

Session: **Open session I.**  
Abstract nr: **EASM-0243**

## **Making it happen: The role of action research in facilitating positive behavioural change in an English premier league football club**

*D. Parnell<sup>1</sup>, D. Richardson<sup>1</sup>, G. Stratton<sup>1</sup>, B. Drust<sup>1</sup>*

*<sup>1</sup>Liverpool John Moores University, Research Institute for Sport and Exercise Sciences, Liverpool, United Kingdom*

D.S.Parnell@2003.ljmu.ac.uk

### **Background**

Football in the Community (FitC) programmes have been identified as organisations that can attend to the development of a range of social issues (Watson, 2000). Sport and football oriented interventions have been criticised for not possessing coherent practices that evidence ‘real’ behavioural change (i.e., observed, articulated, measured and evaluated) (Jackson *et al.* 2005; Football Foundation, 2006; Coalter, 2007, p. 1). This paper concerns an evolving collaboration between the Everton Foundation (EF – the community arm and registered charity of Everton Football Club) and the School of Sport and Exercise Sciences at Liverpool John Moores University.

### **Objective**

This paper aims to discuss the utilisation of a longitudinal collaborative participatory action research (PAR) oriented methodology, highlighting the use of such approach and its subsequent impact in the facilitation of positive changes in working practice.

### **Methods**

This study engages a series of ‘reflective cycles’, as part of a longitudinal extensive PAR orientated methodology (Richardson, Gilbourne, and Littlewood, 2004). In this case PAR was adopted to allow the researcher to gain knowledge of the workplace (i.e., environment, culture and practice) and to create and disseminate new knowledge through practitioner reflection. In this regard, the aspiration of this exchange was to develop the effectiveness of EF in promoting ‘real’ positive behaviour and/or lifestyle change. Author one was immersed within the culture of the EF during an extensive reconnaissance phase utilising ethnographic principles, whilst undertaking prolonged fieldwork and extensive observations (typically 2 days per week from June 2007 to September 2008 and 5 days a week from September 2008 to present). Contextual and situational data was collated through informal conversations and meetings alongside reflective field notes. The results offer insights into (but not exhaustive) issues that emerged from the expansive data collected.

### **Results**

The results evidence a complex meeting of cultures. In this case the monitoring and evaluation driven academia culture with the performance/outcome culture present within football. The facilitation of change within the EF needed a subtle and gradual approach to implementation. In this sense it was essential that the researcher was fully immersed, engaged and accepted within EF. In order to observe and understand the distinct and often minute intricacies and cultural nuances that was present within and across all operating levels of the EF. The researcher travelled through the reconnaissance phase and series of successive and varying reflective cycles (which would be detailed in an extended paper) and has now entered a period of implementation and monitoring (i.e., change has taken place despite it not being *change* to the full extent of its initial scope - it is still positive). The researcher has, via prolonged engagement, raised awareness and navigated positive change, in spite of critical situations and political disturbances. In this regard the successful changes include practitioners within the EF embracing new philosophies and 'new ways of doing things', the adoption of new approaches to recruiting practitioners and the development of a more coherent, strategic behaviour change initiatives with monitor and evaluation techniques in place. This process of change has been slow and difficult journey to implement, however the force and significance has impacted positively on the culture, philosophies and working practice of the EF.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

It became increasingly evident that the methods employed and utilised within PAR played a crucial part in the 'successes' of the subsequent change facilitation. Importantly, the paper highlights the scope and strength that a prolonged extensive PAR approach can provide in the facilitation of positive change in working practice, especially within cultures entrenched in 'doing' rather than of monitoring and evaluating. By using PAR researchers will be able to gather an in depth understanding of practitioners and managers abilities to 'see through' or 'get things done', which subsequently assists and enables the facilitation of positive change in working practice.

## **References**

Coalter, F. (2007). *A Wider Social Role for Sport: Who's Keeping the Score?* USA: Routledge.

Football Foundation, (2006). *Football and its Communities: Final Report*. Manchester, Football Foundation and Manchester Metropolitan University.

Jackson, N.W., Howes, F.S., Gupta, S., Doyle, J.L., and Water, E. (2005). Policy interventions implemented through sporting organisations for promoting healthy behaviour change. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, **2**.

Richardson, D., Gilbourne, D. & Littlewood, M. (2004). Developing support mechanisms for elite young soccer players in a professional academy: Creative reflections in action research.

*European Sport Management Quarterly*, **4**, 4, 195-214.

Watson, N. (2000). Football in the community: what's the score? *Soccer and Society*, 1, 114-125.