

LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY

Nottingham City of Football:

Focus Groups With School Pupils – February
2017



Reader Information

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Executive Summary

Although football has mass appeal large groups of children still don't engage. To attract new groups, requires a new view of the 'job to be done'. It is easy to assign poor or even non-attendance to shortfalls in children's personal motivation. Today's children need football in new and innovative ways, therefore, to reach non-engaged groups, modern football systems require similarly innovative provision.

Data from the school survey that led to these focus groups indicated that football's traditional audience was well equipped to engage with current provision. Yet, children who were not engaging, but who might, were missing vital parts of the jigsaw of influences to fit into existing provision. It suggested that interventions needed to do more to motivate and 'up skill' children who are currently left unreached by traditional offers. Further, while shortcomings in social and environmental elements had a dramatic consequence on engagement for boys, their effects were more pronounced among girls. The findings from the focus groups reported here centred on these groups of children to explore their experiences of football.

Principal findings from the focus groups revealed the importance of creating a physically and psychosocially 'safe' intervention for children to make any initial engagement with football. Based on informal exposures to football, non-footballing children needed this *before* they could engage with the activities that would help them to become physically competent to play, and then enjoy, football. Among these children, the perception was of football as rough, aggressive, overly-competitive and likely to cause physical harm. Some children even reported that it had a negative influence on their mental health. Isolating experiences were ubiquitous (being put in goal, no-one passing to me and so on); children with limited physical skills typically felt 'left out' and unable to contribute to the 'game', but had no viable ways to develop that competence. These feelings were exacerbated for girls, even when they were more physically skilled than boys. These messages were often reinforced by peers in their social networks. A '*safe environment*' (physically and psychosocially) is fun, inclusive, helps all participants to improve and is done with friends. This 'formula' will attract the interested young people who have little to do with football right now.

1: Introduction

The focus groups for this element of the evaluation were designed to follow on from the brief survey conducted in December 2016 with children across schools in Nottingham. The aim was to explore some of the key findings emerging from the survey in more detail with those children who did not engage with football and reported low scores on the sources of influence framework. In line with the other interim evaluation documents and the survey that this piece of work follows on from, the sources of influence model (2 x 3 framework) is used as a guiding framework for the focus groups.

2: Methodology

This section summarises the methodology employed for this piece of work and sits within the overall programme evaluation of 'Nottingham City of Football' (NCoF). Based on the findings from the survey work the results highlighted the need to explore the responses in more detail. This piece of work aims to answer the following research questions:

1. *What are children's experiences of football and how does this influence participation?*
2. *What can be done to improve the experience of football for children who traditionally don't engage?*

Data Capture:

Children were invited to take part in a focus group over two days in January 2017 to discuss and draw their experiences of football and establish what could be done to encourage people who didn't play football to engage. The focus groups were conducted at 5 schools in Nottingham. These included one secondary school (Year 9 children) and four primary schools (Year 5 children). In total there were N=40 children (15 boys and 25 girls) that took part. Each focus groups lasted approximately one hour and was digitally recorded.

Data Analysis:

To help address the research questions, a theoretical thematic analysis was completed on the focus groups and framed around the 2 x 3 framework. Data were summarised through a process of iterative listening with key passages transcribed verbatim.

3: Results

(i) **INDIVIDUAL LEVEL:** *Enhancing the Experience & Improving Practice*

When asked what skills were required to play football, the children responded with attributes including, strength, speed, toughness, and courage. Many pupils reported perceived deficiencies in these attributes. The absence of these ‘attributes’ was interlinked with low motivation and a fear of the consequences that their supposed low skill set may lead to.

“I absolutely detest playing football, I’m worried I’ll get hurt as I’m terrible at it” (Boy, Year 5)

Most children reported that football had led to some form of physical harm and could readily cite instances where this effectively curtailed their engagement and interest in football.

“The ball was hit in my face with my glasses on and I’ve been scared to do it ever since, I just don’t play it anymore” (Girl, Year 5)

Linked to the possibility of physical harm, many boys and girls reported that the competitive nature of football led to aggressive and rough behaviour among their peers when they were playing. This often caused arguments and created an unwanted fractious environment for those that simply wanted to have fun and enjoy themselves.

“I see people playing and they’re often angry, mardy and frustrated. They always just want to win but we don’t mind” (Girl, Year 5)

In some instances, these factors appeared to adversely affect children’s mental health. Some children even reported that playing football brought about feelings of fear and anxiety.

“I’m afraid of being hated by other children at school for no real reason. People are always moaning at my performance and picking on me” (Girl, Year 5)

Although most children we spoke to did not play or enjoy football, the majority took part in other activities and sport. Primary reasons for engagement centred on fun and inclusivity. The ability to contribute to a ‘game’, not feeling left out and being a valued member of the team were seen as key ingredients for continued engagement. Being with friends and children of a similar ability were the most frequently articulated predictor of participation in other sports.

“I know I’m not great at cross country, but it is fun, I’m with my friends and no one has a go at me. It’s totally different to football” (Boy, Year 9)

(ii) **SOCIAL LEVEL:** *Creating a Movement & Enhancing Social Capital*

To increase football engagement among children that don't traditionally participate it is important to have a critical mass of people buying in to the programme and creating affirmative social norms. As part of this, it is generally accepted that having social support from peers is a key ingredient for success. This was not something that was widely reported as occurring for the vast majority of children participating in the focus groups. The social environment effectively reinforced that these children should not be playing football.

"I've had lots of bad experiences, I know everyone will shout at me if I play" (Boy, Year 5)

A sense of belonging to a 'group' had a significant impact on engagement. Most children reported feeling socially excluded, expressing that they did not feel part of the football community and its social environment. In many instances, the children told stories about being treated like an outsider and being made to feel like they didn't fit in.

"I'm made to feel not cool cos I don't play football, there is this big thing going on that I can't be part of" (Girl, Year 5)

This lack of socially supportive networks around football engagement was especially evident among girls. Many of the girls in the focus groups were acutely aware that they did not necessarily belong and could feel like outsiders when attempting to join in.

"I want to try it cos it looks fun, but I'm the only girl that's playing and I feel a bit different. But when I'm not playing football I feel like the same as everybody else" (Girl, Year 5)

For some girls, friends and family members were actively dissuading them from participating due to issues around social exclusion. To activate these girls, encouragement from their friends and family will be integral to help overcome these barriers to participation.

"When I'm the only girl, I feel left out. My mum says I should stop as I'm the only girl even though I feel like playing it. But I don't feel like it when I'm the only girl" (Girl, Year 5)

For these children, a large amount of the social buzz around football was reportedly coming from the 'Match Attax' cards. At present there are no cards for female footballers and this was cited as another example of how girls can feel socially excluded from football.

"Why are there no girls 'Match Attax' cards? It doesn't seem fair" (Girl, Year 5)

(iii) **STRUCTURAL LEVEL:** *Changing the Environment*

From a structural or system based perspective, the consensus within the focus groups was that the environment needed to change to reach and engage the children who did not currently participate. The focus groups confirmed that the least effective strategies were those that aroused fear in the person attempting to make a change. Even though many of the children were strongly interested in playing football, their perception of the footballing environment was that it wasn't conducive to making their participation easy.

"If you aren't good, people are mean to you. Who wants to be part of that" (Boy, Year 9)

These low outcome expectancies were typically based on participant's prior understanding of football and observational learning. This was in part due to them observing the - often negative - consequences of being involved with football. Experiencing positive attention from others was reported to increase the outcome expectancies for engaging behaviours in other domains. Creating positive feedback loops and a system that rewards children, is immediate, gratifying, and clearly tied to vital behaviours may be advantageous.

"If people are cheering and encouraging you, you are more likely to play" (Girl, Year 5)

Central to a new and improved environment were the coaches or intervention deliverers. They were seen as inextricably linked to program success in the eyes of non-engagers. Participants suggested that these individuals needed to be calm, encouraging, supportive, accepting of mistakes, knowledgeable, and have the ability to improve the skills of children who 'aren't very good'. Moreover, many of the participants reported that being 'coached' by their peers might be a desirable option, especially if they exuded these qualities.

"It really matters who's training you, it needs to be a good role model" (Boy, Year 9)

These findings point towards an opportunity to provide practical ways in which to make engagement with football easier. Although the football environment is often unavoidable, it is equally unobtainable for many. Many focus group participants reported limited football sessions outside school for older children with lower ability levels wanting to learn to play.

"Clubs have little starter groups but they're baby starter groups, big people like us don't really want to join toddler ones. They should have starter groups for every age" (Girl, Year 5)

Appendix A: Additional Participant Quotes

“Not a lot of people pick on you at gymnastics” (Girl, Year 5)

“I’m stood around doing nothing, people don’t pass to me. The good players hog the ball, I guess that’s just football” (Girl, Year 5)

“I never get the ball and they make you feel like you have no purpose to be on the team. I haven’t done anything good so I may as well leave” (Boy, Year 5)

“People shout at me and it makes me feel like I don’t want to play, it’s mostly the boys” (Girl, Year 5)

“We are in the bottom group of PE and were not as good as most people, I’d like to be a bit better so it’s actually playable” (Boy, Year 9)

“We had a match with someone else similar to us, it was actually really fun. It just felt like a normal game. It feels fun and happy cos you play with people who don’t argue and moan at you” (Boy, Year 9)

“Some people get a bit too aggressive” (Girl, Year 9)

“It’s like a hidden thing, if you’re good at football it’s like you’re allowed to be aggressive” (Boy, Year 9)

“It’s cos we have it in the morning, everyone has just got ready and we have to get changed again” (Girl, Year 9)

“When I play football I feel like a boy because there are not many girls and too many boys” (Girl, Year 5)

“Me and my cousin have tried to play but the other boys say we don’t know how to kick. We stop playing now and do skipping and stuff” (Boy, Year 5)

“Hardly any girls play, it’s weird but you feel different as a girl playing football” (Girl, Year 5)

I kind of got dragged in by my dad, he wanted me to be one of the good football players but I really didn’t like because I never got the ball. I wanted to quit but it made my dad happy so I couldn’t (Boy, Year 5)

“If you’re playing with other people who haven’t experienced football you feel more comfortable” (Girl, Year 5)

“What motivated me was that there was a friend doing it” (Boy, Year 9)

“It was really good when some sixth formers taught us PE, they know what it’s like for us” (Girl, Year 9)

Appendix B: Example Participant Drawings

