

Football in the Community: Effective Community Engagement

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Abstract

Introduction

Football in the community programmes have been identified as organisations that can attend to the development of a range of social issues [9]. More recently, The Football Foundation (2006) identified that the relationship between football and its communities had become more obscure and challenging [3]. Specifically, the report identified a need for a more coherent strategic framework to inform English football's approach to community engagement. Whilst the Football Foundation highlights this need we are required to consider the monitoring and evaluation processes that can help understand the effectiveness of community engagement. In this regard, little research conceiving the effectiveness of football community engagement schemes has been undertaken. This paper outlines the research as a result of a formal collaboration between Everton Football in the Community (EITC), the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences at Liverpool John Moores University and Greggs plc. This study attempts to evaluate current practise of EITC by exploring the presence of actual lifestyle change and/ or behaviour change in children, within EITC School Development Programme.

Methods

This longitudinal research project adopted a collaborative action research orientated methodology that is typically framed around a series of 'reflective cycles' [7]. The data presented in this paper captures the reconnaissance phase of an action research protocol [2], utilising a multi method procedure. The study engaged in an extensive reconnaissance phase lasting 10 months (August 2006-June 2007), which included a 16-week long community engagement programme. The 1st author immersed himself into the culture of EITC utilising the principles of ethnography, undertaking prolonged fieldwork, and extensive observations in the natural setting (typically 2 days per week). The 1st author initially adopted an objective lens, and actively engaged in both observation and participation and participant-observation [5]. Information regarding the lifestyle, physical activity levels and behaviour change of the children was drawn from child activity diaries (pre n=43, during n=32, post n=26) [1], focus groups (week 8, n=10, week 16, n=10) [4] and pedometer results (pre n=43, during n=32, post n=26) [8], to help understand the effectiveness of the EITC school development programme in creating actual lifestyle and/or behaviour change.

Results

Of the children (n=57) that were involved pre-programme, 14 dropped out prior to the first session. Pre-programme step count data indicated that n=22 children were meeting the recommended guidelines (>11000 steps per day), and that n=20 children were not meeting the recommended guidelines [6]. Changes in behaviour were evident in seven children. These children improved their mean step count from pre programme <11000 steps counts per day to >11000 steps per day post programme. Two of these children were classified as overweight and obese (both pre and post programme). The programmes 'drop out' rate was 54% (n= 31). This was not recognised or investigated. The coaches were able to provide enjoyable sessions, however the sessions appeared to neglect any underlying physical activity/behaviour change message or theme.

Discussion

It was clear that the children involved loved football, and that football and the Everton brand is a powerful vehicle to promote agendas and engage communities. The results identified small activity changes in the children (significant with the two children classed as overweight/obese), however it would appear these changes were not as a result of a strategic aim, but more of a by-product of an enjoyable session. Whilst providing fun sessions is essential in work of this nature, a broader remit is needed in an attempt to specifically target the 'at risk' children. The results indicate that the coaches were unaware of the agenda of the programme and unable to adopt a physical activity lens and promote behaviour change. With this practitioners must ensure that the people 'on the ground' are equipped with the necessary skill base, knowledge and tools to be able attend to an agenda and that coherent procedures must be in place to ensure 'drop out' is monitored and addressed. The research has provided a better understanding of the 'on the ground' complexities involved in a community engagement project, specifically when linked to the culture of a Premier League Football Club. Future community engagement projects should be part of a coherent strategic framework and involve appropriate monitoring and evaluation processes that can increase its effectiveness.

References

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