Introduction

Football clubs have traditionally taken seriously their responsibilities to the local community. Supporting the work of local organisations such as schools and hospitals has been part of the weekly work of a professional footballer since the game began. This activity was organised by clubs as and when required. This changed in 1986 when the Professional Footballers’ Association (PFA) and the Football League responded to mounting public concern about the damaging effects of football violence on community life in England.

As Crabbe highlights, Drug taking, violence, corruption, cheating, racism, homophobia, intimidation, sex scandals and other forms of criminal behaviour have become part of the very fabric of media representations of sport during the last decade (Crabbe, 2000:381).

The PFA and the Football League decided that clubs needed a co-ordinated approach to maintaining good links with local communities. Upon evaluation of the success of six experimental community projects in the North West of England, the national ‘Football in the Community’ (FITC) scheme was established.

Players as role models

Society has no more influential role models than its professional footballers. Children and young boys in particular, will imitate anything they see their favourite players do and will always listen carefully to what they have to say and so they set a moral lead to the younger generation.

Players should recognise the role they can play among the fan community in coaching, in education and in social events...Clubs and athletes depend upon local communities for support and services. This means they also have important local public duties and responsibilities, beyond the simple staging of sports events (Football Task Force, 1999:4.4).

Every professional footballer is contracted to carry out community work. Many players carry out unreported activity in the community and some give freely of their time and do much more than required. Club-based FITC schemes are an important vehicle for player involvement in community activities. They are intended to promote close links between clubs and communities. Other initiatives that have built upon this concept are Kick It Out, Learning Through Football, Playing For Success and Positive Futures.

‘Kick It Out’

Kick It Out works throughout football, educational and community sectors to challenge racism and work for positive change. The campaign ‘Let’s Kick Racism Out of Football was established in 1993 and is supported and funded by the game’s governing bodies, including founding body the PFA, the FA Premier League, the Football Foundation and The Football Association.

Learning through Football’

This is a package of cross-curricular teaching materials that uses children’s interest in football as a means of stimulating an interest in the range of academic subjects.

‘Playing for Success’

Playing for Success is a national initiative, established in 1997 by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in partnership with the FA Premier League and their clubs, and local education authorities. Since then it has expanded to include a wide range of professional sports, including cricket and rugby. It aims to contribute to raising educational standards, especially in urban areas, by setting up Study Support Centres in professional football clubs and other sport venues. The initiative has expanded from six centres in 1997 to over 100 signed up in 2004.

Playing for Success focuses on underachieving young people, mainly in Years 6 to 9, and places a strong emphasis on improving pupils’ attitudes and motivation to learn. Centres are managed by experienced teachers and supported by mentors. They use the medium and environment of sport to support pupils’ work in literacy, numeracy and ICT. Pupils attend the Centres after school for around 20 hours during a period of about ten weeks (Sharp, Schagen & Scott).
We know that motivating children to learn through sport works. Playing for Success Centres provide a real boost to raising children’s standards of literacy and numeracy—which is at the heart of our strategy to improve achievement (DfES, 2003).

‘Positive Futures’

Launched in March 2000, Positive Futures is a national sports-based social inclusion programme which offers a relationship strategy for young people aged 10-19 years, based on the principle that engagement through sport and the building of mutual respect and trust can provide cultural ‘gateways’ to alternative lifestyles. It is managed within the Home Office Drug Strategy Directorate and has an advisory group made up of representatives from the Department of Health, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, Connexions (DfES), Sport England, the Youth Justice Board and the Football Foundation.

Within the individual projects, sport acts as a catalyst for bringing people with similar experiences and a shared interest together, within a supportive environment where secure opportunities are provided and participants are encouraged to make decisions for themselves. Importantly, Positive Futures is creating opportunities that address issues associated with problematic substance misuse. Young people have the opportunity to improve their educational performance, undertake training, join the labour market, join local sports clubs, improve their social relations and make personal development progress. (Home Office, 2004)

The Benefits of Sport

Through popular appeal, football, particularly during the last decade, has become regarded as unique in the potential it has, to make a positive contribution to well-being.

Sport can be crucial to the social and personal development of young people. By participating in sporting activities they can learn to differentiate between good and bad behaviour (Labour Party, 1997:8).

There has also been growing concern in recent years about the emergence of a health crisis in the form of an obesity epidemic among young people, one of the main causes of which, it is assumed, is their declining levels of involvement in sport and physical activity.

The British government appears to view sport and physical activity as ‘critical’ in combating the supposed epidemic rise in avoidable chronic diseases or ‘lifestyle’ diseases (such as heart disease and obesity) and sport as a ‘crucial’ vehicle for the promotion of on-going involvement in health-promoting lifestyles (Smith, Green & Roberts, 2004:458).

Role of Staff

In recent years, young people have increasingly become a focus of UK sport policy. Fuelled in part by concerns such as the increasing levels of childhood inactivity and obesity, and the lack of international success in sport, a plethora of policy initiatives aimed at young people have been developed (Flintoff, 2003).

One of the more recent initiatives to be introduced is the School Sport Co-ordinator programme designed to increase sporting opportunities for young people by developing and enhancing links between school PE and sporting opportunities in the wider community. The underlying philosophy of the programme, reflecting the government’s wider agenda, is one of social inclusion-to increase participation in sport for all young people, but particularly from those groups who have previously been under-represented (girls and young women; young people with a disability; ethnic minorities, and those from deprived socio-economic backgrounds).

Widening Participation in Further and Higher Education

Labour’s governmental policy on widening participation has led to a greater diversity of students entering higher education (HE). This has meant that students once considered as a ‘minority’ within higher education, such as ‘non-traditional’ students, are increasingly becoming the norm. (Macdonald and Stratta, 2001:250). This has led some to argue that increased participation has caused failing academic standards in higher education. Furthermore, increased participation has been linked to increases in student withdrawal.

As Thomas notes, …there is a tendency to attribute lower levels of completion to greater student diversity and a lack of ‘academic preparedness’ of these new student groups (2002:426).

Whilst there are those who locate blame with the individual student, critical theorists argue that there presents an alternative educational perspective, which promotes the benefits of adopting collective responsibility to enhance preparedness for further and higher education and to achieve change by exploring innovative ways that consider diversity alongside achievement and progression (Duggan & Rice, 2005).

Aimhigher

Aimhigher is a programme to promote partnership working between schools, FE colleges, HE institutions and employers, to raise aspirations and increase applications to higher education amongst under-represented groups.

The government intends that the integrated Aimhigher programme should become the national outreach facility to support widening participation (Allen & Storan, 2005:11).
Most activity operates on a sub-regional basis, with some co-ordinated at regional level and several projects are currently now operating at a national level.

Raising Achievement and Aspirations through Football

Bringing all these partnerships together and building on such concepts as those outlined, to work towards an innovative model of social inclusion, ‘Raising Achievement and Aspirations Through Football’ is one of nine Aimhigher National projects that was awarded HEFCE funding from July 2004 until March 2006 and therefore can be defined as work in progress. The Widening Participation Unit at Manchester Metropolitan University is working with FITC to use football as a vehicle to widen participation.

Aims

The objectives of this national project are to help to raise attainment, to raise awareness of higher education as a possible future, and to raise aspirations. Utilising a case study approach, narratives are being captured from stakeholders involved in the project as well as drawing on pupils’ predicted versus actual attainment scores, attitude questionnaires and attendance data to assess the impact of the scheme.

A clear aim of this project is to empower targeted students who had been previously identified by the government as vulnerable young people who have little access to social power, with knowledge about how to progress into and through education by participating in an innovative project which has adopted a diverse and inclusive, relational approach to student support.

The research put forward by this national project, is just one example of how a collaborative partnership is responding to current policy by evaluating the, ‘interplay that occurs when prioritising intervention and prevention through collaboration and consultation’ (Duggan & Rice, 2005:4). In doing this, Raising Achievement & Aspirations Through Football explores as well as questions to what extent there is a need for multi-layered ‘change’ using proactive and responsive approaches to support diverse student communities within the arena of student achievement and progression.

Methodology

The project, through exploring and evaluating ‘Action Research’ methodologies, seeks to capture the utility of ‘homework clubs’ and the impact of additional ‘football coaching’ as well as trying to respond to the professional perspectives of the community of staff who support young learners within identified contexts.

Action Research can be described as an approach which focuses on working with people to identify problems in practice, implement change and evaluate solutions (Reason and Rowan, 1981).

... way of generating knowledge about a social system while, at the same time, attempting to change it (Hart and Bond, 1995: 13)

Data Collection

Due to the project being so complex and multi-layered, a multi-methodological approach to data collection is being adopted in order to generate a rich and clear picture of evaluation, focussing on to what extent this national project has been effective through capturing differing stories from both student and staff perspectives.

Data is being collected in qualitative and quantitative formats:

- Case study profiles of school and football club activity by staff/students
- Attitude questionnaires completed by pupils
- Attendance monitoring of pupils by school co-ordinators

- Comparisons of predicted vs. actual attainment scores (SAT/GCSE)

- Free school meals eligibility mapping by school

- End of project evaluation from pupils, school staff and football co-ordinators

A Reflection on the Selection of Schools and Football Clubs

The original intention was to identify clubs that wanted to participate and then approach the Aimhigher Steering Groups (ASGs) in those areas to negotiate with their schools and Aimhigher borough co-ordinators, culminating in the selection by them of the target schools. Given our notion of operating with small clusters of 2-4 schools plus a club, this meant recruiting 20 or so clubs, constrained by our intention to run the project in all nine Aimhigher regions.

Unfortunately, the success of the bid was not announced until the last week of the school year. Given the time it would take to (a) recruit clubs (b) contact ASGs (c) for ASGs to hold negotiations with boroughs and schools (neither of the last two being possible until September) (d) have matters put in place in schools, the likelihood was that no homework clubs would be up and running until at least January.

Faced with this, it was decided to approach schools directly, writing to them within two days of the bid announcement. This occasioned blanket coverage, though the only schools invited to express an interest were those that would meet Aimhigher criteria. By early August 2004 over 500 expressions of interest had been received. By September 2004 the clubs had been recruited.

Clubs were recruited through the auspices of the FITC Regional Directors who were advised of where we had workable clusters of schools. These exceeded the 20 we wanted so a further whittling down
was achieved through discussions with the FITC Regional Directors and ASGs. Finally, where there was more than the required number of schools per cluster expressing an interest, these were whittled down through discussions with football clubs and/or Aimhigher borough co-ordinators (Project Director, Rob Halsall, Head of Widening Participation, MMU).

**Project Activity**

In collaboration with staff from schools and football clubs, homework clubs have now been set up in 60 schools across the nine Aimhigher regions in England. The purpose of the homework clubs are to encourage 1200 selected boys and girls from Years 9, 10 and 11 from disadvantaged areas who have the potential to perform well academically but who are underachieving as a result of unsatisfactory homework and/or coursework completion to obtain better scores at SAT and GCSE levels. Linked to each school is one of 27 professional football clubs. The incentive for those who attend the homework club is to be given the opportunity to engage with professional football coaches who offer the young people football skills and coaching qualifications.

Parents are encouraged to get involved in the scheme and are also offered the opportunity to gain coaching qualifications from the football clubs as well as information, advice and guidance about how best to support their son/daughter in raising levels of attainment from school staff involved in the project. HE student ambassadors/mentors are employed to support homework club staff and assist in raising awareness of higher education and raising the aspirations of the young people by acting as role models who highlight the benefits of staying on in post-16 education.

**Achievements to Date**

To date, feedback from the schools and football clubs is that the project is going really well. Some schemes started later than others so they are all at different stages of development. Highlights to date are that students have had the opportunity to write articles about the project for football match day programmes, students have been taken on under work placements at several Football In The Community schemes and both parents and students are undertaking coaching qualifications. A number of homework club attendees at one school have recently won a competition to have their work published in a creative writing journal.

In addition, due to feedback from students and staff about further development of the project, a national inter-school football tournament is currently underway which will result in Aimhigher National Football Champions by the end of the project. The tournament has already produced 50 qualifying teams representing 25 different football clubs and the final play-off event is to be held at Derby County F.C on 1st February 2006.

Pam Bancroft, project co-ordinator at Sinfin Community School, Derby, said that,

"We knew that using football as a vehicle to raise attainment would be successful when we first took 20 pupils on a coach to Pride Park Stadium. When we arrived we had 46 pupils-26 stowaways to a homework club was a clear sign that working with Derby County was going to be a motivating factor for them to do homework!"

Bob Barnes, project co-ordinator at Plume School, Essex, added,

“We are delighted that The Plume School has got off to a flying start and the Aimhigher scheme featured highly in our recent Ofsted inspection and was favourably received. We are enjoying working in partnership with Ipswich Town Football Club, Manchester Metropolitan University and Aimhigher to raise the achievement and aspirations of our students.”

Case studies are being captured and will all feature on the project website which is under development and will soon be accessible through www.mmu.ac.uk/aimhigherfootball. Links will then be set up to Aimhigher/Football In The Community websites. They are currently being used to generate a profile of the scheme through local press in each area.

We are currently analysing SATs and GCSE results and these will be compared against the current year group average for both predicted and actual scores in each school. Early analysis indicates that the scheme, as an intervention, has had a substantial impact on achievement.

A conference is planned for 2 March 2006 at Derby County FC to disseminate initial findings and any further recommendations to explore the wider application of this innovative, demonstration model.
References


