a charity of choice by the winning group, and many in the WhatsApp chat supported emphatically the idea and agreed to do so (see *Figure 7.7.*)

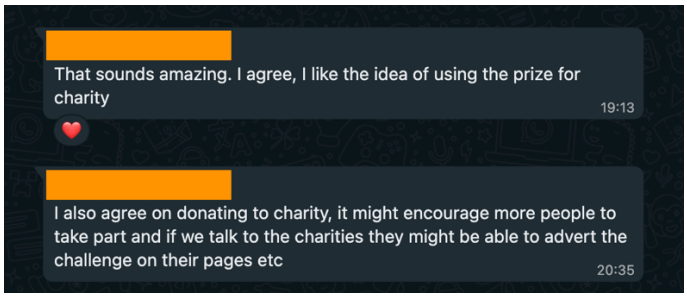


Figure 7.7. Group B: Donating to charity

While I believe that some of the participants already had solidaristic views and a preference for engaging in friendly non-competitive ways, I recognised the influence of the Co-PA approach and critical reflections in strengthening their confidence to bring forward these values and centre the co-designing of the action around them. On a related note, some participants expressed fear about potential cheating (e.g., Strava can be tricked by using a bike and logging it as walk). I found this to be a fair objection, so I took the chance to collectively reflect on how cheating can indeed happen, and later I encouraged them to actively promote the challenge with the same values they had been talking about, namely mutual support and enjoyment over competitiveness. While this might not completely remove the possibility of someone cheating, they agreed that winning was not the main objective in the first place, and it would not matter significantly. I believe that this interaction shows the importance of critical reflections surrounding physical activity: although Strava might promote competitive and consumeristic principles, this group's critical and collective approach used Strava simply as a tool and infused the action with their own values. Participants were committed to using it on their own terms and creating a gated community within it, which I perceived to be a fair adjustment in the face of practical needs.

Participants also talked about meeting up to walk or run together, although they found this option difficult because they all lived in different places and had busy schedules with studying and working. Therefore, they decided to start with the challenge and encourage walking within family and groups of friends in their respective vicinities. Despite this activity being organised within a capitalist-oriented app, the Co-PA approach and especially the workshops seemed to have contributed significantly in two main ways: (i) when having the chance to design their own activity, participants felt empowered to address the aspects that were most important to them, namely being active with people they feel comfortable with, not too competitively and on their own terms; (ii) having visualised the importance to collectively strive for well-being, they designed an action that was within their capacity while also addressing material limitations that many people in their communities face. In other words, the material constraints had always been present in their reasoning around physical activity, what had changed was the newly found or reinvigorated awareness that things should not necessarily be this way (e.g., the status quo can be critiqued and not hopelessly accepted) and that they could directly address material limitations through actions, even while adapting to the possibilities of the now. I suggest that material circumstances within capitalist societies will always be limiting, but an albeit limited empowerment is a necessary

starting point when striving for equality, especially when it is paired with hopeful visualisations of a larger-frame of alternatives to the status quo. Paraphrasing Spaaij, Oxford and Jeanes (2016), although the project cannot lead to considerable changes in the unequal capitalist status quo, it aims to provide participants a foundation to build on and to prompt future collective interactions within their communities.

7.2.2. Action and subsequent interactions: the perks of the online and the struggles to gather in-person

As *Figure 7.8.* shows, the challenge started on the 1st of December 2022 and was scheduled to last until the last day of the month. In total, 15 people took part in the challenge, totalling an overall group distance of 1,311.4 kilometres and more than 176 hours of activity. While some participants covered significantly higher distances than the rest, most showed commitment and logged several walks and runs per week.

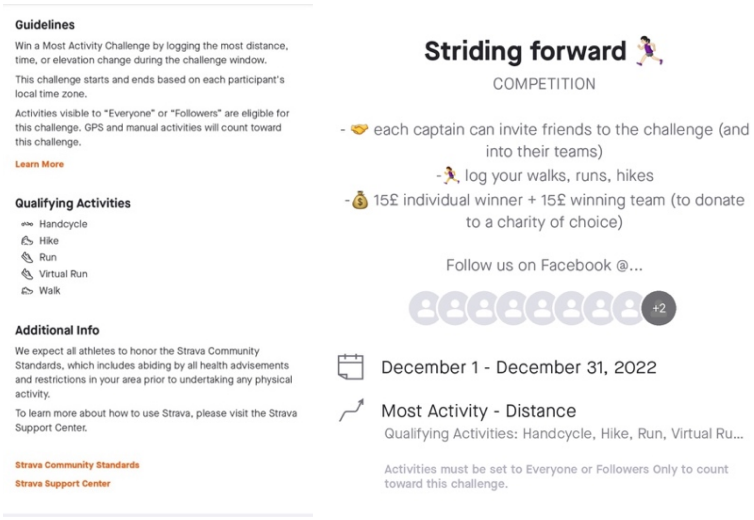


Figure 7.8. Group B: Strava Challenge Description

At the end of the challenge, I sent a message in the WhatsApp group chat to congratulate everyone and thank them for the proactive and positive participation. It had been impressive to see many of them walk (and run) consistently during a very cold December month. While writing this message, I reflected on how much I had benefited myself from the Strava challenges, which had pushed me to walk considerably more than my average, especially for winter. I therefore thought to ask Group B informal feedback, indicating that they could also message or e-mail me privately. In doing so, I was aware that this was not done in an

anonymous form, but I stressed that critical feedback and ideas for improvements were especially welcome. However, the feedback was only positive, as in the two examples from *Figure 7.9.* and *7.10.*:

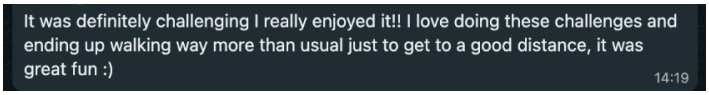


Figure 7.9. Group B: Post-challenge Feedback Example 1

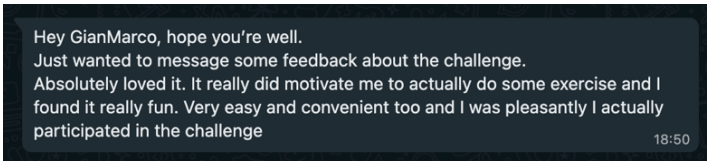


Figure 7.10. Group B: Post-challenge Feedback Example 2

One of the participants messaged me to say that they often forgot to bring their phone to record their walks on Strava. In fact, this participant was one of the most proactive throughout the whole project and one of the strong promoters of walking as a good physical activity, but he did not score well in the challenge. This, in my opinion, shows how some participants approached the challenge as an excuse to be active outdoors during the winter months and to reach out to friends, being less interested about the competitive aspect of it. However, two teams – whose captains were Bella and Brandon – were clearly more committed to the competition, with all of their members logging impressive amounts of walks and runs throughout the month. In my view, this kind of *action* paired with critical *reflections*, had allowed both approaches to be welcome and co-exist in the friendly walking challenge that they had ended up creating and moulding around their own preferences. Eventually, the winning team decided to donate the prize to the Salvation Army. At this point we started discussing a potential meet up to walk together. The exchanges in *Figure 7.11.* and *7.12.* are just examples of how difficult it was to find a day to meet up despite their enthusiasm for the idea, considering their school, university and work commitments.

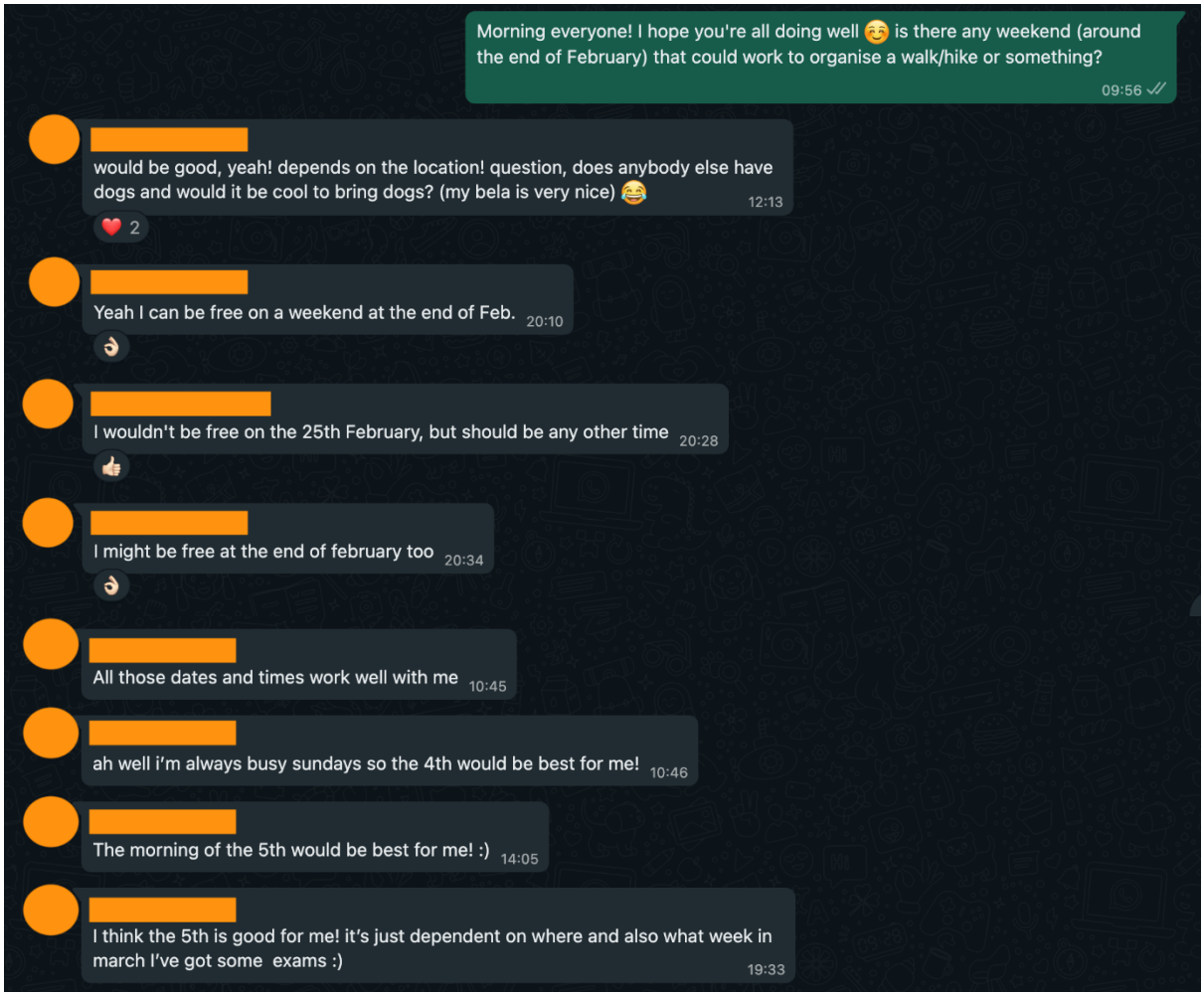


Figure 7.11. Group B: WhatsApp Group Chat Exchanges to Arrange a Group Walk, 1

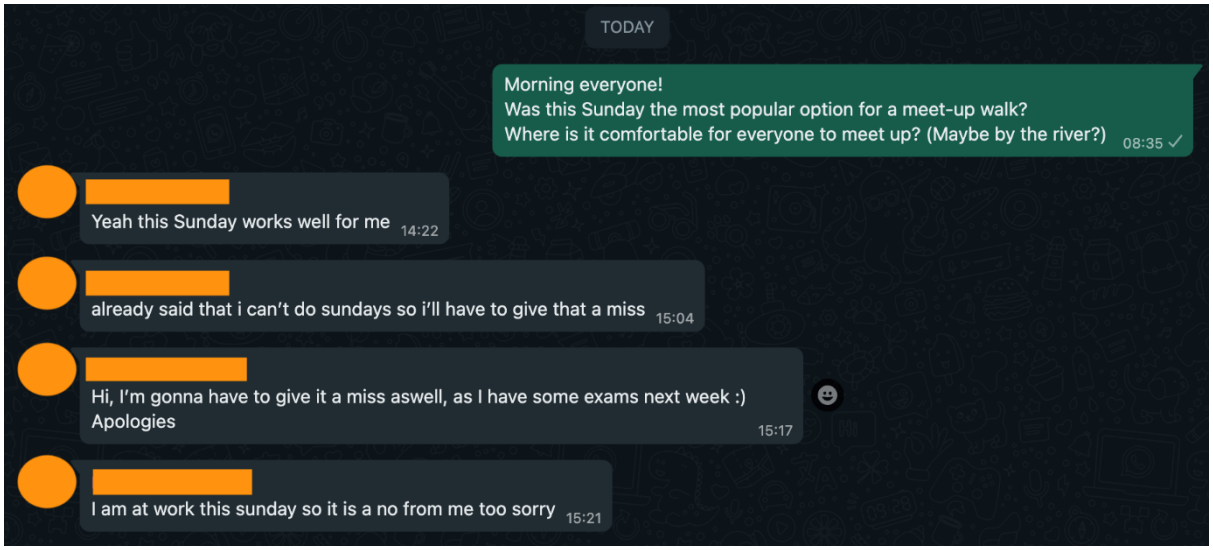


Figure 7.12. Group B: WhatsApp Group Chat Exchanges to Arrange a Group Walk, 2

It was clearly difficult to find a time and place that worked for the majority of the participants, which made me think that the Strava challenge might have been, all in all, a better option than I had initially given it credit for. At first, I believed that more in-person collective activities could have been a better option, but both Group A and B showed that there was value in this mixed online and in-person option: they could manage their walks (and runs) at the time and place they found most suitable, they could involve the relatives and friends they lived close to and they could more easily fit these activities within their daily routine.

7.2.3. Small group walk and two testimonies of improved physical activity engagement: reflections that affect actions

After a few exchanges like the ones in *Figure 7.11* and *7.12.*, we decided to organise a walk/hike even though only a few people could join at the same time. We met on a Sunday morning: three people said that they would join and one texted me at the last minute saying that they were sick, while most of the others had work commitments. Bella arrived earlier, which gave us time for a warm-up walk while waiting for the others. At the outset of my engagement with her, Bella had described herself as *'not sporty'*, with her focus being mostly on university studies and more intellectual hobbies. However, I had been impressed by the consistent number of walks and runs that she logged during the challenge, where she had finished second overall. That day, she told me that she mostly liked walking or running very slowly, but that she felt good about taking part in the challenge and the project overall, and she was starting to look at her physical activity habits from a different perspective. In fact, I keep seeing her logging walks, runs and workouts in the Strava app with impressive consistency, a couple of years after the end of the project. Bella was an interesting example of the value in reflecting critically about physical activity's different meanings, that can go beyond mainstream conceptions of sport and fitness, and allowing people to find their own meaning in the kind of movement they prefer.

When Brandon joined us, we took a long walk along the river, through some parks and then up to the neighbourhood where Bella had to start her shift at work. In the end, Brandon told me that he wanted to talk about something, and we took a longer route to do so. He had lost his job as a construction worker just days before we started the project, and he was an

enthusiastic sports-lover even though he was completely inactive when we first met. During the walk he told me that while he was unemployed, the research project was his only activity and source of income. And, although those months were not easy financially, he was very glad to have gotten the inspiration to re-start working out after many years. He recognised that not being tired from a physical job and having more free time was making a big difference, and that he was also feeling a lot better mentally thanks to running and home workouts. He then added that this experience and improvements in his lifestyle (and well-being) had convinced him to stop applying for construction jobs and he found a job as waiter instead. In his own words, this job was paid less but it allowed him a lot more free time to exercise and relax, which he preferred. He added that this journey from his time unemployed alongside rediscovering his love for physical activity had also made him want to influence and support other people to do the same. Brandon is the same participant that during Workshop 2 had written that his ideal community would be one where *'people didn't have to work as much and had more time to invest in creating a healthier lifestyle'* and that *'if people have more free time, being healthy and active comes natural'*. After this walk and talk with him, I reflected on how the pedagogical *reflections* had had an influence on his *actions*. During the workshops' discussions, he had started visualising how healthy lifestyles are strongly intertwined with the socio-economic world we live in but also how things could be different. Then, while conscious of the material limitations of the now, he still tried to make the most of these ideas by applying for a job that would allow him enough free time to exercise and feel good. At the same time, he also felt the urge to help other people join a similar journey towards well-being, saying how he would like to do more within his local community and the youth organisation he sometimes joins. After this walk we did not manage to organise other in person activities with the rest of the group and – aware of how much effort the young people had put into the project – I did not insist, although I told them that I would remain available if they wanted to ask anything or do something else, which did not ultimately happen. As mentioned earlier, I did not have a preconceived idea of how the interactions should end, since I would have gladly been open to participants carrying on activities on their own: however, similarly to what happened with Group A, also with Group B I followed their lead and recorded their unspoken decision to end the engagement.

7.2.4. Group B-related methodological reflections: independent engagement without structured support

Since the beginning of the PhD journey, I visualised the physical activity actions within a Co-PA approach as potentially looking different in different contexts, adapted by and to the people, organisations and local communities. After the action with Group B, I reflected further on the differences between kickstarting independent grassroots actions or doing it within existing structures. The youth organisation that had helped me gather participants for Group B had been very kind towards me and I had the chance to meet incredibly inspiring youth workers and young people there. As mentioned in Chapter 4, at some point there had been some struggles to reach out to them which had postponed the recruitment, and similar intermittent contacts continued also afterwards. Eventually, one youth worker gave me a list of young people that were potentially interested in taking part, and from that moment on the participants and I became an independent group detached from the youth organisation. This organisation was repeatedly mentioned by the participants in the interviews and workshops, since some of them had clearly found an important community within their facilities and joining some of their activities. However, I did not manage to reach any of the youth workers after the recruitment phase: the first one I had been in contact with and whose activities I had joined the year before, had stopped answering before the recruitment phase; then I had been contacting a person with a more senior role, who had put me in contact with another youth worker; this third one had been extremely helpful in the recruitment but she had handed in her notice and left the organisation shortly after. After the workshops, I then tried to contact again the one with the more senior role to let them know how the project was progressing and potentially connect my participants with other groups they worked with, but I did not succeed.

In terms of the research itself, I found value in experimenting the Co-PA approach in a completely independent way, with young adults that did not necessarily have previously engaged in research or community activities and that, in many cases, were hardly active at all. Furthermore, as with Group B, participants did not know each other and were geographically distant. However, when it came to the action part, I believe that being a newly formed group with no support from the youth organisation had played a role in the extent to which we managed to carry out the activities. This youth organisation does amazing work throughout the North East of England, some of which I had the pleasure to witness in person and I

believe that, with a little support from their side, Group B could have been able to reach even more peers and potentially keep the momentum to co-organise further physical activities. While reflecting on this, I find it important to acknowledge that I did not expect nor demand more support and I remain extremely grateful for the help I received. Compared to the community centre of Group A, in which I gathered interesting insight about the youth workers' struggles, I do not possess the same kind of information for the youth organisation related to Group B. However, I still had the feeling that the organisation deserved more funding and better facilities for the priceless work they do within those communities. I had once joined one of their sessions for young adults that took place in a nursery, and I witnessed how the activities had to make do with limited resources and relied on the charisma and passion of the youth workers. The latest YMCA report (2022) on expenditure on youth services in England, has found a £1.1bn cut in youth services funding over the past ten years in England, with real-terms expenditure down 74% from 2010/11. Comparatively, expenditure has fallen in real terms by 83% in the North East, one of the worst affected regions (YMCA, 2022). Therefore, it is important to note the context in which this research has taken place, namely one in which the existing organisations face serious financial struggles that limit their range of action.

From the perspective of this thesis, I suggest that it is important to join grassroots networks, using local knowledge and existing structures, but that it is also important to build new ones that do not necessarily depend on unreliable public funding. The kind of activity that Group B organised was a self-standing one, albeit small. In hindsight, I think that there is value in the fact that participants could experiment with creating something on their own, without the support of the organisation and finding comfort in choosing the people and the mode of physical activity that they preferred. From the Co-PA perspective, if this action reached a limited amount of people at the time, it allowed them to experience how they can kickstart independent and grassroots actions themselves, be they in the physical activity sphere or beyond. In other words, I believe that how this action happened, namely independently and being completely in the participants' hands, might be even more valuable than if it had been relying on the youth organisation's support. Before moving on to the conclusions, I highlight some take-away points related to the actions co-organised with both groups, the emergent focus on walking, and how these relate with previous stages (especially the influence of the workshops' reflections) and the theoretical stance of this thesis.

7.3. Final reflections on the actions: walking towards different futures

The actions co-designed with Group A and B ended up having several similarities, despite the differences that the two groups had shown in previous stages of the project. Both groups independently converged towards very similar ideas, namely creating walking (and running) groups. Throughout this chapter I have used the 'walking (and running) groups' formulation not only because Group B was adamant about the importance to prioritise walking – as it was believed to be more inclusive and less competitive – over running, but also because among the two groups most of the activities logged on Strava were indeed walks. Interestingly, at the interview stage, walking had been the activity that most participants had mentioned, even though they had often been unsure whether it could count as physical activity. Walking had also been raised as a means to go to work, school, university as well as to the shops or to meet people, and for some of them it was the only physical activity in their routine. Both groups confirmed the trend highlighted by the latest Sport England's spotlight on low socio-economic groups (2018), namely that active travel is key for people in these groups in the UK. However, as previously mentioned, it must be acknowledged that walking may not always be a choice for individuals within these groups, since other factors may prevent access to other forms of transport and physical activities (Sport England, 2018), as participants in both Group A and B confirmed. In fact, the participants of this research project mentioned their interest for various *'alternative'* and *'less popular sports'*, but seemingly turned to accessible activities like walking also because of material barriers and lack of free time. However, the critical pedagogical process had aided a shift in the perspective, with participants finding new meaning and empowerment within the accessible and affordable activity of walking. Therefore, throughout the project I observed how walking moved from being seen as a quasi- or 'non'-physical-activity, to being upgraded for a few reasons: (i) for being a personally meaningful activity, that after critical discussions started to be perceived as equally legitimate as mainstream sports; (ii) because walking allows them to be active *'on [their] own terms'* with friends and in nature, two aspects that were highly valued; (iii) for being an accessible option that helps overcome structural barriers by creating – quite literally – their own paths towards physically active lifestyles. In other words, walking was not only chosen because of impeding barriers, but it was also reclaimed as a collective tool to overcome them. In this experimentation, adopting a framework and prompting topics oriented to a post-capitalist-oriented Co-PA helped participants to discuss inequalities while not

accepting them as inevitable, and helped to promote consideration of personally meaningful physical activity – in the here and now – alongside a vision of radically different futures, topics that, at the beginning of the project, were far from being on the radar.

I remain conscious that social transformations can often remain elusive, even when participants become critically aware of the social structures that constrain their lives, and that small-scale changes occurring at an individual and interpersonal level can be rightly critiqued as offering false generosity, in Freirean terms (Choules, 2007; Newman, 2012; Spaaij, Oxford and Jeanes, 2016). As argued by Spaaij, Oxford and Jeanes (2016), some opportunities might end up bringing forward individual transformations that mostly manifest as changes in the participants' capacity to survive and move forward within the existing status quo. At the same time, it is important not to under-value smaller-scale changes and to keep in mind how also things that defy measurement can be indicators of success (Rossi and Rynne, 2014; Spaaij, Oxford and Jeanes, 2016). While providing a setting in which capitalist structures can be substantially contested and transformed might require larger scale efforts (Spaaij, Oxford and Jeanes, 2016), in this project some participants had the chance to engage in new ways and with new concepts. When it came to the *actions*, these ended up being relatively small ones, but they contained aspects of the critical *reflections* that took place in the workshops. For example, participants considered the need to create inclusive activities that could cater for different levels of physical activity as well as economic possibilities; they opted for activities that should not have to rely on existing structures or businesses (e.g., gyms, sport facilities, public fundings etc.); they used a challenge for motivational purposes while making it strongly clear that it should not be too competitive, in order to make more people feel welcome to join. Regarding the collective aspect, this was limited to friends and family members, namely people they felt comfortable with. In my initial vision, these actions could have potentially reached a wider network of peers and people in the community, but I thought very important to allow participants to be in charge of these decisions. I would now argue that, especially amongst young adults that valued comfort and being active on their own terms, the small-collective scale is an important learning that came from the action part of the project.

While the critical pedagogical *reflections* helped visualise the possibility for collaboration and solidarity on a larger scale, the initial translation of these principles into *action* was preferred on a smaller scale. In the theoretical terms previously highlighted in this thesis (see

Chapter 3 for dialectical materialism), the *dialectical* interactions are intended as an open ended process that took into account the *material* starting point, resulting in an action that was a *synthesis* between the post-capitalist reflections and the need to be active in the now. However, this action is not to be intended as the end of the process, but rather as the potential beginning of new dialectical spirals, namely the *new thesis* for future interactions that will contain in themselves aspects of the previous dialectical interactions. In other words, the physical activity actions contained the seeds of ideas discussed in the workshops, even though their development and measurement falls beyond the scope of this thesis. I argue that it was relevant to include post-capitalist values and visions of the future, even if not all of them could be translated into action in the immediate present. In fact, not only did the participants engage enthusiastically with post-capitalist ideas, but these helped them move beyond the hopelessness of their starting points and towards creating something of their own, albeit on a relatively small scale.

7.4. Critical reflections and methodological perspectives on the actions stage

Reflecting on the actions stage, I see it as the most delicate and unpredictable part of the project, one that tested the adaptability of the Co-PA approach and my own capacity to let go of expectations. While the workshops had created a space for critical reflection and hopeful imagination, the transition to action brought participants face-to-face with the material constraints of their lives. It was in this phase that the dialectical nature of the project became most visible: the synthesis between the desire for change and the realities of time, energy and resources. I had hoped that the actions might reach wider networks or spark more sustained engagement, however I came to see the small-scale nature of what emerged not as a limitation, but rather as an expression of what was possible and valuable within the participants' contexts and their possibilities.

Facilitating this stage required a different kind of attentiveness. I had to resist the urge to push for outcomes and instead remain open to the forms that agency might take. Sometimes this meant accepting that a WhatsApp group would go quiet or that a walking challenge would replace an in-person walking group. On the other hand, it also meant recognising the significance of a participant who had once described themselves as inactive and was now walking regularly with a friend, or another one choosing a job that allowed more time for their own well-being. These moments made me reflect on how empowerment might also take

the form of subtle shifts, new routines and language people use to describe and visualise their lives. In hindsight, I find myself seeing better the value of these small transformations, especially keeping in mind the place of relative disempowerment that we had started from.

From a methodological point of view, the actions stage highlighted the importance of flexibility and adaptability. The co-design process worked best when it was grounded in participants' own rhythms and preferences, even when these diverged from my initial expectations. I argue that these actions had meaning for the very fact that participants could shape them on their own terms. Group A, despite initial disengagement, showed a sense of ownership over their walking challenge even as participation eventually waned. Group B, more confident and articulate from the outset, designed an action that reflected their values of inclusivity, mutual support and non-competitiveness. In both cases, I believe the actions to have been small in scale but significant in meaning, representing a synthesis between participants' material realities and their newly developed critical reflections: a pragmatic yet hopeful step towards reclaiming physical activity on their own terms.

Personally, similarly to what happened at the workshops stage, this stage also brought moments of doubt and reflection. I sometimes wondered whether I had done enough to support the participants or whether I should have intervened more to sustain momentum. I also recognised that part of the Co-PA ethos is to allow participants to lead, and to accept that not all seeds will grow immediately. I was reminded of Freire's perspective of transformation as neither immediate nor linear, but rather as a situated and ongoing process that begins precisely in the places we seek to change (Olson, 1992). In this sense, I see the action stage not directly as the conclusion, but as a continuation of the process: a moment in an ongoing dialectical spiral, where small acts of agency carry the potential to ripple outward in ways that may not yet be visible and fall outside the scope of this research project. Ultimately, I believe that the actions co-designed in this project embodied the core principles of the Co-PA approach: they were grounded in critical reflection, shaped by values of collectivism and care, and responsive to material realities, still managing to carve out personally meaningful ways to be active.

Chapter 8. Conclusions

Through this thesis I aimed to contribute to and advance the discourse around physical activity inequalities with the development of a post-capitalist approach (Co-PA) and the methodological and empirical learning that came with its practical experimentation. From a sport and physical activity perspective, this project has taken place within a landscape of increasing emphasis on systems-thinking, social determinants and the need to overcome barriers to tackle inequalities (e.g., Piggin, 2019; Sport England, 2021). For example, during the course of this PhD, Sport England (2021) set out their new vision in 'Uniting the Movement', a 10-year plan which has marked a significant turn towards wanting to 'level the playing field'. This plan emphasised sport and physical activity's ability to connect communities, and it recognised the potential value of bottom-up approaches as well as the need to make the wider environment (beyond just parks and sport facilities) conducive to active lifestyles. These are all aspects that I consider extremely relevant and aligned with the view of sport and physical activity presented in this thesis. However, from a socio-political perspective, this project has also taken place within a landscape of worryingly increasing wealth and health inequalities (Watt, Raymond and Rachet-Jacquet, 2022), an ongoing – seemingly forgotten – pandemic that keeps decreasing life-expectancy and healthy life-expectancy (Dennis et al., 2022; Guogui Huang et al., 2024; Ryan et al., 2022), global conflicts and political instability, and the ever more impactful effects of the climate crisis (IPCC, 2022; 2023). All these aspects, I have suggested in this thesis, should be taken into account when planning to tackle physical activity inequalities. While it can be argued that we cannot stand outside the system that we seek to change (Byrne, 2009; Rigby, 2022), I think that the opposite could be true in this instance. Using a Marxist lens, I examined the sport and physical activity system as a sub-system of the capitalist one: therefore, since it is contained within a system that is inextricably built on inequalities, I argued that the sport and physical activity system cannot significantly challenge its own inequalities without addressing what is outside of it and engaging with the wider socio-political context from which it is heavily influenced. I argue that this is especially the case in such a time of stark and cooccurring crises.

Sport England's (2021, p. 9) strategy stated that 'inequalities are at the very core of Uniting the Movement' and that there will be a 'laser focus' on 'providing opportunities to people

and communities that have traditionally been left behind'. At the same time, the UK keeps being subjected to austerity, defunding of community and youth centres (£1.1bn cut – 74% – in the past decade), cuts in sport and recreation (by 70% on average within local authorities from 2009-10) and growing regional inequalities with several areas facing increased poverty and deprivation (Harris, Hodge and Phillips, 2019; Webb, Bennett and Bywaters, 2022; YMCA, 2022). Far from levelling out, these factors are instead rendering the 'playing field' increasingly uneven. Therefore, in this thesis I have advocated for strengthening bridges between the physical activity world and the rest of society, between sport actors and organisations, activists, people that are already working on the ground in diverse struggles to build fairer and more equal communities. And, I argue, we should aim to do so in overtly political ways to meet the urgency of current crises.

This thesis calls for a reorientation of physical activity efforts towards bottom-up and activist approaches that, while potentially influencing policy, do not solely rely on governmental focus and funding that often prove to be insufficient (e.g., Coalter, 2012). As argued at length in this thesis, while we are confined to the capitalist status quo, there are very limited chances to significantly overcome inequalities: therefore, it would be relevant to engage in more activist ways to promote physical activity in the here and now, whilst also widening its scope. In this project, I have outlined such a vision of the Co-PA approach, and I experimented with one potential way to put it into practice, using principles of critical pedagogy. In this final chapter, I revisit the three research questions that guided this project, reflecting on their theoretical, methodological and practical implications in light of the findings presented in the previous chapters. While these findings are presented throughout the thesis, in the following sections I reflect on and organise the main contributions that this thesis aims to make from a theoretical (8.1.), methodological (8.2.) and practical (8.3.) perspective. Then I compare this project's outcomes with other Freirean experimentations within the sport field (8.4.) and later focus on the limitations and potential recommendations for future research and applications, alongside a call for action to learn from and link with existing inspiring efforts (8.5.). Finally, I conclude with an overall summary of the project's main message (8.6.).

8.1. Theoretical discussion and contribution

Earlier in the thesis I outlined the case for 'Collective Physical Activity' (Co-PA) as an approach to strengthen physical activity's contribution to building more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable post-capitalist futures, while also contributing to individual and community well-being in the here and now. This approach contributes to academic knowledge by foregrounding an explicit link between physical activity and post-capitalist-oriented change. While previous work in SFD and critical pedagogy has examined the potential of sport to foster critical consciousness and promote agency towards social transformations (e.g., Rossi and Rynne, 2014; Spaaij and Jeanes, 2013), this thesis builds on and repositions those efforts within a more explicit post-capitalist orientation. Grounded in Marx's (1996) critique of capitalism as a system of inherent structural exploitation and Freire's (1972) conception of praxis as reflection to build consciousness of such exploitation and action in order to challenge it, Co-PA offers a frame through which communities can critically engage with their material conditions and collectively envision transformative alternatives. In doing so, it aligns with post-colonial sport studies (Bale and Cronin, 2003; Bancel, Riot and Frenkiel, 2017) and Milan and Milan's (2021) work on community gyms to highlight how physical activity can be reclaimed as a site of cultural resistance and collective self-determination within, against and beyond systems based on structural oppression. Therefore, this thesis advances a novel approach that positions physical activity as a politically engaged practice, aiming to foster collective empowerment towards systemic change beyond the confines of traditional physical activity and SFD paradigms that are embedded within capitalist frameworks.

This approach is intended as a 'praxis' in Freirean terms: at the same time theory and practice, reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (Freire, 1972). Therefore, in this project I deemed it important to keep theory and practice always communicating with each other, in a spiral-shaped dialectical process. Using a dialectical materialist lens (that sees knowledge not as something fixed but rather constantly evolving) my theoretical view of the Co-PA approach has been informed by its practical application, and by going through a dialectical *thesis-antithesis-synthesis* process. In this project, the *thesis* can be said to be represented by the aim: helping young adults in marginalised and low-income areas become more physically active, within a context of growing inequalities. The *antithesis*, presented itself in the form of the material circumstances that participants mentioned as barriers to their physical activity, such as: lack of free time, unaffordable costs, lack of structures or abandonment of existing ones, and struggles with existing mainstream

sport opportunities. In light of this, the participants and I discussed several topics during the workshops – both physical-activity-related and socio-political – which informed their later focus on activities that could be free, inclusive, accessible and deliverable on their own terms. Therefore, opposing elements such as the *thesis* (trying to become more active) and the *antithesis* (structural barriers) have generated a *synthesis* that took both into consideration, resulting in actions based on walking (and running). In truly dialectical terms, this *synthesis* should not be seen as the end of the process, but rather the potential beginning of new dialectical spirals, namely a *new thesis* for future applications of this approach.

The novelty of this theoretical approach and its application to the physical activity sphere is in supporting a process that does not remain confined within the restrictive boundaries of the capitalist system: it rather contains reflections on what causes structural inequalities and how to overcome barriers, observations of collective alternatives based on collaboration, as well as the visualisation of ideal communities and how to build in that direction. Even if the actions taken in the form of walking (and running) groups were small ones, they were informed by new knowledge co-created in the workshops and were directed at contributing to more egalitarian communities and societies built around people's well-being. The participants advanced this *synthesis/new thesis* by interacting with the possibility for transformative action while experimenting with their own agency: therefore, the collective *reflections* infused the physical activity *actions* with new meaning, as discussed in Chapter 7. In this sense, this project's contribution to the fields of sport and physical activity is a theoretical proposition that is neither linear nor flat, which would encompass changes within a given system (as discussed in Chapter 3), but rather a less common but here deemed necessary spiral-shaped one, whose actions – being a continuous, open, dialectical process – contain elements aiming towards a completely new system.

Another important contribution, from a theoretical perspective, was the view of structure and agency within this work. Applying a Marxist and Freirean lens, I aimed to emphasise the role of both structures and agents. In earlier chapters I argued that capitalist structures are largely influential, and participants' views have confirmed the prominent role of material barriers in their lives. I also argued that capitalism's influence is reinforced through the promotion of 'capitalist realist' views that there is no alternative, which I found to be internalised by the young adults I interacted with. However, this project promoted a critical approach to bring consciousness of both the unfairness of such structures and the possibility of challenging

them, hence stressing the role of agency. Possibly an agency intended as collective action, one that sees people not simply as individuals but rather as social beings. In this sense, while starting the analysis from the current influence of structures on people, both structure and agency have been here intended dialectically, in a continuous process of reciprocal cause and effect. In my view, this approach influenced the way in which participants experimented with their own agency and capability to affect small scale changes. Initially, several of them had expressed hopeless views but, through the collective reflections, they started empowering each other and found hope in their own actions. In Freirean terms (Freire, 1972; Shudak and Avoseh, 2015), this thesis' theoretical approach allowed to simultaneously acknowledge and challenge 'limit situations' which are partly due to the situations themselves (e.g., structural inequalities and barriers) and partly because of the internalisation of the oppressors' consciousness (e.g., 'there is no alternative'). In other words, this research project has not stopped at the analysis of how structures limit people's agency, but rather tried to empower participants to use their own agency in changing those very structures: and this approach consequently supported the participants in creating physical activity actions, arguably definable as small-scale *solutions* but within a large-scale *framework* (Fleming, 2007). Therefore, the *theoretical* position and the *practical* side of the project have been constantly interacting, which makes it difficult to analyse the former without looking at the latter. In fact, in the next section I reflect on the application of critical pedagogy and what could be learned from this trial.

8.2. Methodological discussion and contribution

Throughout this thesis, as well as the project itself, I have considered the physical activity and socio-political aspects as equally relevant and related to each other. From a methodological point of view, I have found the Co-PA praxis to bring about relevant findings on both ends, which are now summarised in the following two sections.

8.2.1. Critical pedagogy and physical activity

One of the three main research questions focused on the extent to which the collective reflections could affect the participants' perception of physical activity and their ways to engage in it. The workshops' discussions have shown how collective, democratic and critical

reflections were able to produce shifts in such perceptions. A significant example is that of their understanding of what physical activity is and the meaning it could have for them. For instance, at the interviews stage, several participants were unsure whether walking could count as physical activity and some of them did not include it within the hours of weekly physical activity, even though they enjoyed walking. Later, during the workshops, we discussed Sport England's definition of physical activity, and participants appreciated the fact that walking was included. Specifically, one group went a step further and approached critically the wording surrounding 'moderate intensity', since they believed that a broader definition including also 'low intensity' walking could be more inclusive and beneficial. They argued that this could better promote active lifestyles, seeing walking as an easier step towards those lifestyles than costly gym memberships or taxing activities like long-distance running. This is one example, among those presented in earlier chapters, which shows a progression from the participants' initial hesitation on whether their most practiced physical activity could be counted as contributing to daily activity rates, to critically discussing the very definition given by Sport England and their interpretation of it. The pedagogical process supported them to reflect on their own meaning of physical activity, which led them to go beyond mainstream ideas in order to find the ways to be active that felt more personal and truly significant to them: as one participant wrote in Workshop 3, *'physical activity is what you make of it'*. It was in these open and democratic interactions that their preference for more casual physical activities, non-competitive variations and more chances to be active outdoors started to be seen as feasible and legitimised. Both groups of young adults that I interacted with expressed their interest in physical activity as a reason to get out of their house and as a chance to socialise and feel better about themselves. I argue that this kind of perspective was able to emerge and be valued thanks to the critical pedagogical setting and collaborative learning. The first opinions to be expressed were often closer to mainstream ideas of sport and fitness or, at best, variations of it. And it was only when they felt encouraged to reflect deeply on what they truly like, and felt free to express their diverging opinions, that the focus of the discussions shifted towards more low-key, enjoyable, shared and independent forms of movement.

In this process, the voices of some participants that did not enjoy most mainstream sports – such as, for example, Abigail in Group A – were fundamental to introduce further layers to the collective reflections, that were missing or latent in earlier stages. At the same time, also our previous discussions of inequalities and socio-political aspects had permeated their

thinking surrounding physical activity. The holistic approach of our workshops made it natural for them to reflect on how difficult it can be for some people to exercise after a stressful day at work, or on how others may not lack motivation to be active but may just lack time. This also brought them to recognise the connection between social class and lower physical activity levels in certain areas of the UK. They added that people need stability and financial security in order to have enough free time to dedicate to their own well-being, something that many people do not possess. Such reflections appeared to be aided by the critical pedagogical approach that merged physical-activity-related topics and more political ones. Consequently, participants veered towards a systemic view of physical activity, criticising individualistic approaches that cannot work for people lacking time and financial resources, and discussing how structural societal changes are necessary.

However, this research project did not only enhance participants' understanding of the interconnectedness of inequalities, which can easily lead to despondency, but rather used it as a stepping stone to visualise alternatives and potential solutions that they discussed in hopeful terms. After the workshop in which we imagined how an ideal community could look, participants looked at physical activity as more closely tied to the wider context of place and community, and they stressed that improving people's chances to be active would require structural changes, such as creating cycle lanes around the city and improving equipment in parks. In this collective reasoning, encouraging individuals to be more physically active started to be seen as an insufficient measure, in favour of a necessary societal shift and the creation of communities in which being physically active becomes easy and normal. Even though some changes were clearly seen as difficult to be achieved forthwith in their communities, the perspective started to shift from complete hopelessness and acceptance of the status quo, to being more engaged in the political process of demanding and striving towards such a different society. My theoretical starting point was one that saw physical activity opportunities as always useful, but one that also deemed it necessary to look upstream at the root causes of inactivity and inequalities. And I noticed that, through merging wider critical reflections with physical activity, the two aspects came naturally together and reinforced each other in hopeful ways.

Circling back to the example of walking, the participants of this research project – as well as those with low socio-economic status more generally – might turn to such accessible activities because of barriers that they face when trying to access other activities. As a

participant explicitly stated in a workshop, it is often quite expensive to do most activities besides running and walking. However, the critical pedagogical process seemed to aid a shift in the perspective, with participants finding new meaning and empowerment in these activities. As highlighted in Chapter 7, they moved from seeing walking as a quasi- or non-physical-activity, to seeing it as their choice of preference for several reasons: for the renewed perception of accessible and personally meaningful activities as equally legitimate as mainstream ones; for the possibility to be active on their own terms with friends and in nature; and to overcome structural barriers by creating – quite literally – their own paths towards physically active lifestyles. In other words, not walking because of impeding barriers, but walking reclaimed as a collective tool to overcome them. This perception came alongside different strains discussed in the workshops, in which participants found strength in collectively legitimising their preference to be active on their own terms, not competitively, and favouring inclusivity and togetherness over performance. In sum, through the Co-PA approach, awareness related to physical activity preferences came not as an individualised concept but as a collective one, directly interconnected to the wider socio-political context in which they live. As one participant eloquently put it: we should *'create a community where people didn't have to work as much and had more time to invest in creating a healthier lifestyle. If people have more free time, being healthy and active becomes natural'*. This quote, I argue, is a good illustration of how the post-capitalist-oriented reflections merged with physical activity, promoting personally meaningful strategies to be active (in the here and now) while supporting participants in making sense of current material circumstances and simultaneously aiming to challenge them.

8.2.2. Critical pedagogy and the socio-political

Another research question intended to explore the extent to which the Co-PA praxis could support the participants' view of the possibility of organising communities and society differently. This possibility was strongly visualised and widely supported by the participants, and even if its practical translation would be difficult in the now, visualising alternatives started influencing the way they approached physical activity and also how they imagined their communities, two aspects that they finally synthetised in their physical activity actions. In fact, as highlighted in the previous section, the physical-activity-related topics and socio-political ones were interlinked in the workshops' conversations. While both benefited from

the critical pedagogical strategies, the participants' opinions on socio-political subjects went through a significant development. From the start of our interactions, while I was interviewing them one-on-one, I noticed different levels of interest in political matters, with one group significantly more engaged than the other. However, participants of both groups had in common a strong 'capitalist realist' perspective and nearly no hope expressed in the possibility of substantial social changes. Most of them agreed that our current society does not work for everyone, but their suggestions of what could be done differently were either not structural or not involving socio-economic issues, and most saw a world without poverty as impossible to achieve and a society centred on people's well-being as a difficult concept even just to visualise. What I encountered seemed to reflect the trend highlighted by the Institute for Economic Affairs (Niemietz, 2021), namely that the majority of young Britons think that capitalism is exploitative and unfair, that it causes climate change and fuels racism, selfishness and greed – but, at the same time, they have also internalised consent for pro-capitalist frameworks. This is why, in this project, I leaned on critical pedagogy and collective learning to try and stimulate reflection on how things could be organised differently, and the participants' response was strikingly favourable.

While none of them had ever heard about the concepts that I proposed for discussion, they liked the idea of co-operatively run businesses (*'can't believe all businesses aren't like that'*), communities based on Community Wealth Building approaches (*'we should experiment more with these'*) and degrowth paradigms (*'sounds like it would be good for the planet as we use so many resources and consume so much'*). These conversations, in which participants challenged each other to deepen their knowledge on topics they found interesting despite their novelty, showed the importance of critical pedagogy with an outlook on solutions and alternatives to the capitalist status quo. While I did not aim to alter the way they saw the world in a few meetings, I noticed more systemic, critical yet hopeful thinking starting to emerge and later being applied to the action side of the project. Regardless of how they might make use of this knowledge in the future, they had the chance to widen their horizon beyond the 'there is no alternative' hopeless and limiting narrative. From a methodological point of view, if I had stopped at the interviews and analytical stage and only asked their views on certain topics, I would have mostly received answers that had deep knowledge of barriers and inequalities but nearly no idea of how these could be overcome. Critical pedagogy, on the contrary, allowed them to not only deepen their understanding of the interconnectedness of structural issues, but also widen the horizon of what is possible.

An additional observation from my initial work with participants was a certain gloom when they talked about the future and an overall disempowered outlook, which I interpret to be a natural response when being extremely aware of societal issues while having no vision of how systemic changes or system change could look, and how to contribute to their achievement. To my knowledge, this project's introduction of explicit post-capitalist reflections alongside physical activity was a novel approach, and this attempt at stimulating discussion on alternatives was received much more positively than I had anticipated. In Group B, where many participants seemed to hold progressive views alongside capitalist perspectives, the contribution of some more critical participants was key in using knowledge-based reasoning to resolve apparent contradictions and in generating overall agreement on radically different and egalitarian alternatives. In Group A, whose participants had spent less time in formal education settings and were from more disadvantaged backgrounds, those topics were faced with overall hopeful enthusiasm, despite their complexity. Therefore, discussing such political topics has proven useful not only with already politically engaged young adults that had not yet heard of any post-capitalist perspective, but also with the ones who had previously shown little political interest to date, but who demonstrated to be passionate about wealth inequalities and the unfairness of the current state of affairs. The workshops' conversations showed that not only were most young adults very receptive to and positive about post-capitalist alternatives, but also that these reflections were foundational to start picturing a different, collective and bottom-up way to look at physical activity.

In summary, the methodological contribution of this thesis lies in its synthesis of a participatory, pedagogical and political approach to physical activity. While drawing on principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and co-production, the project did not fully adopt these frameworks in their conventional forms. Instead, it built on their ethos by embedding them within a dialectical materialist and post-capitalist orientation, using Freirean critical pedagogy as a dialogical and transformative praxis that merged critical reflection with collective action. This layered approach responded to the underutilisation of participatory methods in physical activity research that aim to challenge systemic inequalities and their struggles to foster systemic critique of socio-economic structures (Rich, Smith and Giles, 2024; Spaaij et al., 2018). The Co-PA praxis developed here moved further than traditional participatory models by explicitly engaging with structural critique and visualisation of alternatives, supporting a process of collective conscientisation and bottom-up

experimentation. It enabled participants to explore their agency in relation to both physical activity and broader societal transformation, offering an approach that future research may seek to build on by fostering critical consciousness and prefigurative action in marginalised contexts.

8.3. Practical discussion and contribution

A further research question asked whether and how the Co-PA praxis could aid 'conscientisation' in both physical-activity-related and political terms, and the answer is a synthesis of what the previous sections of this chapter have highlighted. In the initial phase of the project, during the individual interviews, most participants expressed hopeless opinions, could not imagine different ways in which communities and society could work, and saw physical activity opportunities vastly restricted by material circumstances outside of their control. After having critically discussed positive examples and alternatives, they started empowering each other in visualising those alternatives and finding more hope in their own agency. This theoretical 'conscientisation' has also influenced practice, where instead of stopping in front of barriers previously seen as insurmountable, participants focused on their own agency to affect small scale changes and organised a physical activity action that was infused with the new visions of possibility.

In the final part of the workshops, they collectively created an action with the aim to be more physically active and include peers and other people from their communities. The concepts discussed in the workshops translated organically into the participants' focus on the collective good, inclusive and accessible activities, using the outdoors rather than traditional sport settings, and trying new and alternative sports. Both groups especially kept in mind the objective to create inclusive environments, by organising something not too competitive and in which everyone could feel involved and welcome. I perceived this focus to be influenced by the collective reflections that preceded the co-design, which had highlighted issues of inequalities and paved the way for privileging ideas that could help to overcome them. Consequently, participants directed their attention towards activities that can be undertaken outdoors, in parks and other natural settings, with both groups naturally moving away from the commodified perception of sport and towards free, accessible and collectively organised physical activity. The ideas discussed were almost never related to conventional team sports

and traditional settings: they discussed events to try new sports in less structured and also non-competitive ways, using outdoor gyms and open-air activities, on top of the popular – among them – walking and running. These choices were directly related to issues that they had raised in previous discussions, such as the challenges of finding groups that practice less popular sports or costs that are often off-putting and exclude certain social classes. Through the planning of this action that followed group reflections, they took matters into their own hands and organised activities that would answer to the needs that they had expressed.

Through the use of critical pedagogy, participants had been allowed to reflect on their preferences, they had been supported in thinking outside the box of pre-conceived ideas of sport, and they had placed physical activity into the wider socio-political context. Once at the practical stage, the soil was already fertile for them to naturally explore their own personally meaningful ways to be physically active, with a focus on community and solidarity. This praxis provided support for these young adults on the periphery to find their own path towards physically active lifestyles and to try it in practice. Their choices seemed in line with what other scholars have defined as 'post-sport' (Atkinson, 2010, p. 1250), namely activities that are similar to mainstream ones but that value cooperation and social inclusion and move away from competitive, hierarchical and patriarchal forms of sport. Informal participation has been recently observed to be increasingly preferred to club-based and formally structured sports (O'Connor and Penney, 2021) and the participants of this research project have shown a similar preference: the Co-PA approach seemingly worked as a facilitator to promote the explorative process. Such a process may be particularly important in marginalised contexts where holistic and empowering strategies can help overcoming barriers. In fact, as previously mentioned, both groups in this research ended up creating a similar physical activity action taking into account their preferences but weighing them against their means, and considering their objectives while not forgetting the context. I argue that their focus on walking (and partially running) can be interpreted as a way to embrace and reclaim a collective, accessible and enjoyable tool to be physically active in defiance of the socio-economic limitations, and against them. In my interpretation, this project has shown the potential to turn physical-activity-related disadvantage upside down, owning it and making it a tool for social change. This experimentation, in my view, shows how a certain process can give new significance to something not new *per se*, like walking.

Furthermore, I suggest that the action part of this project was useful for participants to experience change as something that they can bring about themselves. The Co-PA approach allowed a twofold process: on the one hand, participants visualised the role of structural issues and their contingent nature, which helped them to see the barriers as something difficult to overcome but not impossible; on the other hand, they perceived value in the physical activity they enjoy and manage to do (see chapters 5 and 6), rather than dissatisfaction for not meeting mainstream ideals of fitness and sport, which can potentially result in not being active at all. Participants also reflected on how funding could be beneficial for their physical activity actions, but this was not faced as a necessary condition, since both groups visualised a bottom-up action that could be organised for free and with their own means. As highlighted in previous chapters, I aimed to experiment with opportunities that would not necessarily rely on policies and public funding, and participants seemed to converge towards a similar approach. Nevertheless, as far as policy is concerned, this project could suggest two important avenues for intervention matching Sport England's (2021) 'Uniting the movement' vision, namely (i) supporting bottom-up community approaches and (ii) creating environments that are conducive to active lifestyles. The young adults in this project have expressed a strong preference to be active on their own terms and outside mainstream sport settings: in my interpretation, this indicates the relevance of facilitating and supporting independent gatherings and enabling spaces in which people can experiment, be autonomous and fluid in the participation, without requesting high levels of commitment. O'Connor and Penney (2021) have highlighted how informal physical activity practices seem to respond to societal demands for increased freedom, autonomy and social connection (Atkinson, 2010; 2013; Tomlinson et al., 2005; Wheaton, 2004), while wanting to resist to the traditional focus on ability, fixed scheduling and activities reliant on membership fees (O'Connor and Penney, 2021; O'Connor and Brown, 2007; Wheaton, 2004). I suggest that applications of the Co-PA approach can aid this shift and can strengthen the connection between those spontaneous demands and wider political struggles aiming for social justice. In this thesis, I did not aim to resolve the theoretical tension between bottom-up versus top-down, or between independent spaces versus organised interventions. But I suggest that Co-PA can be a useful tool from both perspectives: gladly in reception of public support but not necessarily reliant on it, integrated in institutional activities such as towns experimenting with Community Wealth Building, or within experiences of self-organisation and movement building such as the community gyms highlighted in Chapter 2 (Milan and Milan, 2021).

8.4. Small-scale solutions within a large-scale framework: reflecting through the lens of physical activity's holistic definition and other applications of critical pedagogy in sport

This project started by being aligned with Piggin's (2020, p. 5) holistic definition of physical activity that stresses the focus on the culturally specific spaces and contexts in which people move, which can work as opportunities or barriers, and are therefore inherently political. This view was strengthened by my interactions with peripheral young adults whose physical activity opportunities are mostly limited by their contexts, namely busy work schedules, limited free time, costs acting as barriers, poor infrastructure in their neighbourhoods, as well as issues with mainstream sport opportunities. As van Sluijs et al. (2021, p. 430) pointed out, older teenagers and young adults are rarely the focus of physical activity research, despite the need to better understand the major life transitions that they go through. Indeed, the participants here highlighted the peculiarities of transitioning into adulthood within a socio-economic context that is not conducive to maintaining active lifestyles. They also stressed their preference for finding meaningful ways to be active on their own terms and possibly alongside people that they feel comfortable with. At the same time, the political discussions that took place in the workshops had given a larger-scale framework to their thinking, whereby these small-scale actions were seen as valuable and feasible in the now alongside consciousness of the need for structural changes (such as allowing people to have more free time and building communities were being active becomes natural: see Chapter 6). In light of this, this thesis adds a novel argument to the landscape of physical activity research and interventions that have social justice at heart, arguing that those can be strengthened by an overt interaction with post-capitalist-oriented reflections, by means of which disadvantaged people might find personally meaningful ways to overcome barriers as well as empowerment in collective engagement.

Within sport projects that include critical pedagogy and in which participants become critically aware of the social structures that constrain their lives, Spaaij, Oxford and Jeanes (2016) argued for the importance to consider that some opportunities might end up bringing forward mostly individual transformations to survive within the existing status quo. However, smaller-scale changes should not be necessarily underestimated and it should be noted how also things that defy measurement can be indicators of success (Rossi and Rynne, 2014;

Spaaij, Oxford and Jeanes, 2016). For example, in their application of Freirean pedagogy to SDP programmes in Cameroon and Kenya, Spaaij, Oxford and Jeanes (2016) found that young women were able to take part in activities, access social spaces and be recognized within their communities in ways that were not considered possible before. While within the scope of the projects they could not achieve considerable changes in the oppressive gender hierarchies, they argue that the projects provided a foundation to build on in order to prompt future changes in gender relations. Thus, they suggest that when using critical pedagogy it is important to consider transformation as an incremental process and one that should be judged in relation to the restrictions that exist within local contexts (Newman, 2012; Spaaij, Oxford and Jeanes, 2016). Applying these reflections to my own project, if providing a setting in which capitalist structures can be contested and transformed might require larger-scale efforts (Spaaij, Oxford and Jeanes, 2016), participants had the chance to engage in new ways and with new concepts: some of them had never been to a community centre or community activity of any kind; they approached radical and hopeful alternatives to the status quo of inequalities that none of them had ever heard before and did so in seemingly enjoyable ways; they experimented with a dialogical, democratic and collaborative way to learn, one that also the less academic participants seemed to particularly appreciate; and, last but not least, they reframed their idea of physical activity and organized activities themselves. Drawing on Spaaij, Oxford and Jeanes (2016) and their analysis of SDP programs, I ought to consider the changes achieved in relation to the restrictions of the contexts that this project took place in. Since the beginning of this research, I aimed to engage with young adults on the periphery of society and in marginalised contexts, and the baseline that we started from was indeed a fairly disengaged one. Therefore, even though I would have gladly co-organised further physical activity actions with a wider outreach, I remind myself of the importance of having empowered participants to take direct action, albeit on the scale that they felt manageable.

Nols et al. (2018) similarly pointed out that it is important not to underestimate what they call ‘micro victories’. In their investigation of critical pedagogy and its role within an urban SFD initiative, they found that young people experienced it as a space where they could be themselves, feel safe to talk about personal and social problems, learn to reflect and form opinions and become socially engaged, among other things. Nols et al. (2018) argue that, from a Freirean perspective, such SFD initiatives could be seen as an action in themselves. Drawing on this perspective, I could interpret the entirety of this research project, with all its individual and group interactions, as an action in Freirean terms. In other words, when

analysing this project's practical implementation, we could not only look at the walking groups, but also at the workshops and collective reflections, as the *action* part. According to Nols et al. (2018), critical dialogue and group conversations might not necessarily or directly impact the root causes of poverty, but there is evidence that they stimulate socio-critical reflections, and promote virtues such as equality, rejection of discrimination, joy, respect, love and care. Developing critical awareness needs nourishing contexts and repeated opportunities, and this process can be slow and occur in very fragile and non-linear ways (Nols et al., 2018; Spaaij, Oxford and Jeanes, 2016), and that is why it should continue over the life course (Mwaanga and Prince, 2016). I agree with the latter point even though, because of the limited timeframe available within the span of the PhD, I could not plan to observe changes over a longer time. In this project, however, I found that the more we engaged the more participants started thinking critically, systemically and in hopeful ways, which led them to develop action thought, namely seeing the need and possibility to act directly for the greater good. I did not assume that all participants would find the same meaning in our pedagogical encounters (Tinning, 2002), but I found that discussing wide socio-political issues and solutions influenced significantly their way to think about physical activity for themselves and their communities. Using Fleming's words (2007), I found some indications that large-scale problems might not necessarily require large-scale solutions, but they might require small-scale solutions within a large-scale framework.

The participants of this research project had consistently highlighted the influence of material barriers on their chances of being physically active. The socio-political reflections merged with physical-activity-related ones, supported their visualisation of the need for radical societal shifts while they simultaneously reclaimed walking to be active despite current material limitations. I argue that this shows how the Co-PA approach can aim to improve physical activity opportunities in the here and now, while creating a link between current barriers and wider struggles for equality and liberation. In other words, if current mainstream sports and physical activities are often perceived as not accessible, Co-PA could contribute to: (i) experimenting with ways to be physically active that match marginalised people's preferences as well as material conditions, finding empowerment within the boundaries of the now; (ii) alongside this, visualising the possibility to challenge the status quo and to strive towards alternatives and wider social change. I suggest that post-capitalist alternatives based on a fair redistribution of income, investments in public services and guaranteed living wages, can enable people to live well while working less and in more meaningful jobs for the

well-being of their communities (Hickel, 2019). At the same time, these societal shifts would allow more free time to have fun, cooperate with other people, care for loved ones, enjoy nature, and be more (recreationally) active (Hickel, 2019). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the current status quo makes it difficult, or nearly impossible, for many people to experience and embrace different lifestyles, and that these can only be achieved through collective and concerted efforts. From the Co-PA perspective, meaningful and enjoyable physical activity could definitely be one of the aspects gaining a more pivotal role in future societies centred around people's well-being, but it should first play its role in the collective struggles to build them. This project experimented with one potential way to merge physical activity and post-capitalist-oriented political engagement, but many adaptations or alternatives could be experimented. As Freire did not present critical pedagogy as a blueprint, but rather as principles for adapting liberating education in contexts over time and space (Ledwith, 2018), I propose Co-PA as principles for a liberating post-capitalist-oriented physical activity, to be adapted to different contexts. At the same time, I suggest learning from and linking with existing efforts that act in transformative ways through sport and physical activity.

8.5. Limitations and recommendations for future research

I believe it crucial to acknowledge that this chapter, as well as the whole thesis, presents one way of reflecting on and interpreting the data here included, namely my own. Other and different interpretations of the participants' views and experiences could be drawn from it and be equally relevant. I have tried to give a fair representation of them (materialistically) while always bringing forward the subjectivity of my own interpretation (dialectically), and I hope to have conveyed the fact that this non-linear process could have taken – and could hopefully take in the future – different ways. In this section, I highlight some of the limitations that this project presents, still being aware that several more could be fairly pointed out by a critical reader.

The practical action that this project culminated with responded to the view reached by the participants that even *'small scale help adds up to make a bigger difference'*, a perspective that they developed or strengthened through the collective learning. In this chapter, and in Chapter 7, I have reflected at length on the meaning of small-scale actions: however, it is also

important to note that, were it not for some limitations, the groups might have opted for different or more actions on top of the walking (and running) groups they created. As mentioned in Chapter 6, several participants in both groups (especially the ones that did not enjoy football and other conventional team sports) had expressed interest in trying different sports, among which they named lacrosse, Gaelic football, hockey, badminton and handball. While these are noticeably all team sports, my interpretation was that less popular ones might not carry the same competitive and performance-related aura, which would have made them feel more at ease taking part without necessarily having to be good at it. Therefore, future research with a similar scope might benefit from allowing participants to feel materially supported in organising actions that include unconventional sports. I perceived the choice of walking (and running) to be a truly heartfelt one and one that fitted within these young adults' busy schedules, being likely to enter their medium- to long-term routines, and requiring relatively low organisational efforts and resources. However, it would be interesting to explore whether, within different contexts and with more access to structures, some alternative sports would be the preferred choices. And whether there would be value in directing the discussion towards sports which young adults would otherwise not come in contact with, or practically guiding them through trying some of those less conventional ways to be physically active.

On the other side of the spectrum, another potential limitation was the orientation towards an action focused on physical activity, which was suggested by the very nature of this project and its limited timeframe. As mentioned in Chapter 6, some participants in Group A did not initially perceive physical inactivity as an important issue and some did not enjoy being active, while in Group B the socio-political topics seemed to be more engaging than the physical activity-related ones. While I could see a shift in their perception throughout the collective reflections, the final part of the workshops was pre-orientated towards physical activity. In future experimentations, where engagement can be sustained over a longer period of time, I believe it could be relevant to leave young adults complete freedom in choosing the type of community action to co-create (be it within the realm of arts and crafts, music, mental health support groups etc.) and seeing whether physical activity takes a more or less relevant space within them, or possibly none at all. Similarly, it would be important to engage with a range of young people, in different life stages and with even more diverse demographics (accompanied by thoughtful consideration of broader intersecting inequalities), to explore a

possibly wider range of opinions, needs and collective dynamics which could lead to completely different observations.

From a logistical point of view, I think it is important to further pinpoint three areas of limitation and potential enrichment of future research, when considering whether or not to apply a Co-PA praxis or critical pedagogy to physical activity projects. The first, and arguably most important one, was my limited previous engagement within the communities and with the young adults that took part in the project. While I had attended some meetings of the first youth organisation, the second community centre was a last-minute contact, due to the recruiting struggles mentioned in Chapter 4. In this regard, I suggest that local educators, youth workers and researchers that are already embedded in the communities they aim to work with could apply Co-PA principles starting from a higher baseline of familiarity and closeness with both people and context. Second, while I received useful recommendations from my supervisory team, establishing contacts on my own and in communities that we were not well networked within has been very challenging as an outsider researcher, as Chapter 4 and Chapter 7 reflect on. While this aspect could be better addressed by researchers embedded in their communities, I also acknowledge that I wished to engage with young adults that were not involved in sport and physical activity, and possibly not really engaged in formal settings altogether. I was committed to collaborating with participants whose voices would not otherwise have been heard and to create something for communities that would not otherwise have been engaged in a project of this kind. I believe that, because of my background and demeanour, I was perceived more as a peer than a representative of Durham University, but I also take into account that I was still a researcher. However, I was probably the one who struggled most with the jarring contrast between the billions I heard circulating within the university system and the crumbs that youth centres and organisations seem to make do within those extremely disadvantaged areas. While I think that both research and grassroots would deserve more finances, it made me wonder if the scholarship that financed my PhD would have been better spent just by donating money to local youth centres. This is a doubt that I am, to this day, not able to dissipate. Third, the support I received by the youth organisation and the community centre has been mostly related to the recruiting phase and, in one case, in allowing me to rent their spaces: for the most part, I carried out the project on my own. I was fine conducting the workshops on my own, but a more synergic effort could have probably benefited the final action part, especially with Group B. In Chapter 7 I have reflected on the diminishing engagement in the final stages of this project and its potential

meanings: experimenting with a similar approach in different contexts, within more established networks and a longer timeframe would also be an important addition to the development of knowledge surrounding future Co-PA approaches. Without this it is challenging to understand fully the contribution of my methodology to the engagement and experiences of participants within the work, when compared with more conventional approaches. However, I am extremely grateful to the inspiring youth workers that supported this project and that work in deprived communities with very little resources, whilst dedicating infinite passion and time to everyone they encounter. One of them shared with me their struggles to keep the community centre open because of rising rent and bills, lack of personnel and lowered funding (see Chapter 4 and 7). Their struggles, however, are not exceptions, but rather the new norm: spending on youth services in England has faced a £1.1bn cut in the past decade, equivalent to 74% of its total (YMCA, 2022), and it is difficult to imagine a significant inversion of this trend in the foreseeable future, given that the leadership of the Labour party at the time of writing is also committed to austerity measures (*The Guardian*, 2024). In theory, I would suggest that future research could benefit from being carried out with further collaboration with local organisations if not directly by themselves, but I acknowledge that their systematic underfunding is a structural limitation to take into account. This is why I have theorised and experimented the Co-PA approach with an outlook on it being applicable also in independent spaces and grassroots movements.

8.5.1. Learning from and linking with existing transformative efforts

I suggest that Co-PA's post-capitalist approach and its overtly political ethos could support already existing efforts, but also that – vice versa – future research should aim to link with and learn from the examples that are already in place around the world. For instance, the Italian *palestre popolari* thoroughly analysed by Milan and Milan (2021), where self-organised 'community gyms' repurpose abandoned buildings to create spaces where sport is experienced as a political practice based on 'self-organisation, inclusion and accessibility' (p. 733). I bring this example not only because I am familiar with these spaces, but also because I believe there are similarities between the political trajectory of the UK and the one that in Italy is at an arguably more advanced phase. Due to the economic crisis and the consequent decline in conventional forms of youth participation, some young people in Italy have started engaging in innovative and unconventional forms of political action, such as recreational

activism practices, aimed at re-appropriating spaces, free time, and access to leisure through mutualistic practices (Milan, 2019). I suggest that three things are notable about examples such as the community gyms discussed by Milan and Milan (2021), and the many more existing all over the world.

First, from an implementation perspective, that minimal economic and political support is required (indeed, in some cases even political opposition is present). Second, from a conceptual perspective, that post-capitalist ideas are rarely discussed explicitly (e.g., Milan and Milan, 2021), which is a valid strategy but also a point of difference to my vision of Co-PA. Lastly, from a research perspective, it is notable that because these actions often emerge informally with dynamic involvement, it can be challenging to capture and explore their emergence; as such, it would be interesting to creatively develop – with communities – ways of understanding further their dynamics and effects. Therefore, I argue that where bottom-up entities exist, critical pedagogical strategies could be helpful to learn from them and/or support their post-capitalist and prefigurative strength. Conversely, in contexts where such movements and activities struggle to emerge spontaneously, Co-PA could be a tool to plant the seeds or lay the ground for them. In this project, I found the praxis – uniting critical reflections and practical action – extremely helpful in moving organically towards a physical activity integrated within the socio-political context and seen as connected to other actions striving for radical social change. Therefore, I argue that it could be used, adapted and improved by future researchers aiming to explore physical activity's potential to contribute to political engagement for system change. While I believe that similar practices are more likely to happen outside policy and government frameworks, I suggest that policies could contribute to improving the environments that would allow them to emerge, grow and thrive.

8.6. Final reflections and concluding remarks

In conclusion, considering how socio-economic disparities, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic are affecting and exacerbating inequalities, in this thesis I argued that there is an urgent need for sport and physical activity actions to enhance their focus on contributing to radical system change. At this historical moment, those working within sport and physical activity contexts should join forces with other sectors and social structures to find ways to tackle inequalities and save humanity from capitalist-induced climate catastrophe. In this

context, I suggest that physical activity, without eclipsing other efforts, should nonetheless be considered an important lever, given its unique and wide-reaching positive effects on physical, mental, and social well-being. To maximise its potential, I suggest: diverting attention from organised sport towards personally meaningful physical activities; focusing on bottom-up collective opportunities to experiment with physical activity, rather than top-down individualised and commodified ones; and envisioning radical system change to foster hope and tackle societal issues at their roots. Therefore, in this thesis I proposed Co-PA as an approach focused on (i) meaning and enjoyment, (ii) collective action, and (iii) a post-capitalist outlook as features to guide diverse future physical activity efforts aiming for social justice. I argue that such an approach is particularly needed when doing research with and aimed at marginalised people and lower socio-economic classes, that are significantly affected by capitalist inequalities.

Furthermore, I argue that we should take into consideration the fact that funding of youth centres and overall public spending keeps declining, which makes it risky to rely on policies to reverse structural inequalities (Taylor-Robinson, Barr and Whitehead, 2019), since these might never be substantially implemented. This is why I believe that our projects should also integrate immediate bottom-up solutions that can support people to find their own enjoyable and pragmatic ways to be active, and to become community or group leaders themselves, when possible. Therefore, in this thesis I suggested Co-PA as a tool to create physical activity opportunities that can benefit individuals and communities in the here and now, while also fostering critical consciousness and empowering in undertaking wider bottom-up political action. In other words, a collective physical activity to contribute to necessary forces for change, be it through local community actions, community co-operatives, activism or other forms of small- to large-scale political engagement.

What I propose as crucial is to focus on processes that start from acknowledging capitalist inequalities (materialistically) and aim not to accept them as inevitable – and, at best, ameliorate the conditions of the most affected – but rather strive (dialectically) towards a necessary and possible system change. The background highlighted at the beginning of this thesis, namely capitalism's core features and the concurrent crises that are exacerbating inequalities, calls for different ways to approach physical-activity-related and general inequalities, if we are to overcome them in any significant way. At a time of concurrent global crises that are devouring our societies and planet (Fraser, 2022), 'where the old is

dying but the new is yet to be born' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 275–276), I argue that it is urgent to strengthen physical activity's contribution to the creation of a more socially just society. For this purpose, I argue that sport and physical activity actors should engage in more political and activist ways: for example, by acting as 'prefigurative' educators, namely organising activities that strive to reflect the future that people could seek – one that is more egalitarian, non-commodified and centred around people's well-being. I advocate for a collective and post-capitalist-oriented physical activity in the belief that transformative actions can and should have the potential to lead to 'alternative realities' (Spaaij and Jeanes 2013, 448), and that such a potential should be valorised and strengthened by hope in the possibility to build more equitable and enjoyable futures, as well as civic empowerment to contribute to their realisation.

In summary, this thesis contributes to academic knowledge by proposing a radical reorientation of physical activity research and practice through the development of the Co-PA approach. This post-capitalist and bottom-up approach aims to move beyond seeing physical activity as an individualised health matter or an aspect to be improved mostly through policies, instead strengthening its role as an opportunity for political engagement and collective transformation. In a time of intersecting global crises – from a climate, health and socio-economic perspective – this thesis suggests a shift in perspective by advancing a post-capitalist-oriented integration of critical pedagogy and physical activity. It does so aligning with calls for more bottom-up and activist approaches in sport and physical activity (Spaaij et al., 2018; Spaaij, Oxford and Jeanes, 2016), and resonating with perspectives that see sport as a contested terrain of resistance (Bale and Cronin, 2003; Bancel, Riot and Frenkiel, 2017; Milan and Milan, 2021). At the same time, this thesis offers a new theoretical and methodological pathway to approach physical activity, by integrating critical pedagogy, elements of participatory practices, and an overt post-capitalist-oriented approach. This proposition of Co-PA, however, is presented as just one way to engage with a more political physical activity, in the belief that adaptations or alternatives could stem from the imagination and expertise of scholars, as well as community organisations, social movements and independent groups of people.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Project title: **Let's help our community become more active!**

Durham University | NIHR | Applied Research Collaboration North East and North Cumbria

Lead Researcher: Gianmarco Dellacasa, Durham University

Contact details: gianmarco.dellacasa@durham.ac.uk

🎯 What is this research?

In this research, we want to do two things. First, we want to talk with you about what it is like in the area you live, study or work in. We want to discuss and **hear your thoughts** **on what could be done differently** to create opportunities to be physically active for you and your communities. And then we want to turn words and ideas into action, **designing and creating together** **one or more physical activity opportunities** for yourself and those around you.

To make sure this research is safe, it is reviewed and checked. This study received approval to go ahead, but if you have any questions or are unsure about anything, please do ask me or the person who gave you the leaflet.

🤔 Can I take part?

Anyone aged between 16 and 25 can take part! Everyone is welcome to join: whether you like sports and being engaged in the community or, vice versa, physical activity and community action are not your cup of tea. The more diverse your opinions and experiences, the better.

If you…

❌ don't fancy sports
❌ don't engage much within the community

…you're welcome to join!

And if you…

✅ enjoy being physically active
✅ like community engagement

…you're welcome to join too!

We would like to invite you to take part in the research because we believe that, as a young adult living in this area, your opinion and knowledge are very important.

💰 What do I get?

You will be **paid** for your time (a minimum of 25£ per hour – taking part to the whole study the total could be between 125 and 400£) and, at the same time, we hope that this experience could turn out to be fun as well as contributing to your personal development.

➡️ What next?

Before you decide whether to agree to take part, it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read all the information carefully and don't hesitate to get in contact if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

🤔 Do I have to take part?

No - participation is **voluntary** and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. Your rights in relation to withdrawing any data that is identifiable to you are explained in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

💪 What will I need to do?

STEP 1: If you agree to take part in the study, there's going to be an initial one-to-one **interview** with me (the researcher) that will last between 1 and 2 hours. If you prefer, I can also send you the questions beforehand. Interviews can take place in person or via Zoom, as you prefer. Your interview responses will be audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed.

STEP 2: Then you would take part in **three workshops** with other partcipants. In those, we will talk about physical activity, the differences in how different people are able to take part and other similar topics related to you and your community. After this, if you wish we'll work together to start **designing one or more physical activity opportunities** for you, your peers and your community.

👀 Are there any potential risks involved?

The research involves minimal risks. All interviews will take place in professional spaces or remotely (e.g., via Zoom). At the end, you will be able to see what we write and approve it or ask us to change it before we publish anything.

🤫 Will my data be kept confidential?

All information obtained during the study will be kept confidential. Transcripts will be anonymised; if the data is published it will not be identifiable as yours (unless you request otherwise). Full details are included in the accompanying Privacy Notice. All research data and records needed to validate the research findings will be stored for 10 years after the end of the project.

📝 What will happen to the results of the project?

The results may be: written up as academic papers; shared at academic seminars or conferences; included in public or practitioner facing blogs or reports. We hope that the results will be used to **inspire** the design and delivery of **future community-based physical activity actions**. At the end, a summary of the results of the project will be shared with you and **we will discuss together additional ways to use the findings** and information gathered.

Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?

If you have any further questions about this study, please speak to the researcher Gianmarco Dellacasa (gianmarco.dellacasa@durham.ac.uk) in the first instance. If you are unsatisfied, or to raise any concerns, please contact the Supervisor, Emily Oliver (emily.oliver@durham.ac.uk).

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part.

Appendix 2: Consent form

Consent Form

Project title: **Let's help our community become more active!**

Researcher: Gianmarco Dellacasa
Department: Sport and Exercise Sciences
Contact details: gianmarco.dellacasa@durham.ac.uk

To raise any concerns, please contact the supervisor: Emily Oliver, emily.oliver@durham.ac.uk

This form is to confirm that you understand what the purposes of the project, what is involved and that you are happy to take part. Please tick each box to indicate your agreement:

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated _____ and the privacy notice for the above project.	
I have had sufficient time to consider the information and ask any questions I might have, and I am satisfied with the answers I have been given.	
I understand who will have access to my data, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
I consent to being audio recorded and understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, and other research outputs.	
I agree to take part in the above project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	

Please complete
Participant's Signature _____ Date_____ (NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS) _____ Preferred contact (email and/or phone number) _____ Researcher's Signature _____ Date_____

Researcher's use only	
Participant Code Assigned	_____

Appendix 3: Demographic questions

Demographic questions

Project title: **Helping our community become more active!**

Researcher: Gianmarco Dellacasa
Department: Sport and Exercise Sciences
Contact details: gianmarco.dellacasa@durham.ac.uk

This form is to collect demographic data that will be anonymised and kept confidential. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to ask me or the person that handed you the form.
To raise further concerns, please contact the supervisor: Emily Oliver, emily.oliver@durham.ac.uk

Researcher's use only	
Participant Code Assigned	___

1. How old are you?

_____
(Day/Month/Year of birth)

_____

2. What is your country of birth?

_____

3. If you were not born in the UK, when did you move here?

_____

4. What is the postcode of your home address?

_____

5. How would you describe your ethnic group?

A. White

- ☐ English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British
- ☐ Irish
- ☐ Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- ☐ Roma
- ☐ Non specified above, please write here:

_____

B. Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups

- ☐ White and Black Caribbean
- ☐ White and Black African
- ☐ White and Asian
- ☐ Non specified above, please write here:

_____

C. Asian or Asian British

- ☐ Indian
- ☐ Pakistani
- ☐ Bangladeshi
- ☐ Chinese
- ☐ Non specified above, please write here:

_____

D. Black, Black British, Caribbean or African

- ☐ Caribbean
- ☐ African background
- ☐ Non specified above, please write here:

_____

E. Non specified above

- ☐ Arab
- ☐ Non specified above, please write here:

_____

6. What is your religion?

- [ ] No religion
- [ ] Christian
- [ ] Buddhist
- [ ] Hindu
- [ ] Jewish
- [ ] Muslim
- [ ] Sikh
- [ ] Non specified above, please write here:

_____

7. What is your main language?

- [ ] English
- [ ] Non specified above (including British Sign Language), please write here:

_____

8. Which of the following most accurately describes you?

- [ ] Female
- [ ] Male
- [ ] Non-binary
- [ ] Transgender
- [ ] Intersex
- [ ] Non specified above, please write here:

_____

- [ ] I prefer not to say

9. Which of the following most accurately describes your sexual orientation?

- [ ] Heterosexual
- [ ] Gay or Lesbian
- [ ] Non specified above, please write here:

_____

- [ ] I prefer not to say

10. Which pronouns would you like people to use to refer to you?

- [ ] He/him/his
- [ ] She/her/hers
- [ ] They/them/theirs
- [ ] Non specified above, please write here:

_____

11. What is your marital status?

- [ ] Single/never married
- [ ] Married
- [ ] In a domestic partnership

- [ ] Divorced
- [ ] Widowed
- [ ] Non specified above, please write here: _____
- [ ] I prefer not to say

12. Do you have children?

- [ ] No
- [ ] Yes (if you wish, you could say how many here:_____)
- [ ] I prefer not to say

13. How would you describe your health in general?

- [ ] Very good
- [ ] Good
- [ ] Fair
- [ ] Bad
- [ ] Very bad

14. Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more that affects your capacity to be physically active?

- [ ] No
- [ ] Yes (If you wish, please specify here:_____)

15. Which of the following best describes your occupational status?

- [ ] Student (please specify here:_____)
- [ ] Working (please specify here: _____)
- [ ] Looking after home or family
- [ ] Looking for jobs
- [ ] Non specified above, please write here:

_____

16. Have you achieved a qualification?

- [ ] Degree level or above
- [ ] GCSEs or equivalent
- [ ] AS, A level or equivalent
- [ ] NVQ or equivalent
- [ ] Non specified above, please write here:

_____

17. How many hours per week do you usually dedicate to your main activity (for example, working and/or studying?

- [ ] 0 to 15
- [ ] 16 to 30
- [ ] 31 to 48
- [ ] 49 or more

18. How do you usually move to go about your daily life? (please select more than one option if necessary)

- ☐ Underground, tram
- ☐ Train
- ☐ Bus
- ☐ Car
- ☐ Motorcycle, scooter or moped
- ☐ Bicycle
- ☐ On foot
- ☐ Non specified above, please write here: _____

Appendix 4: Sample from interview with Alfie (Group A)

Gianmarco: And so how do you think people can look after their own health? We speak about physical activity but also other things, what do you think?

Alfie: Just watch what they eat.

Gianmarco: So would you say eating is the most important?

Alfie: Eating and keeping active.

Gianmarco: Good points. And do you think that people can also help each other with their health, for example, physical activity choices?

Alfie: Yeah, because like, if they've got a friend that's struggling and that and that friend's just like doing runs and that, they could say do you want to come on a run with us and that, it could entice them onto activity.

Gianmarco: Perfect, that's a very good example. And so what does the word community mean to you? There's no right or wrong answer.

Alfie: A lot of different things really, because in mine you've got loads of knackers and you've got like the decent people, so just it depends what you make of it really.

Gianmarco: Good point. And do you think you belong to one community, more communities…?

Alfie: A few. So I've lived in [omitted] and that with my nana, then I've come back to [omitted] so.

Gianmarco: So would you say your communities are mainly related to the places where you lived?

Alfie: Yeah.

Gianmarco: OK, and do you think that like, for example, you and your mates, would you consider they're a kind of community as well or not?

Alfie: Yeah.

Gianmarco: OK, and if you could describe it in a few words, how would you describe your community or communities?

Alfie: Just, it's canny actually. I've got like people who you just don't associate yourself with or you've just got like pals and that.

Gianmarco: What do you think is your role in those communities if you have any role?

Alfie: To keep the peace really.

Gianmarco: And do you feel like you and your friends can be like influential in your communities?

Alfie: No.

Gianmarco: Tell me more.

Alfie: Well, just say someone's… and that, we're just quite happy sitting there bouncing them off the floor and that.

Appendix 5: Sample from interview with Benjamin (Group B)

Gianmarco: So yeah before we move on to the next part, we were talking about sports like alternative forms of physical activity that might be more enjoyable for you, would you mind expanding…

Benjamin: Yeah so I think plenty of people really thrive on the competitive sports because, well first of all actually it encourages you to do better and do more, but also the camaraderie of being on a team and it being us versus them. I think there are plenty of people who do really come into their own on that, but for me personally I get quite anxious, especially with things like football and rugby where it might be quite close and physical, I get quite anxious about being hurt, because they can be quite physical sports. In the same sense of camaraderie though, there's group-led classes like yoga and pilates where there are sometimes a bit more high intensity classes like that. But they have the same sense of camaraderie, but it is still quite individual and there's no one pressuring you to engage with other people. It is still like this is your own exercise, but we are all doing this together.

There's definitely less pressure especially in yoga and stuff, but also having a group-led session is really quite peaceful because I quite like just being fed instructions directly. Especially for my autism, ADHD, being told these exact steps to do as you do them in that way is really good for me to engage with. Then other such limitations, I spoke a little bit about alternative forms of exercise, I think, especially young people probably are looking for something a bit more weird to do, like the Thai Chi or other forms of martial arts or, I know at university actually we had a rollerblading club which was fun. And rollerblading, you need a special area, because it needs to be flat really, you can do the skate park stuff, but if you are just beginning you need a special flat area. And I know in this place, in

[omitted], it's really hilly everywhere. And on a similar note, ice skating, I really enjoyed ice skating as a kid and I still enjoy it now; although now it's more only a seasonal thing. But with ice skating you need a really specialised area to do so because you're literally on a big block of ice.

Gianmarco: Would you say if these activities were more accessible or free, those would be…

Benjamin: Yes, especially for the group-led classes and stuff like… I'm lucky that I've got these, I think it's seven free Thai Chi lessons, which is really cool. But with more specialised stuff like that it is usually the case that it's a cost per class or a cost for a block of sets and yeah to access that kind of exercise, there's definitely a financial burden. The same with roller-skating and ice-skating and stuff like that actually. I know some places they do their rentals as part of the class, but if you wanted to engage in roller skating outside of those classes you'd have to buy your own roller skates.

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