

(SP) YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF SOCCER IN ENGLAND: A GROUNDED THEORY

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Introduction

This paper follows from an earlier methodological paper (Piggott and Weed, 2005) and aims to present substantive findings from a doctoral thesis on the experiences of young soccer players in England. The research was commissioned by the English Football Association (FA) and is specifically concerned with assessing the impact of one of their core grassroots policies: the Charter Standard Scheme (CSS). The CSS is essentially a kite mark scheme for clubs and schools who achieve minimum standards in coaching, child protection and administrative development. Such schemes are now commonplace in most sports in England. As such, the remit of this research was to investigate the impact of the CSS on the quantity and quality of soccer provision where it is awarded.

Clearly, there are a number of approaches one can adopt when conducting an impact study. However, as the CSS aims to drive up standards specifically in youth soccer, recent legislation can inform the research approach in an ethical sense. For example, the UK Children Act (2004) states that: "...persons exercising functions or engaged in activities affecting children [should] take account of their views and interests." If, therefore, we are interested in evaluating policy that principally affects young people, we have an ethical mandate, as set out in legislation, to 'listen to their voices'. In practice, this means getting access to their views and opinions on how soccer is provided within CSS environments. Of course, this ethical position has implications for the methodological choices we make.

Methods

Following logically from the ethical position already outlined, a Grounded Theory (GT) approach was taken in this research. The revised GT methodology of Charmaz (2000) sets out general principles for conducting qualitative research and generating theory from data. In this sense, the use of GT allows the agenda of the participants to lead the research; in stark contrast to traditional theory driven approaches where research questions are predefined (by adults).

Initial case study sampling was predicated on data from a mapping questionnaire sent to CS clubs and schools. Unstructured group interviews were then employed with young people (usually organised in friendship groups) in order to generate 'open codes' that helped direct future theoretical sampling. As hypotheses and models were generated, interviews became increasingly structured, revolving around issues derived from key emerging themes.

Results

Core themes forming the final substantive theory will be presented with a brief description and some suggested implications for policy change and future research. Broad

areas for discussion will include: coach behaviour and player learning; parental behaviour and its impact on young players; gender differences and barriers to participation; cultural differences and social integration; motivation and dropout. In most cases, because of the nature of the methodology, these broad themes will serve to highlight directions for future research rather than to draw final conclusions on the nature of youth soccer.

Discussion

In presenting an explanatory model of the final grounded theory, this paper will make links to existing bodies of knowledge in a range of areas, from psychology to pedagogy. The aim will be to raise and discuss the following questions with reference to the youth soccer environment and young people's perceptions of it:

1. What type of coach behaviours help young people learn most effectively, and do (or should) they change with age and sex?
2. How do parents influence children's confidence and learning, particularly during games?
3. How are girls' experiences different to boys', and what are the perceived barriers to participation (if any)?
4. Should we afford equal but separate opportunities to ethnic minority players, and if so, what are the implications for wider social integration?
5. What motivates young people to begin and continue playing soccer, and what are the factors contributing to dropout?

References

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