Citation: Fothergill, Melissa, Baik, Danna, Slater, Hannah M. and Graham, Pamela (2023) “We’re All the Same and We Love Football.” Experiences of Players and Facilitators Regarding a Collaborative, Inclusive Football Program Between Academy and Special Olympics Footballers. Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly, pp. 1-20. ISSN 0736-5829 (In Press)

Published by: Human Kinetics

URL: https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.2022-0139 <https://doi.org/10.1123/apaq.2022-0139>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link: https://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/51526/

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University’s research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher’s website (a subscription may be required.)
“We’re All the Same and We Love Football” Experiences of Players and Facilitators Regarding a Collaborative, Inclusive Football Program Between Academy and Special Olympic Footballers

Fothergill, Melissa. A*ab, Baik, Dannaa, Slater, Hannah, M a, Graham, Pamela, L.c

a School of Psychology, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK;

b Department of Psychology, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK;

c Department of Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

*corresponding author
“We’re All the Same and We Love Football” Experiences of Players and Facilitators Regarding a Collaborative, Inclusive Football Program Between Academy and Special Olympic Footballers

Abstract

This study provides insight into an inclusive programme between Special Olympics (SO) and academy football (soccer) players within the UK from the perspectives of players and facilitators. Qualitative focus groups were conducted across 30 participants (6 facilitators, 14 Premier League academy players and 10 SO players). Focus groups compared stakeholders’ experiences of participating in a season-long inclusive football programme. Three overarching higher order themes were generated which highlighted positive outcomes from taking part. SO players provided endorsement for developing friendships and improving football skills, whereas academy players cited the positive impact that SO players had on their mood and motivation. Facilitators reflected on positive player outcomes and subsequent accomplishments. Overall, the findings indicated this shared experience had psychosocial and football specific benefits for everyone who participated. Facilitators indicated that these benefits could transition into everyday life but noted that there needs to be further considerations for future programmes.

Keywords: soccer, integrated sport, qualitative
Stakeholder experiences of inclusive sport

“We’re all the same and we love football” Experiences of players and facilitators regarding a collaborative, peer-to-peer, inclusive football programme between Academy and Special Olympic footballers.

Introduction

According to the UK Sports Association for People with Learning Disabilities (Sport Excel, n.d) there are 1.5 million intellectually disabled (ID) individuals in the UK. Intellectual disability from a medical perspective, is defined by impairments in intelligence and social functioning that begin in childhood and have lasting developmental effects (WHO, 2022). Moreover, around 30-50% of people with ID experience mental health issues, and some experience comorbid physical health problems such as respiratory, cardiac, skeletal and muscle tone issues linked to genetic syndromes (Gilderthorp et al., 2018; Smiley, 2005). In contrast, the social model of disability contests that society imposes disability on people with impairments and it is not the disability but society that excludes them from opportunities and community life (Bingham et al., 2013; Haegele & Hodge, 2016). However, medical and social models of disability have been reported as presenting extreme positions that are mutually exclusive (Martin, 2013).

It has been argued sport and physical activity (PA) could provide a platform for people with ID to improve health outcomes and wellbeing (Crawford et al., 2015). A recent rapid evidence review confirmed moderately strong evidence that PA was associated with improvements in balance, attention, motor skills and social development in children and young people with ID (Smith et al., 2022). Similarly, in adults with a disability, there was strong evidence of an association between PA and a range of positive physical and social outcomes (Jaarsma & Smith, 2018). Despite such benefits, research has reported reduced interest in developing exercise interventions for people with ID (Rimmer et al., 2004; Varela et al., 2001).
Stakeholder experiences of inclusive sport

Barriers also exist for those wishing to engage in elite sports with only 3 out of 22 paralympic sports providing an opportunity for people with ID to compete (Mencap, 2021).

Special Olympics (SO) provides an avenue for sports training and competition specifically for ID athletes. Originating in the United States of America (USA) in the late 1960’s, it aims to support people with ID develop physical fitness, friendships and courage, and to experience joy and fulfilment (Special Olympics, 2022). In a systematic review Tint et al. (2017) revealed support for increased physical, psychological, and social development amongst people with ID who participated in SO; though a lack of consistency across programmes, study samples and methods limited the generalisability of the findings. Whilst many athletes, coaches and parents perceived SO as facilitating social inclusion, by its very nature it is exclusive and thus restrictive to athletes with ID (Inoue & Forneris, 2015; Thomson et al., 2021). While SO does bring together people with and without disabilities, interactions are argued to be ‘superficial and casual’ and unlikely to lead to meaningful friendships (Storey, 2004 p36).

In an effort to enhance social inclusion, SO has been instrumental in bringing together typically developing individuals and teams with ID of similar ages and ability to train and compete through the Unified Sports Programme (USP) (Dowling et al., 2013; Special Olympics, 2022). Integrated USP’s have proven efficacious, e.g., in basketball, people with ID showed improvements in skill and social perception (Riggen & Ulrich, 1993) and similarly (Castagno, 2001) highlighted improvements in children’s basketball skills and self-esteem. While an inclusive approach to sports participation appears more in line with Article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of Disabled People (United Nations, 2006), which stipulates disabled people should have ‘full participation in mainstream sporting activities at all levels’, limited opportunities for sports participation can present a barrier (Cartwright et al., 2017).
Previous research, whilst limited in quantity, highlights physical and psychosocial benefits of sport participation for people with ID, both when performed individually and as part of a USP. However, research drawing on the views and experiences of USP participants is limited, particularly in the UK. Subsequently, it has been argued the voices of marginalised groups are often underrepresented in society, resulting in the development of policies and programmes that do not represent the priorities of the groups they intend to support (De Freitas & Martin, 2015; Hjortskov et al., 2018). This is particularly evident for people with ID who frequently experience stigma and marginalisation, and have been characterised as ‘weak, passive [and] powerless’ (Cameron, 2014; Fenn & Scior, 2019). This presents a need to examine the efficacy of using sport as a vehicle to integrate people with ID, with a view to enhancing social relationships and communication; whilst educating those without disability about inequalities and breaking down social stigmas.

In the UK, there is a dearth of literature dedicated to assessing the utility of inclusive sport programmes and even more so for those with ID. To our knowledge this is the first study to examine stakeholders’ experiences of participating in a novel UK-based integrated programme combining football (soccer) training and classroom education sessions. Therefore, utilising a qualitative approach, the aim of our study was to address the following research questions: how do stakeholder groups view participation in an inclusive football programme? (RQ 1) and are there any differences between the stakeholders' experiences? (RQ2).

**Method**

**Design**

A qualitative methodology was employed due to the uniqueness and specificity of the programme and stakeholder groups. Qualitative methods allow researchers to understand both...
experience and context, which was important in addressing the proposed research questions (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). From an interpretivist perspective, the current study sought to understand the subjective experiences of players and facilitators involved in the football programme. This approach was underpinned by relativist ontology, recognising the uniqueness of individual experiences and the socially constructed nature of reality (Ryan, 2018). Further to this, the study drew on social constructionist epistemology, which recognises knowledge as socially constructed and open to individual interpretation (Losantos et al., 2016).

Aligned with the interpretivist approach, focus groups were adopted to capture the stakeholder perspectives and are reported to provide a social context that encourages rich insights through social exchanges between participants (Ryan et al., 2014). Focus groups also provide an accessible method of data collection that can promote equality and give a voice to often marginalised groups (Barbour et al., 2018).

Participants

A purposeful criterion-based sampling strategy was adopted with all participants having experience of the peer-to-peer programme. Six focus groups were conducted in February across the respective groups (see table 1) resulting in over 4 hours of data, the groups comprised, one focus group of facilitators from SO and the football academy (N= 6, M = 54.16, SD = 7.19); three focus groups of Premier League academy players (N = 14, M = 17.62, SD = 0.92) and two focus groups of SO players (N= 11, M = 30.2, SD = 7.43).

Insert table 1 here
Stakeholder experiences of inclusive sport

The Integrated Football Programme

The peer-to-peer learning programme was a pilot initiative developed between a Premier League football academy, a local SO football team, which although being a registered charity, was operated from Local Authority provision. The programme’s inception was born out of a previously established coaching relationship between the academy manager and a director of SO Europe. From initial conversations they approached the SO football team who was geographically closest to the academy to ascertain if the programme would be of interest to them. The next steps included a meeting with interested parties from the football academy, local authority, SO football team and academics from a local university. The lead author was known to the academy manager having provided sport psychology support to the academy previously and was invited to deliver the SO and academy psychology workshop and programme evaluation. From the initial meeting all of the aforementioned stakeholders discussed and agreed upon relevant programme content (football and educational sessions) including duration and structure. The programme received no additional funding other than a nominal cost to cover transport of the SO players to the academy training ground.

The programme offered monthly sessions across an eight-month period (September to April), comprising classroom-based education (e.g. sport psychology, physiotherapy, performance analysis and nutrition) delivered by university and academy staff who had no previous experience of working with individuals with ID. The educational sessions were then followed by football-based training and games delivered by academy and SO coaches. The programme also paired SO players with under 18 and under 23 academy players who acted as a peer mentor for the duration of the programme (see table 2).

Insert table 2 here
Stakeholder experiences of inclusive sport

Materials

Following an initial meeting which detailed the structure and content of the programme a semi-structured focus group guide was developed by three members of the research team. Questions were then phrased slightly differently to account for differences in experiences between the groups e.g. coaching vs. playing. Questions included “Can you take me through what you did in a typical session?” “What have you most enjoyed about taking part in the programme?” and “What do you feel could be improved?” Clarification was sought by the research team and probes were employed to elicit further depth of responses.

Procedure

Following ethical approval from the Faculty of Medical Sciences within a UK-based university, a further meeting was held between all stakeholders (Academy Manager, SO coach, SO Chairman, Council Service Manager, SO Players, Academy players and the principal researcher). During this meeting, the purpose of the research was explained, and the voluntary nature of participation was highlighted. SO players had their respective parents and carers present who alongside their coach and chairman were able to support participant understanding of the project and consent. Materials for SO players were adapted as a leaflet with bigger font sizes and easy to read formatting. All participants were assured that their choice regarding taking part would have no influence on their involvement in the peer-to-peer programme and no incentives or inducements were offered for participation.

Focus groups took place at the academy and SO training grounds, beginning with a brief introduction which recapped the purpose of the study and ensured all participants were still happy to take part. Following this, focus group facilitators-initiated conversation using questions from the interview guide. Focus groups lasted 25-60 minutes, were audio recorded to allow for
subsequent transcription and concluded when participants had exhausted all views relating to the peer-to-peer programme. Participants were verbally debriefed and provided with written information to take away, which included information on how to withdraw from the study later if necessary. All focus groups were conducted in the same way except for the two SO groups where upon initial discussion with specialist staff, it was decided the coach and chairman should stay within the room whilst focus groups occurred. This was important to maintain familiarity for the SO players and to assist with communication, although staff were under strict instruction not to offer suggestions or prime the players’ responses.

**Data Analysis and Reflexivity**

Due to limited research in the area, an inductive approach to reflexive thematic analysis was employed to organise themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2016). In the early stages of the research, the first author immersed themselves within the programme to build trust and rapport with participants. This involved attending training sessions and completion of a reflexive journal (Sparkes & Smith, 2013), which provided useful contextualisation to support focus group discussions and subsequent analysis. The second and third authors were involved in the design of the research but were not involved in the programme delivery. Upon programme conclusion, member reflections were sought to gain a further insight into the data regarding participant experiences and also to seek clarification on interpretations of findings and development of themes (Schinke et al., 2013). Moreover, SO participants were consulted and agreed on appropriate terminology pertaining to their ID for the purpose of analysis and dissemination.

Focus group transcripts were read several times to gain familiarity with the data and potential points of interest were highlighted and discussed between the first three authors. Initial
Stakeholder experiences of inclusive sport

codes were developed and reviewed to identify meaningful features within the data. Themes and subthemes were then generated and synthesised to ensure accuracy, distinctiveness and good fit with the data. The fourth author, who was unfamiliar with the programme, acted as a critical friend to reflect upon assumptions and interpretations of the data. Themes were then reviewed and refined by the research team and discussed with the SO and academy. This then culminated in themes being defined and labelled to show the scope of each theme.

Results

Three higher order themes were elicited from the transcripts; prior considerations, psychosocial aspects and outcomes (see table 3). Participants’ perceptions of the programme are outlined and comparisons are provided across groups. To maintain authenticity, quotes are provided verbatim and have not been changed to account for any grammatical inaccuracies.

Insert table 3 here

Theme 1: Prior Considerations

This theme refers to the initial thoughts and reflections that stakeholders held both prior to the programme commencing and during the initial stages. The theme comprises four subthemes: authentic experience, initial expectations, changing perceptions and testing boundaries. Ensuring the SO players gained an authentic experience of what it was like as an academy football player was deemed important by facilitators and Academy players from the outset. The facilitators and academy players wanted to ensure that SO players were immersed in the environment and got to experience a day in the life of an academy player.

We wanted to make sure that it was a whole football experience, not just on the pitch so, everybody is getting a great understanding of different elements of development. So
Stakeholder experiences of inclusive sport

whether it is nutrition, sports science, fitness, goal setting… that was a big one at the start
(Academy Facilitator 3).

Yeah, I mean our expectations were to come and enjoy it. Enjoy it, and come meet other
people which is a big thing and part in our players. They love meeting other people and
enjoy it, learn from it, and they were really really looking forward to playing football, and
have the drills off (Coach) and (Coach). and it’s happened. It has exceeded our expectations,
it really has (SO Facilitator 2)

Interestingly, SO players compared the differences between their own training
experiences which was a shared council facility against the academy environment “(at the club)
you spend more time there playing and get more time’ (SO Player 2). SO players also specifically
mentioned the provision of food which they did not have access to at their usual training facility
‘It’s different. Because it’s something you never experience. When the youngsters get food after
like training and stuff’ (SO Player 1). Academy players also demonstrated awareness that the SO
players would not be afforded the same type of facilities and commented that SO players
appreciated the better facilities and environment ‘to be coming into a professional
environment…this is probably better than what they’re used to, better facilities and stuff”
(Academy Player 4).

It was also evident that every stakeholder group had some feelings of apprehension and
uncertainty. For academy players, uncertainty arose from not knowing what to expect prior to the
first training session and the physical capabilities of the SO players, for many this was their first
experience of interacting with people with ID. However, this uncertainty soon dissipated once the
players were out on the pitch and players were able to reflect that despite their initial reservations the SO players could play at a good standard.

We didn’t really know what to expect, so we just wanted to take part to see what it was like really… I thought they would have been worse than what they were, they were actually very decent (Academy Player 4).

Academy players also seemed surprised regarding some of the SO players' outgoing personalities: ‘the sessions were quite funny I thought, they weren’t shy to like speak up and interact’ (Academy Player 7). Some of the academy players also said they felt more nervous than SO players: ‘I think it was the other way around. We were more nervous around them than they were with us’ (Academy Player 13). This apparent nervousness most likely stemmed from the lack of experience from any of the groups having worked together before. SO facilitators were also concerned about their players making a good impression and expressed concern about player behaviour during training and classroom sessions, as some players were prone to outbursts or unpredictable behaviours:

I was a bit worried about how we would be. I was also worried about their commitment level, sticking in and coming every Tuesday because sometimes they are not always 100% committed as you want them to be. To be fair, they are getting much better, and much more committed. Also, the behaviour as well, I was a bit apprehensive about how they would behave but, we did a little work with them before they came, and the code of conduct and stuff like that (SO Facilitator 2).

Similarly, SO players also indicated they felt nervous: ‘I think it was good, I think was nervous’ (SO Player 5), but they were keen to highlight that these nerves soon dissipated after a
couple of sessions where there was a much more relaxed dynamic between the players which included jokes: ‘it wasn’t easy at first because we didn’t know them or know us, but few weeks after aye’ (SO Player 1)

I think everyone was shy at first, I think they were a bit shy as well, it wasn’t just us…by the second and third time everybody was just telling your names and everyone knew everybody’s names to join in more, everybody just cracked on. Everybody was talking to each other, joining in and having a laugh (SO Player 2).

Academy players alluded to some evident apprehensions specific to not knowing about or understanding the SO players’ disabilities which is indicative of the literature, but it was also a concern for them whether their normal banter and joking would be socially acceptable.

I was nervous….how good they are and how much they’re gonna be able to do and what we are saying to them…. Obviously not swearing and that in front of them, we can’t just talk to them like we would talk to each other in terms of the banter (Academy Player 11)

Yeah at first, I didn’t want to craic on with them with a joke or anything….. I didn’t give them a joke that’s too brutal to start with. When he walked off to get water I said something like ‘you aren’t going to get me one?’ or something like that, and you just see what you say and see if they laugh…. (Academy Player 1).

Despite initial hesitations, once familiarity and relationships had been established and initial barriers had been broken down; academy players were more willing to engage in some banter on the pitch and tentatively gauged what the SO players' responses were in order to ascertain if this was acceptable. This undoubtedly seemed to contribute to the experience of the
SO players who provided some validation “Training and eh another half an hour is like football with us and like have a laugh and crack on” (SO Player 1).

Whilst neither SO or Academy players mentioned perceptions of themselves or others, there was a sense from all facilitators they wanted to change perceptions; whether that be as a footballer who received bad press was often stereotyped or as a SO player who were often marginalised due to their disability.

I think there has been a massive impact. We said it at the start, that perception of academy players and professional players generally, that they are in their own world and in their bubble. You take them outside of that. We have put them into a zone that is so outside of their comfort zone and they have responded really well, as we expected them to do (Academy Facilitator 3).

Yes…I think it was good from the point of view that you know a lot of people have got a perception of footballer….even younger footballers as being big time and that they got no time for anyone (Academy Facilitator 4).

Hmmm… the worst one I get with X is, ‘what’s his name’. Best thing in the world is to ask him. If there is somebody with them, ‘what’s his name?’ Our players you can be blunt with them. It’s like any team really. There are people in your team that you can have a go if you need to, and there are some I wouldn’t dare. That’s the thing I love about Special Olympics is that, whatever they achieve, they deserved it…. (SO Facilitator 2)
Theme 2: Psychosocial Aspects

All stakeholders identified a range of positive psychosocial outcomes, some which were specific to the SO players whilst others were more relevant to the academy players. These outcomes resulted in five sub-themes: enjoyment, developing social relationships, opportunities and fostering growth, communication and stress relief. Academy players and facilitators held strong views that irrespective of football and above everything else, SO players should enjoy their experience and be able to reflect positively about their time at the academy.

The enjoyment, the ability of the boys... It’s all about Special Olympics. They must go away from here with fantastic memories, fantastic occasions every time they came here. So for me, it would be that they had a fantastic time (Academy Facilitator 2).

It’s cause like you know when we are working with them, you can just see their smiles on their faces and that, it doesn’t take much to help them, it’s cool isn’t it (Academy Player 12).

SO players placed greater importance on developing social relationships throughout the focus groups. Specifically, they emphasised wanting to meet new people as a positive of taking part ‘I liked meeting the new people, trying to know to how to meet new people’ (SO Player 3).

The SO players were also especially excited to work with the Academy players. When they were asked what they looked forward to most about the programme one player reported ‘meeting the young’uns’ (SO Player 6). This quote is indicative of the fact that many of the SO players were older than the academy players and they were also excited about having their own academy player assigned to them as a mentor ‘I think it was something good, get to see players and everyone has their own player’ (SO Player 5).
This peer-to-peer interaction and development of social relationships was something which the SO facilitators also thought was an important aspect of the programme. The following quote highlights the perceived dual benefits of the programme for playing football and meeting other football players:

For me they took to it like a duck to water so that was the biggest surprise for us. Because we could have had people academy players who were quite standoffish with our guys, if they spoke to them. And our guys didn't either perhaps comprehend what the person was saying to them. That might be what can lead to new communication for the academy players, they may or may have given up on the conversation or thought, goodness is more bother than it's worth…. just never been any of that, the investment they have given which is kinda allowed them to flourish….. the high fives all that camaraderie which we saw last week (SO Facilitator 1).

Many of the Academy players also highlighted they had made friends with the SO players but had developed a stronger bond with the player they had been mentoring which supports the views of some of the SO players.

I think for me it was probably getting to have like have a great relationship with the SO players and obviously my partner like [name] we’ve got a good relationship and as well with everyone else, but just I was looking forward to like making a strong bond between me and my buddy (Academy Player 2).

It was noticeable from the transcripts that facilitators felt the programme had beneficial effects for both academy and SO players and had provided opportunities which fostered growth.
Facilitators commented on the progress achieved in football skills for the SO players which had given them an insight into how they had benefitted from playing alongside academy players.

What I learned really is, I have seen them progress. I can see now that during the drill, they see how good the young ones are at keeping the ball alive, and they touch the ball back to main players and stuff. That doesn’t happen in my sessions because players are at a lower level than some players so it doesn’t balance out sometimes. It made me realise that how much capabilities they have at getting better in this sort of environment. We really should be putting separate session on for these lads, once a week if not. It made me realise that they will get better with the right people and right tools (SO Facilitator 5).

SO facilitators mentioned the wider impact of the programme which they felt had an impact on the players’ social development outside of the football environment. One SO facilitator was keen to emphasise the programme was designed to facilitate independence and allow SO players the freedom to experience things for themselves. The quote below highlights that the programme had perhaps facilitated SO players to step out of their comfort zone to learn and implement new skills.

Because you would have got erm…individuals here who never been challenged enough to perhaps communicate as much as what we are asking them to do here. So whether it is, you know, sitting in the classroom and asking questions at the end of the team talk or whether it is actually typing in a message that they want to send to their mentor on a keyboard. That's not something that they’re generally asked to do. But this is about giving them back more independence (SO Facilitator 1).
Stakeholder experiences of inclusive sport

Indeed, SO Facilitator 1 also expands upon this and highlights an opportunity which one of the SO players had acquired during the programme which he felt was a direct outcome from taking part.

It just allows people to kind of spread their wings, hopes for the first time in their lives and start to do things without the council’s help. So the communication thing’s been a big. See (Player), who’s one of the oldest ones. He's now got six hours a week post in Italian restaurant in (Location) Oh, yeah….. works there at (Restaurant) now. Now could (Player) have gotten that without getting this I’m not sure…. You can see the development of him he’s xx-odd years young getting a job like that in the first time in his life…. (SO Facilitator 1).

There was also a perception from academy facilitators that their players had been exposed to a new experience which allowed them to develop the psychosocial skills that they were deemed to have lacked prior to undertaking the programme.

Psychologically, they’ve had to deal with different things themselves whether it’s in the form of communication by email, whether it’s actually speaking to somebody who they normally won’t speak to. Psychologically and socially, I think they start to grow up (Academy Facilitator 3).

These psychosocial aspects were also consolidated by the players who admitted they had ‘learnt how to talk to different audiences and that’ (Academy Player 12) and also felt better equipped to work with people with an ID in the future ‘Aye like if I was in a situation like that again in the future, I’d be able to deal with it better and support more’ (Academy Player 4). This is very important from a social inclusion perspective and indicates that inclusive sport provide
opportunity to develop confidence to interact and connect with people with ID. Academy players reported that the opportunity to develop their interpersonal skills were welcome and they became more responsive to the SO players’ needs. There was also an increasing appreciation for the opportunity to be able to assume the different role of coach for the academy players which had given them an insight into their own personal communication styles. Moreover, Academy players reported they used non-verbal communication to help facilitate understanding such as pointing ‘we were more formal with pointing and demonstrations to help’ (Academy Player 6) and also used high fives to indicate when the SO players had done something correctly or which they deemed good ‘we would be praising them, encouraging them, giving them high fives’ (Academy Player 14).

SO facilitators also suggested that effective communication could be a potential challenge for the academy players as they felt academy players would have to adjust to the communication styles and needs of the SO players in order to demonstrate skills effectively.

I think it's taught probably the players a bit more about different various forms of communication approaches they need to undertake when they converse with people who were I suppose are not as cognitively blessed to what they are….the extra time and attention people need to give…. and you know they need to show their team mates a particular skill and their teammate will grasp within one initial take but our guys need to be shown something 8 or 9 times. And so patience is probably a key attribute which they will have to develop as well (SO Facilitator 1).

A key finding from the focus groups for Academy players pertained to the feeling of stress relief they experienced when the SO players came into training. They felt this provided a
Stakeholder experiences of inclusive sport

welcome relief from the monotony of their everyday training regime and the stress of being evaluated ‘we’re always being watched and now like they come in and it’s all about them’ (Academy Player 3). This reflected the views of many academy players who reported that they looked forward to the SO training sessions due to the fun element rather than the serious training they would normally do.

Yeah, like when the Special Olympics are coming in, and we get told in day advance, you look forward to it because you don’t get training and all that pressure, you just have fun and that (Academy Player 2).

It just takes your mind off like everything when you train you might be like stressed and you might not like being in here all the time sometimes and it takes your mind off the hard stuff, it’s something different (Academy Player 5).

Interestingly, academy players also advocated for the SO players’ ability to uplift their mood if they were feeling down, but also commented they helped refocus them by giving them some perspective and motivation:

Just to say like you come in and then sometimes you come in and you aren’t feeling at your best and obviously like and be like you are a bit down…. feel like you don’t like football today but then they come in and every time they come and they absolutely love it 100%…. so just shows that like to give 100% every time you are here and just love the game because there’s someone dying to get a spot like that (Academy Player 3).

Theme 3: Outcomes
Participants reported positive benefits which ranged from increasing intensity in training leading to performance improvements and from gaining experiences that could be transitioned into life away from football. Outcomes were summarised across four subthemes: elevation in level of football for positive benefits, gaining perspective and a sense of responsibility, personal accomplishments and moving forwards.

There was an acknowledgment by SO players that the training they undertook was more difficult and had subsequently elevated their performance ‘playing with the academy players…it was more specific, whereas training here [at SO] is much more about fun (SO Player 2). SO players believed this was beneficial for their own match performance ‘We are playing at a higher level in the league games that we are playing now’ (SO Player 1). They also acknowledged that the increase in level motivated them to up their work rate ‘Aye, because they work harder, but it’s good because we were working harder’ (SO Player 1). Academy players were also confident they were challenging the SO players in order to improve their skills and help them to become better players.

Well hopefully all of them enjoyed it and developed football skills to help them become a better player. We sort of set up drills, so it challenged them, but hopefully they came out of it becoming better footballers (Academy Player 1).

Academy players indicated from their experience of the programme that they had a newfound appreciation for football due to gaining an insight into what it is like for an SO player and the challenges they have faced. Several academy players reported this had given them a ‘reality check’ (Academy Player 10) and they would appreciate their own opportunity more moving forwards as can be encapsulated below:
Try to enjoy football a bit more, because they love it, absolutely love it and smile so much, so I think to smile a bit more as well (Academy Player 3).

Moreover, stemming from their interaction academy players realised how incredibly lucky they were ‘sometimes, like we might like take it for granted and stuff’ (Academy Player 5). They acknowledged from acting as mentors to the SO players, they felt a sense of responsibility to act professionally and be a role model. This has implications in terms of the perceptions that are often held about young football players not appreciating the opportunities they are given.

Probably I think how lucky I am and like that’s the big one but I’d say probably responsibility, like taking responsibility for like things to do and like making sure I know what I’m doing all the time and cause these guys are looking up to people like me, (academy player name) and (academy player name), just like not mucking around cause they’ll try and replicate that so just like being professional that’s it (Academy Player 1)

Just to be honest, I don't think like…. they say like they've got an intellectual disability but they’re just like us, we’re all the same and we love football in that way more than the games but all of us love football so to be honest we’re all the same and enjoying it…(Academy Player 3)

This quote highlights that academy players drew similarities between themselves and the SO players, who were just like them, footballers, who were united by their shared love of the game. Benefits were not just restricted to players; interestingly, one of the academy facilitators felt the experience of coaching SO players had made him more confident to converse and interact outside of the football environment with a friend’s child who also has an ID. The following quote
Stakeholder experiences of inclusive sport

highlights that although this programme was focussed on positive player outcomes it has had a wider impact on the academy facilitators who have not coached SO players before.

Just as (Academy Facilitator) said before, just realising how lucky you are sometimes. Because I have a friend of mine with a boy in the same position, and I have a little chat with him and what not you know, and it’s great. It’s just something that was not in my way of behaviour, and to do that. With the SO players coming in, I could relate to this boy, and when you are doing it a little bit, I have sorted a temperament about how to behave and how to go forward with questions he asks me and what not. So that made me more comfortable, that was a little bit of help for me (Academy Facilitator 2).

Programme continuation and the next steps were also highlighted by participants, academy players would ‘definitely recommend’ (Academy Player 14) that players got involved next year. SO Players also highly endorsed the programme and commented ‘It’s like going on an adventure with your friends. That’s what it’s like’ (SO Player 6) and they advocated that SO players should take part ‘because it will help them and us improve as players’ (SO Player 5). Facilitators concentrated more on the logistical issues of financial implications and publicity that would be required.

Yes. This is going to grow. This is where your chief executives are important. To be able to access funding, the research that the University is doing. We give information back to highlight the benefits or costs. There are costs, financial costs, so we got to commit to that (Academy Facilitator 4).

Facilitators acknowledged that further support from key stakeholders within relevant organisations would be required to grow the programme both publicly in terms of access and
participation but also regarding financial support. Thus, it was evident that despite the success of the programme there was a long way to go in terms of its feasibility and longevity.

**Discussion**

The current study provides a unique exploration of stakeholders’ experiences of a UK-based integrated football programme, which paired Academy players with SO players. The study aimed to address two research questions: how do stakeholder groups view participation in an inclusive football programme? [RQ 1] and are there any differences between the stakeholders’ experiences? (RQ2). The study extends the current literature base by presenting practical and rich new data pertaining to all aspects of an inclusive programme; including development, delivery and participation from the experiences of three key stakeholder groups. The research provides practical suggestions pertaining to the efficacy of the programme and presents first hand novel experiences from groups who had never previously been involved in a programme of this nature.

Findings highlighted a strong sense of inclusion within the programme which had beneficial effects for all participants. Social inclusion for disabled people has been highlighted as a priority across research and policy. For example, the National Disability Strategy (UK Government, 2021) sets out ambitions for more inclusive practices to be embedded within society, with sports highlighted as a key activity to promote equality for disabled people as participants and spectators. It has been argued that creating environments which encourage diversity and individual achievements allow for successful inclusion, the practice of social skills and exploration of attitudes (Bota et al., 2014). Moreover, it has been highlighted that community mainstream sport has not adequately facilitated inclusive practice for disabled people, suggesting key stakeholders need to be on board to promote inclusion (Tregaskis, 2003, 2004). The current study addresses this gap in practice and provides evidence that community based mainstream
sports with partnerships forged between interested organisations can make short-term
opportunities work and provide benefits for all stakeholders.

Programme benefits for SO players largely centred on psychosocial factors, such as
meeting new people and developing social relationships, which has been highlighted as a key
predictor of physical activity participation within adults with ID (Peterson et al., 2008). However,
sports programmes for people with disabilities have previously been criticised for their
exclusivity and failure to facilitate meaningful social interactions (Haslett et al., 2020; Storey,
2004). A key feature of the programme in the current study was the opportunity for participants
to experience repeat attendance with the same people over a relatively short period of time. This
is an important consideration as repeat interactions and shared interests are key facilitators of
quality friendships (Bukowski et al., 2009; Vaquera & Kao, 2008). In the current study, academy
players often referred to SO players as their friends which cements a reciprocal relationship. This
bonding has been reported as crucial for facilitating inclusion for people with ID who are often
excluded due to poorer skill level and social skills (McConkey et al., 2013). Moreover, Harada
and Siperstein, (2009) found that athletes with ID, participated in SO programmes to make new
friends or develop relationships with the friends they already had. This could explain why,
despite the SO facilitator’s original concerns regarding attendance and behaviour, the SO players’
commitment levels remained high throughout the course of the programme. This idea is
supported in adolescent footballers, which found a USP was effective in increasing SO players’
social competence but also decreasing their problematic behaviours (Özer et al., 2012).
Moreover, increased social competence can facilitate inclusion across the community, where
individuals live, play, study, and work (Siperstein & Hardman, 2001).

Prior to programme commencement, academy players were apprehensive, which was
attributed to uncertainty of interacting with SO players who have ID and regarding the level of
football which they could play. Upon reflection, academy players identified that despite these initial apprehensions, the SO players IDs were not as challenging as they initially imagined.

Attitude change has been identified as a key component of successful integration between typically developing individuals and people with ID when both parties have equal status and pursuit of a common goal (Sullivan & Masters Glidden, 2014). The present study provides some tentative evidence that despite barriers, acceptance and willingness to engage in an integrated programme can have its merits when the programme is structured to encourage shared goals and change attitudes. This is in line with previous research that has shown typically developing youths improved their attitude towards people with IDs as a result of participating in an inclusive soccer programme (Özer et al., 2012). Furthermore, academy players and facilitators felt their communication had improved as a result of taking part due to their interactions and demonstrations when coaching the SO players. Interestingly, for one facilitator, they felt this experience would assist them in everyday life in terms of interacting with people with ID.

Coaches with a higher level of self-competence in their role and with some experiences of ID are often more willing to view the challenge of integrating people with ID into their programmes (Rizzo et al., 1997).

A pertinent finding for academy players was the feeling of stress relief and resultant positive mood stemming from their interactions with SO players. Young athletes are known to experience an array of cognitive and physical stressors from performance expectations and organisational demands (Elliott et al., 2018; Mellalieu et al., 2009). It has also been well documented in sport that a high proportion of adolescent youths are at risk of burnout or dropping out of sport (Petlichkoff, 1996). The current programme allowed players the freedom to have fun without being evaluated, gave them autonomy in coaching and allowed them to act as a role model with their own SO player, subsequently gaining an increased sense of responsibility and
Stakeholder experiences of inclusive sport

... perspective. This important finding could have wider implications in terms of offsetting young player’s stress in elite sporting environments, however, more research is required to examine the extent and impact of this.

The participants, especially facilitators, were also vocal about the future of the programme and its continuation. SO facilitators highlighted they appreciated the academy coaches technical knowledge in terms of providing more enhanced football drills. The academy coaches also reciprocated they also appreciated the SO coaches’ feedback on how to effectively teach these more complex skill-based drills. Both sets of facilitators highlighted multiple positive outcomes as a result of the programme including several psychosocial outcomes for both SO and academy players. The programme was reported as being effective in terms of changing attitudes, perceptions, developing friendships, leadership qualities and communication. However, facilitators recognised that the legacy could be short-lived if funding or publicity was not obtained. This is an important consideration given that the number of integrated programmes within the local community are limited; the stakeholders in the current study were positive about the continuation of the programme following the success of this first cohort. The current programme received only nominal funding in the form of transportation for the SO players however, both sets of facilitators reported that the provision of time in kind from academy and SO staff which was agreed from the programme outset was essential for the programme to be operational. This is a finding that has been echoed across studies which have investigated USP’s and have highlighted that a multisector approach is required to generate economic and political capital to overcome inequalities (McConkey et al., 2013). Indeed, parasport athletes have highlighted that advocacy is a key factor to improve sport, this undoubtedly has some crossover to people with ID, as advocacy concerns the challenge of ableist attitudes and better access to funding in order to break down barriers (Brittain et al., 2020; Rees et al., 2019).
Although the current findings demonstrate positive effects, there are limitations related to the design of the study. The participants were actively recruited from the programme onset and had an active involvement within it. This may have included participants who had a vested interest in its success, which may have led to social desirability in their responses and could have been exacerbated by the employment of focus groups. The current study has provided some rich insights into a collaborative football programme and has uncovered some further opportunities for research. With social justice at the forefront of society, criticism has been directed at the lack of research employed by sport and exercise psychologists with social mission at its heart (Schinke et al., 2016). This study shines an important light on how diversity can be encouraged within mainstream sports for the benefit of typically developing and people with ID. This was especially important for the SO facilitators who highlighted the programme had given him the realisation that this was an environment where the SO players had thrived and was important for their future development. Further work is therefore, needed to investigate whether the benefits of USPs extend beyond the life of the programme and also if they are successful in removing barriers to sports participation. Future studies should also seek to employ participatory approaches from the outset which involve stakeholders in the design of programmes and research to create equity and impact (Schinke et al., 2013).

To conclude, this study provides an important contribution to the extant literature by reporting on practically relevant experiences of integrating SO players with academy players in an inclusive programme in the UK. From the findings it is apparent that the integration of football training and classroom activities presents several benefits for all players and facilitators. Subsequently this provides evidence that integrated sports programmes can be successful and can play an important social and psychological function for those who are involved.
Stakeholder experiences of inclusive sport

References


Cameron, A. (2014). *Stigma, social comparison and self-esteem in transition age adolescent individuals with autistic spectrum disorders and individuals with borderline intellectual disability* [unpublished thesis University of Glasgow].


Stakeholder experiences of inclusive sport


Stakeholder experiences of inclusive sport


disability-continue-face-exclusion-paralympics


Stakeholder experiences of inclusive sport


Stakeholder experiences of inclusive sport


Stakeholder experiences of inclusive sport


Table 1. Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SO Players</td>
<td>24-27</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24-44</td>
<td>Other intellectual disabilities</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36-50</td>
<td>Down’s Syndrome</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academy Players</td>
<td>17-19</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academy Facilitators</td>
<td>56-58</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO Facilitators</td>
<td>44-63</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Details of the Peer-to-Peer Football Programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sessions</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Typical Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Based</td>
<td>20 minutes before football</td>
<td>Nutrition education, psychology, sport science, performance analysis, physiotherapy – injury prevention and rehabilitation, safeguarding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 minutes debrief and reflection at the end of each football session</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Football Session</td>
<td>60 minutes</td>
<td>Warming up, training, passing drills, culminating in an integrated game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email Communication</td>
<td>Ad hoc throughout the project</td>
<td>SO and Academy players email each other back and forth via a third person who acted as a moderator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Each Special Olympic player was also assigned an academy player mentor for classroom and football sessions
Table 3: Higher Order Themes and Sub-Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher Order Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
<th>Citing Group(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prior Considerations</strong></td>
<td>Authentic Experience</td>
<td>Facilitators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Initial Expectations</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Testing Boundaries</td>
<td>Academy Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changing Perceptions</td>
<td>Facilitators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Psychosocial Aspects</strong></td>
<td>Enjoyment</td>
<td>Facilitators, Academy Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Developing Social Relationships</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunities and Fostering Growth</td>
<td>Facilitators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Facilitators, Academy Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stress Relief</td>
<td>Academy Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcomes</strong></td>
<td>Elevation in Level of Football</td>
<td>SO Players, Academy Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gaining Perspective and a Sense of Responsibility</td>
<td>Academy Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Accomplishments</td>
<td>Facilitators, Academy Players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moving Forwards</td>
<td>Facilitators, Academy Players</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>