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“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

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“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



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

4
5 **Introduction**
6

7 According to the UK Sports Association for People with Learning Disabilities (Sport
8 Excel, n.d) there are 1.5 million intellectually disabled (ID) individuals in the UK. Intellectual
9 disability from a medical perspective, is defined by impairments in intelligence and social
10 functioning that begin in childhood and have lasting developmental effects (WHO, 2022).
11 Moreover, around 30-50% of people with ID experience mental health issues, and some
12 experience comorbid physical health problems such as respiratory, cardiac, skeletal and muscle
13 tone issues linked to genetic syndromes (Gilderthorp et al., 2018; Smiley, 2005). In contrast, the
14 social model of disability contests that society imposes disability on people with impairments and
15 it is not the disability but society that excludes them from opportunities and community life
16 (Bingham et al., 2013; Haegele & Hodge, 2016). However, medical and social models of
17 disability have been reported as presenting extreme positions that are mutually exclusive (Martin,
18 2013).

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

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

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

40 In an effort to enhance social inclusion, SO has been instrumental in bringing together
41 typically developing individuals and teams with ID of similar ages and ability to train and
42 compete through the Unified Sports Programme (USP) (Dowling et al., 2013; Special Olympics,
43 2022). Integrated USP's have proven efficacious, e.g., in basketball, people with ID showed
44 improvements in skill and social perception (Riggen & Ulrich, 1993) and similarly (Castagno,
45 2001) highlighted improvements in children's basketball skills and self-esteem. While an
46 inclusive approach to sports participation appears more in line with Article 30 of the Convention
47 on the Rights of Disabled People (United Nations, 2006), which stipulates disabled people should
48 have 'full participation in mainstream sporting activities at all levels', limited opportunities for
49 sports participation can present a barrier (Cartwright et al., 2017).

50 Previous research, whilst limited in quantity, highlights physical and psychosocial
51 benefits of sport participation for people with ID, both when performed individually and as part
52 of a USP. However, research drawing on the views and experiences of USP participants is
53 limited, particularly in the UK. Subsequently, it has been argued the voices of marginalised
54 groups are often underrepresented in society, resulting in the development of policies and
55 programmes that do not represent the priorities of the groups they intend to support (De Freitas &
56 Martin, 2015; Hjortskov et al., 2018). This is particularly evident for people with ID who
57 frequently experience stigma and marginalisation, and have been characterised as ‘weak, passive
58 [and] powerless’ (Cameron, 2014; Fenn & Scior, 2019). This presents a need to examine the
59 efficacy of using sport as a vehicle to integrate people with ID, with a view to enhancing social
60 relationships and communication; whilst educating those without disability about inequalities and
61 breaking down social stigmas.

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

69 **Method**

70 **Design**

71 A qualitative methodology was employed due to the uniqueness and specificity of the
72 programme and stakeholder groups. Qualitative methods allow researchers to understand both

73 experience and context, which was important in addressing the proposed research questions
74 (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). From an interpretivist perspective, the current study sought to
75 understand the subjective experiences of players and facilitators involved in the football
76 programme. This approach was underpinned by relativist ontology, recognising the uniqueness of
77 individual experiences and the socially constructed nature of reality (Ryan, 2018). Further to this,
78 the study drew on social constructionist epistemology, which recognises knowledge as socially
79 constructed and open to individual interpretation (Losantos et al., 2016).

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

85 **Participants**

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

92 Insert table 1 here

93

94

95 **The Integrated Football Programme**

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

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

117 Insert table 2 here

118 **Materials**

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

126 **Procedure**

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

137 Focus groups took place at the academy and SO training grounds, beginning with a brief
138 introduction which recapped the purpose of the study and ensured all participants were still happy
139 to take part. Following this, focus group facilitators-initiated conversation using questions from
140 the interview guide. Focus groups lasted 25-60 minutes, were audio recorded to allow for

141 subsequent transcription and concluded when participants had exhausted all views relating to the
142 peer-to-peer programme. Participants were verbally debriefed and provided with written
143 information to take away, which included information on how to withdraw from the study later if
144 necessary. All focus groups were conducted in the same way except for the two SO groups where
145 upon initial discussion with specialist staff, it was decided the coach and chairman should stay
146 within the room whilst focus groups occurred. This was important to maintain familiarity for the
147 SO players and to assist with communication, although staff were under strict instruction not to
148 offer suggestions or prime the players' responses.

149 **Data Analysis and Reflexivity**

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

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

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

170 **Results**

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

175 Insert table 3 here

176 **Theme 1: Prior Considerations**

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

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

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

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

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

203 It was also evident that every stakeholder group had some feelings of apprehension and
204 uncertainty. For academy players, uncertainty arose from not knowing what to expect prior to the
205 first training session and the physical capabilities of the SO players, for many this was their first
206 experience of interacting with people with ID. However, this uncertainty soon dissipated once the

207 players were out on the pitch and players were able to reflect that despite their initial reservations
208 the SO players could play at a good standard.

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

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

221 I was a bit worried about how we would be. I was also worried about their commitment
222 level, sticking in and coming every Tuesday because sometimes they are not always
223 100% committed as you want them to be. To be fair, they are getting much better, and
224 much more committed. Also, the behaviour as well, I was a bit apprehensive about how
225 they would behave but, we did a little work with them before they came, and the code of
226 conduct and stuff like that (SO Facilitator 2).

227 Similarly, SO players also indicated they felt nervous: 'I think it was good, I think was
228 nervous' (SO Player 5), but they were keen to highlight that these nerves soon dissipated after a

229 couple of sessions where there was a much more relaxed dynamic between the players which
230 included jokes: ‘it wasn’t easy at first because we didn’t know them or know us, but few weeks
231 after aye’ (SO Player 1)

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

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

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

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

246 Despite initial hesitations, once familiarity and relationships had been established and
247 initial barriers had been broken down; academy players were more willing to engage in some
248 banter on the pitch and tentatively gauged what the SO players' responses were in order to
249 ascertain if this was acceptable. This undoubtedly seemed to contribute to the experience of the

250 SO players who provided some validation “Training and eh another half an hour is like football
251 with us and like have a laugh and crack on” (SO Player 1).

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

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

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

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

269

270

271 **Theme 2: Psychosocial Aspects**

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

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

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

283 SO players placed greater importance on developing social relationships throughout the
284 focus groups. Specifically, they emphasised wanting to meet new people as a positive of taking
285 part 'I liked meeting the new people, trying to know to how to meet new people' (SO Player 3).
286 The SO players were also especially excited to work with the Academy players. When they were
287 asked what they looked forward to most about the programme one player reported 'meeting the
288 young'uns' (SO Player 6). This quote is indicative of the fact that many of the SO players were
289 older than the academy players and they were also excited about having their own academy
290 player assigned to them as a mentor 'I think it was something good, get to see players and
291 everyone has their own player' (SO Player 5).

292 This peer-to-peer interaction and development of social relationships was something
293 which the SO facilitators also thought was an important aspect of the programme. The following
294 quote highlights the perceived dual benefits of the programme for playing football and meeting
295 other football players:

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

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

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

311 It was noticeable from the transcripts that facilitators felt the programme had beneficial
312 effects for both academy and SO players and had provided opportunities which fostered growth.

313 Facilitators commented on the progress achieved in football skills for the SO players which had
314 given them an insight into how they had benefitted from playing alongside academy players.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

351 These psychosocial aspects were also consolidated by the players who admitted they had
352 'learnt how to talk to different audiences and that' (Academy Player 12) and also felt better
353 equipped to work with people with an ID in the future 'Aye like if I was in a situation like that
354 again in the future, I'd be able to deal with it better and support more' (Academy Player 4). This
355 is very important from a social inclusion perspective and indicates that inclusive sport provide

356 opportunity to develop confidence to interact and connect with people with ID. Academy players
357 reported that the opportunity to develop their interpersonal skills were welcome and they became
358 more responsive to the SO players' needs. There was also an increasing appreciation for the
359 opportunity to be able to assume the different role of coach for the academy players which had
360 given them an insight into their own personal communication styles. Moreover, Academy players
361 reported they used non-verbal communication to help facilitate understanding such as pointing
362 'we were more formal with pointing and demonstrations to help' (Academy Player 6) and also
363 used high fives to indicate when the SO players had done something correctly or which they
364 deemed good 'we would be praising them, encouraging them, giving them high fives' (Academy
365 Player 14).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

397 **Theme 3: Outcomes**

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

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

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

415 Academy players indicated from their experience of the programme that they had a
416 newfound appreciation for football due to gaining an insight into what it is like for an SO player
417 and the challenges they have faced. Several academy players reported this had given them a
418 ‘reality check’ (Academy Player 10) and they would appreciate their own opportunity more
419 moving forwards as can be encapsulated below:

420 Try to enjoy football a bit more, because they love it, absolutely love it and smile so much, so
421 I think to smile a bit more as well (Academy Player 3).

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

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

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

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

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

443 Just as (Academy Facilitator) said before, just realising how lucky you are sometimes.

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

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

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

461 Facilitators acknowledged that further support from key stakeholders within relevant
462 organisations would be required to grow the programme both publicly in terms of access and

463 participation but also regarding financial support. Thus, it was evident that despite the success of
464 the programme there was a long way to go in terms of its feasibility and longevity.

465 **Discussion**

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

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

486 sports with partnerships forged between interested organisations can make short-term
487 opportunities work and provide benefits for all stakeholders.

488 Programme benefits for SO players largely centred on psychosocial factors, such as
489 meeting new people and developing social relationships, which has been highlighted as a key
490 predictor of physical activity participation within adults with ID (Peterson et al., 2008). However,
491 sports programmes for people with disabilities have previously been criticised for their
492 exclusivity and failure to facilitate meaningful social interactions (Haslett et al., 2020; Storey,
493 2004). A key feature of the programme in the current study was the opportunity for participants
494 to experience repeat attendance with the same people over a relatively short period of time. This
495 is an important consideration as repeat interactions and shared interests are key facilitators of
496 quality friendships (Bukowski et al., 2009; Vaquera & Kao, 2008). In the current study, academy
497 players often referred to SO players as their friends which cements a reciprocal relationship. This
498 bonding has been reported as crucial for facilitating inclusion for people with ID who are often
499 excluded due to poorer skill level and social skills (McConkey et al., 2013). Moreover, Harada
500 and Siperstein, (2009) found that athletes with ID, participated in SO programmes to make new
501 friends or develop relationships with the friends they already had. This could explain why,
502 despite the SO facilitator's original concerns regarding attendance and behaviour, the SO players'
503 commitment levels remained high throughout the course of the programme. This idea is
504 supported in adolescent footballers, which found a USP was effective in increasing SO players'
505 social competence but also decreasing their problematic behaviours (Özer et al., 2012).
506 Moreover, increased social competence can facilitate inclusion across the community, where
507 individuals live, play, study, and work (Siperstein & Hardman, 2001).

508 Prior to programme commencement, academy players were apprehensive, which was
509 attributed to uncertainty of interacting with SO players who have ID and regarding the level of

510 football which they could play. Upon reflection, academy players identified that despite these
511 initial apprehensions, the SO players IDs were not as challenging as they initially imagined.
512 Attitude change has been identified as a key component of successful integration between
513 typically developing individuals and people with ID when both parties have equal status and
514 pursuit of a common goal (Sullivan & Masters Glidden, 2014). The present study provides some
515 tentative evidence that despite barriers, acceptance and willingness to engage in an integrated
516 programme can have its merits when the programme is structured to encourage shared goals and
517 change attitudes. This is in line with previous research that has shown typically developing
518 youths improved their attitude towards people with IDs as a result of participating in an inclusive
519 soccer programme (Özer et al., 2012). Furthermore, academy players and facilitators felt their
520 communication had improved as a result of taking part due to their interactions and
521 demonstrations when coaching the SO players. Interestingly, for one facilitator, they felt this
522 experience would assist them in everyday life in terms of interacting with people with ID.
523 Coaches with a higher level of self-competence in their role and with some experiences of ID are
524 often more willing to view the challenge of integrating people with ID into their programmes
525 (Rizzo et al., 1997).

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

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

537 The participants, especially facilitators, were also vocal about the future of the
538 programme and its continuation. SO facilitators highlighted they appreciated the academy
539 coaches technical knowledge in terms of providing more enhanced football drills. The academy
540 coaches also reciprocated they also appreciated the SO coaches' feedback on how to effectively
541 teach these more complex skill-based drills. Both sets of facilitators highlighted multiple positive
542 outcomes as a result of the programme including several psychosocial outcomes for both SO and
543 academy players. The programme was reported as being effective in terms of changing attitudes,
544 perceptions, developing friendships, leadership qualities and communication. However,
545 facilitators recognised that the legacy could be short-lived if funding or publicity was not
546 obtained. This is an important consideration given that the number of integrated programmes
547 within the local community are limited; the stakeholders in the current study were positive about
548 the continuation of the programme following the success of this first cohort. The current
549 programme received only nominal funding in the form of transportation for the SO players
550 however, both sets of facilitators reported that the provision of time in kind from academy and
551 SO staff which was agreed from the programme outset was essential for the programme to be
552 operational. This is a finding that has been echoed across studies which have investigated USP's
553 and have highlighted that a multisector approach is required to generate economic and political
554 capital to overcome inequalities (McConkey et al., 2013). Indeed, parasport athletes have
555 highlighted that advocacy is a key factor to improve sport, this undoubtedly has some crossover
556 to people with ID, as advocacy concerns the challenge of ableist attitudes and better access to
557 funding in order to break down barriers (Brittain et al., 2020; Rees et al., 2019).

558 Although the current findings demonstrate positive effects, there are limitations related to
559 the design of the study. The participants were actively recruited from the programme onset and
560 had an active involvement within it. This may have included participants who had a vested
561 interest in its success, which may have led to social desirability in their responses and could have
562 been exacerbated by the employment of focus groups. The current study has provided some rich
563 insights into a collaborative football programme and has uncovered some further opportunities
564 for research. With social justice at the forefront of society, criticism has been directed at the lack
565 of research employed by sport and exercise psychologists with social mission at its heart
566 (Schinke et al., 2016). This study shines an important light on how diversity can be encouraged
567 within mainstream sports for the benefit of typically developing and people with ID. This was
568 especially important for the SO facilitators who highlighted the programme had given him the
569 realisation that this was an environment where the SO players had thrived and was important for
570 their future development. Further work is therefore, needed to investigate whether the benefits of
571 USPs extend beyond the life of the programme and also if they are successful in removing
572 barriers to sports participation. Future studies should also seek to employ participatory
573 approaches from the outset which involve stakeholders in the design of programmes and research
574 to create equity and impact (Schinke et al., 2013).

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

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Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participants	Age Range	Disability	n
SO Players	24-27	Autism	3
	24-44	Other intellectual disabilities	6
	36-50	Down's Syndrome	2
Academy Players	17-19	-	14
Academy Facilitators	56-58	-	3
SO Facilitators	44-63	-	3

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

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

* Each Special Olympic player was also assigned an academy player mentor for classroom and football sessions

Table 3: Higher Order Themes and Sub-Themes

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