

EXPLORING THE LIVERPOOL FOOTBALL CLUB (LFC) FOUNDATION'S APPROACH TO YOUTH INTERVENTION VIA THE ONSIDE PROGRAMME

Paula Carroll, Liverpool Football Club Foundation

Francis Hargreaves, Liverpool Football Club Foundation

Anna Bussu, Edge Hill University

Sean Creaney, Edge Hill University

Nicholas Longpré, Edge Hill University

Grace Robinson, Black Box Research and Consultancy Ltd

Daniel Robinson, Black Box Research and Consultancy Ltd

Contact Details: corresponding author anna.bussu@edgehill.ac.uk

Abstract

The importance of working *with* children and young people to build pro-social identities and develop positive and constructive young person/practitioner relationships cannot be overstated. This paper seeks to review the benefits of Liverpool Football Club (LFC) Foundation's approach to youth intervention. It assesses the impact and appreciation of 'Onside', an LFC Foundation intervention programme aiming to raise the aspirations and motivations of children and young people while reducing risky behaviours, both inside and outside of school. The programme enables young people to engage through a bespoke curriculum developed and adapted to suit their needs, incorporating both the Prince's Trust Achieve Award and the Sports Leaders Level 1 Award. By utilising the lens of positive youth development (PYD), this paper presents data and insights into how the programme can act as a *protective factor* by addressing unmet needs such as adversity and disadvantage, enabling participants to thrive in their communities. This paper includes recommended strategies to facilitate the participation of young people in youth interventions and examines the important role of schools in partnering with football charities to co-create similar projects that prioritise young people, facilitate positive child outcomes and divert from stigma by embracing the principle of pre-emptive intervention.

Keywords

Children & Young People, Life Skills, Intervention, Protective Factors, Mixed Methods.

Introduction

The importance of working with children and young people to build pro-social identities and develop positive and constructive young person/practitioner relationships cannot be overstated. In a Positive Youth Development (PYD) context, relationship-based practice is considered vital, particularly when seeking to nurture self-confidence, facilitate personal growth and maximise participation in interventions and activities (Crowther et al., 2022). Indeed, as Butts et al. (2010:30) note, 'Youth who feel safe, valued, and connected to caring adults are more likely to be positive about life, to be engaged in school, and to be emotionally healthy'. Other elements of PYD include equipping young people with relevant and useful skills including techniques to problem solve, manage conflict and regulate emotions. Whilst there can be challenges and limits regarding the extent to which PYD can be implemented in practice – not least due to resource constraints and a lack of adequate or sufficient infrastructure within settings – it has been described as a useful way to facilitate positive youth outcomes such as the building of emotional intelligence and interpersonal communication skills (Bussu et al., 2023; Crowther et al., 2022).

When interacting with young people, key features of PYD include being alert to structural inequalities and ensuring professional practice remains strengths-based. Other considerations include prosocial responses and a focus on nurturing meaningful engagement when seeking to develop holistic responses to address multifaceted issues. As an approach, PYD can be utilised by professionals as guidance to problem-solve. Inclusivity is key to identifying factors impacting adolescent development and ensuring that the necessary support is provided to help young people recover from adversity and thrive within their communities (Butts et al., 2005).

The PYD framework is also applicable when working with young people on the 'cusp' of entering the Youth Justice System. A key focus within the framework centres around identifying the needs of young people and working collaboratively with them and their supporters in a meaningful and interactive way. Indeed, when seeking to engage young people, a relationship-based practice includes being empathic and non-judgemental (Haines and Case, 2015). Practitioners are further expected to avoid the use of punitive sanctions and refrain from introducing or imposing measures that could be described or experienced as stigmatising, which may also be criminogenic or counterproductive, especially the language of 'potential offender', 'pre-delinquent', and 'crime prone', which can influence how the young person perceives themselves (Goldson, 2005; 2010; Turnbull and Spence, 2011).

To improve the life chances of young people, what is required is a commitment from adults to see the value in signposting children and young people on to early preventative services at the first opportunity in order to address unmet needs (Case and Browning, 2021). The LFC Foundation's youth intervention framework is a case in point. These interventions seek to be in the young person's best interests, constructive, non-criminalising, and collaborative by promoting healthy development and providing educational support (Hargreaves et al., 2023). Any intervention is likely to be more impactful when children's views have been considered and ideally used to inform decision-making in the design and development aspect of interventions. Alongside being respectful of agency, the impact of structural factors that can impede personal growth needs to be identified and responded to.

This paper outlines the purpose and key features of the LFC Foundation's approach to youth intervention. More specifically, it aims to assess the impact of the Onside programme. The LFC Foundation aims to empower children and young people to make positive behavioural choices. The principle of collaboration is used to inform the development of interventions facilitated by the football charity and its partners. Alongside this, there is a commitment to embrace key elements of a relationship-based practice considered critical for building the life skills of young people (see Hargreaves et al., 2023). First, the paper provides an overview of Onside and the LFC Foundation. Second, it reviews relevant literature and conceptual perspectives, notably positive youth development, positive youth justice and life skills development. Third, the findings are presented and the implications for practice are set out and discussed.

Overview of Onside and LFC Foundation

The LFC Foundation is the official charity of the Liverpool Football Club. Its mission is to create life-changing opportunities for young people and their families across the Liverpool City Region and beyond (LFC Foundation, 2023). Liverpool is a city and metropolitan borough located in Merseyside. According to Ashton (2024), it is currently the third most deprived local authority area in England, with 63% of its residents living in areas classified as among the most deprived in the country. Additionally, three in ten children in Liverpool are living in poverty (Ashton, 2024).

The Foundation delivers a broad range of programmes under six key themes: Sport and Physical Activity, Health and Wellbeing, Education and Life Skills, Employability and Training, Community and Youth Interventions. On average, the Foundation delivers 200 sessions per week from over 200 venues, including 146 schools in the Liverpool City Region (LCR).

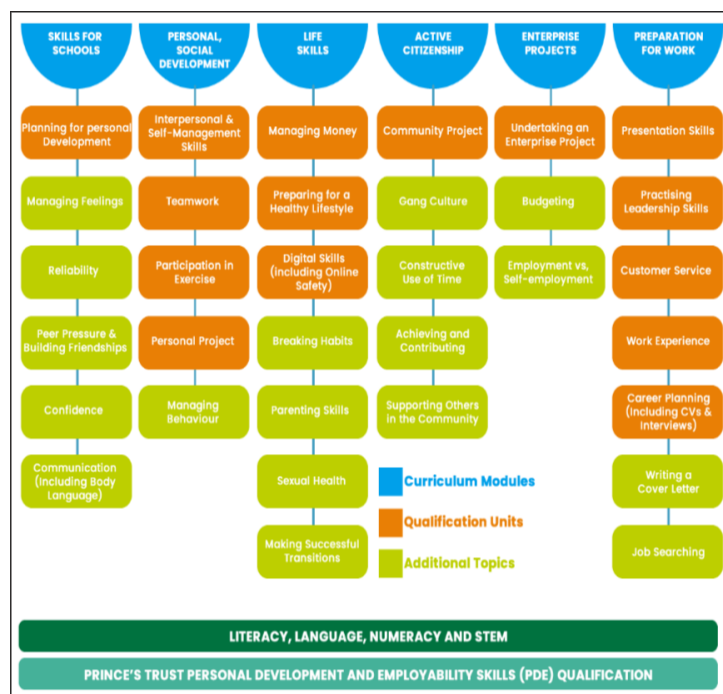
The Onside programme sits within the LFC Foundation's Youth Intervention impact area, aiming to support and empower young people aged 11 – 19 by utilising the power of the LFC badge. The Onside programme involves secondary schools across Liverpool, Sefton, Wirral, Knowsley, Cheshire, and North Wales.

The programme has been developed in collaboration with secondary school teachers and young people, including students identified as 'at risk' and vulnerable to exploitation and those with low attendance and/or poor educational attainment. In terms of categorising 'at risk' students, the LFC Foundation coordinator works with a school's Head of Year, Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCO's), and Pastoral teams to identify and respond to children's needs and understand students' behaviour, attitudes, and perceptions more generally. Additionally, intelligence from Merseyside Police Safer Schools Officers is considered when selecting young people who face challenging situations and exhibit poor behaviour both inside and outside of school. Information about the Onside programme is then distributed to identified students and their parent/guardian, after which a consent form is signed on behalf of the young person who is subsequently invited onto the programme.

The Onside programme aims to develop participants' personal and social skills, encouraging them to change their current behaviours and perceptions of school and education, become more active role models both inside and outside of education, and increase their awareness

of additional activities within their community. The programme also enables students to gain two recognised qualifications; the Prince's Trust Achieve Award and Sports Leaders Level 1 Award. Further information and module content is outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Onside curriculum units



The delivery model for the Onside programme includes one LFC Foundation coordinator attending a partner Onside school one day per week for the duration of the academic year. The coordinator is integrated into the school with the aim of becoming a constitutive element of the school infrastructure and a role model for young people. Cohorts are engaged for twelve weeks. The LFC Foundation staff work with one group in the morning for two periods, followed by a different group in the afternoon for two periods. Session plans and learning objectives for each cohort may differ based on the factors identified; for example, the focus of one group may be to improve confidence and self-esteem, whilst another may focus on behaviour management. Additionally, LFC Foundation staff are available to provide one-to-one support to students during free periods, breaks, and lunch times.

Literature review

Positive Youth Justice: Children's Needs, Life Skills and Interventions

It is important to communicate effectively with children and young people and involve them in constructive activities, nurturing levels of engagement and interaction. Other considerations include ensuring awareness of the person's abilities and being responsive to

their needs and preferences. These aspects are reiterated within the positive youth justice model developed by Case and Haines (2018). The model was formulated and designed to be used by practitioners as an alternative to risk (deficit) based methods of intervention. In the Criminal Justice context, risk-based interventions and prescriptive practices tended to be adult-driven (Burns and Creaney, 2023). Such methods were often deficit-based, which hindered opportunities to nurture positive youth development, a consequence of marginalising the importance of practitioner-young person relationships (Creaney and Case, 2021).

Translating Positive Youth Justice (PYJ) philosophy into practice can be challenging due to budget constraints, resources/workload pressures or a lack of training and development opportunities for staff (Creaney and Burns, 2023). Despite differences between rhetoric and reality, it has been dubbed a principled and progressive model to address unmet needs in a supportive and caring way. It has been argued that young people are more likely to flourish and thrive in environments that are characterised as safe spaces that foster a participatory democracy framed around promoting positive behaviours and outcomes (Creaney et al., 2023a). This involves practitioners providing sufficient guidance and reassurance to young people that they have opportunities and choices and that their views and life experiences matter. When they are recognised as rights-holders, empowered, and listened to, this can help children to experience a sense of freedom to express agency and open up spaces for engaging and interactive participation (Creaney et al., 2023b).

The principles underpinning PYJ align to rights-based practices, especially the focus on ensuring the views of children and young people are systemically considered (CYCJ, 2022). Children First, Offenders Second in England/Wales and the Positive Youth Justice Model (PYJM) in the USA (see e.g., Butts, 2011; Butts et al., 2010; Catalano et al., 2004; 2005) constitute cohesive and coordinated frameworks, capable of supporting and empowering children (Case and Haine, 2018). These models of practice influenced the YJB's policy and strategy in England and Wales. The YJB have now further developed and embraced Child First justice as an approach to practice. This means acknowledging the particular circumstances of the person, with a focus on addressing unmet needs and creating opportunities to help them realise their potential. Professionals (teachers, educators, psychologists) are required to help children to develop pro-social identities by encouraging positive behaviours and promoting skills development (Creaney, 2018; Youth Justice Board, 2021).

To facilitate positive child outcomes, life skills development and personal empowerment are key elements (Bussu and Contini, 2023; Bussu et al., 2018). Whilst life skills can be variously defined, they are key competencies that individuals can acquire and develop as they navigate the challenges of adolescence and transition into adulthood. These skills are crucial for personal growth and successful functioning in various life domains.

Life skills (Duerden et al., 2012; WHO, 1999; 2003) consist of three main domains: cognitive (e.g. decision-making, problem-solving, critical thinking, creative thinking and learning to learn), emotional (e.g., empathy; managing and coping with emotions and stress) and social-relational skills (effective communication, interpersonal skills, cooperation, conflict resolution, accepting difference, concern for others, self-awareness and self-esteem (Bussu

et al., 2018). Another important skill is perceived self-efficacy (Bandura 1997, 2010), which concerns young people's awareness of being able to achieve certain objectives in their lives and the beliefs that they hold in their ability to influence events that affect their lives. Previous studies have highlighted that some pedagogical practices and experiences, such as peer mentoring (Creaney, 2018) and restorative practices (Creaney and Smith, 2023; Veloira et al., 2020), can be useful in terms of promoting young people's 'self-empowerment' and life skills.

Another relevant approach gaining importance across the social sciences and which underscores strength-based methods for children's development is Positive Youth Development (PYD). This marks a shift towards more optimistic and empowering perspectives that rest upon positive attributes that function as protective factors for children facing negative predictors (Sesma et al., 2005). As Crowther et al. (2022: 348) eloquently writes, "PYD is grounded in a belief that all youth has strengths and skills that can be cultivated when aligned with appropriate resources". Programmes that adopt the principles of PYD recognise the unique qualities that young people present with and acknowledge how and why developmental challenges may impact them in diverse ways. Hamilton et al. (2004) propose that youth development can be categorised into assets comprising physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, and social development. The goal of many PYD programmes is then to see young people applying these assets, or life skills, in a variety of contexts outside of the programme itself.

In line with Positive Youth Justice, an important protective factor consists of creating and consolidating positive and trustable relationships with children (Bussu et al., forthcoming), which are crucial for reaffirming their individual strengths and nurturing a sense of belonging (Peer Power, 2021; Youth Justice Board, 2021). Furthermore, children and young people are more likely to engage where they feel as though they are part of the process (Creaney, 2018), and they are more likely to feel engaged when they feel their opinions are valued and that they have a certain degree of choice (Duerden, 2011; Herrera et al., 2000).

In this regard, participatory practices can be particularly effective, especially when there is a focus on identifying and developing young people's interests, future plans, and goals (Burns and Creaney, 2023; Bussu et al., forthcoming). Participatory and relational practices can enhance young people's social skills, whilst improving their self-esteem and self-efficacy when they feel valued as 'trusted equals' within the relationship (Boswell et al., 2021; Mayer and McKenzie, 2017; Williams et al., 2010). Ensuring children and young people feel they have opportunities to participate on their own terms and are listened to when putting forward a perspective is key to sustaining their engagement in any interventions. Including them in discussions on matters that concern them is also compatible with a rights-respecting approach (CYCJ, 2022).

Community-Based Programmes and Protective Factors

Some studies have supported the positive impact of sport upon young people's life skills development in several dimensions, especially emotional and interpersonal skills. (e.g., Biesta et al., 2021; Bussu et al., forthcoming; Crowther et al., 2022; Kay, 2019; Williams et al., 2022). Community sports programmes that incorporate PYD can be positioned as protective factors for young people in promoting inclusion and enhancing coping strategies

(Craig et al., 2017; Ross et al., 2011). Football-related community schemes have become increasingly common and appeared as a result of football clubs becoming more embedded within their communities. Increasing emphasis on corporate social responsibility has seen the development of schemes such as 'Football in the Community', in addition to the creation of community trusts and foundation models. Indeed, Parnell et al. (2013) posit that such schemes aimed to address social and sporting transformations while fostering stronger connections between clubs and their local communities. While possessing financial, structural, and strategic autonomy from the football club, most of these schemes maintain an affiliation with the club in their name, which among other things, provides the programme with the opportunity to utilise the football club's brand as a powerful tool for engaging with the community

One such example of this was documented by Hargreaves et al. (2023), who explored the 'power of the badge' within the LFC Foundation's approach to a youth intervention programme aimed at working with young people at risk of exploitation. The authors noted that rather than being viewed as authority figures, members of the delivery team were viewed as trusted adults. Indeed, this involved professionals being able to relate and connect with the young people, creating an environment that was conducive to learning and development. Lerner et al. (2017) note that such positive relationships with adults and institutions contribute to PYD being more effective.

Aims of the Current Paper

Research continues to show the strengths of the community-based initiatives and places high value in their ability to engage with young people while facilitating the development of their life skills and creating positive and lasting relationships between adults and children. The current study will seek to further cement these notions, highlighting the necessity for the long-term implementation of such programmes in empowering young people to thrive within their communities.

Therefore, the current paper aims to assess the impact of the LFC Foundation Onside programme and its appreciation by participants. More specifically, this paper seeks to assess:

RQ1. How School & Work involvement is connected to General Self Efficacy and Risky Behaviours, and if this relationship is similar PRE- and POST- intervention (Pearson's moment correlations).

RQ2. If the Onside programme can effectively reduce Risky Behaviours, while increasing School & Work involvement and General Self Efficacy (paired-samples t-tests).

RQ3. If School & Work Involvement and General Self Efficacy can predict Risky Behaviours and how tackling these predictors can help to prevent future Risky Behaviours (Multiple Linear Regression).

RQ4. What are the overall outcome impacts of the Onside programme (Frequency analysis).

RQ. 5. How feedback from participants can be used to improve future iterations of the LFC Foundation Onside programme (Participants' feedback).

Methods

LFC Model and Approach

All programmes funded and delivered by the LFC Foundation are in line with the Foundation's Theory of Change (LFC Foundation, 2023). The goal is to "Reduce the impact on those communities facing high levels of multiple deprivation across the LCR and beyond". This is the Foundation's main driver due to the high levels of deprivation in the LCR and the links between poorer outcomes in health, education, employment, and increased involvement in crime (Ashton and Bussu, 2020; 2022). To evidence this, all Foundation programmes measure one or more intermediate outcomes that serve to evidence longer-term impact, including improved outcomes in the areas of health, social, economic and education.

The Onside programme evidences the outcomes below, and the data collection framework has been structured accordingly. The aims of the Onside programme were to develop:

- Increased aspiration, positive attitudes, and future plans;
- Improved confidence, self-esteem, and resilience;
- Improved transferable life skills and knowledge.

Data Collection & Ethical Considerations

Information about the Onside programme was distributed to identified students and their parents/legal guardians. Because participants were all under the age of 17 years old, parent/ legal guardian's consent was obtained prior to the programme. Monitoring data was collected at the start and throughout the programme. This includes demographic information provided by the parent/legal guardian, session information including attendance at sessions and average contact hours. Outcome data was also collected. This includes if a participant has achieved one or more qualifications, a pre-and post-intervention questionnaire completed at weeks 1 and 11 of the programme, and additional qualitative feedback from participants as well as school staff members. The programme is inclusive to all young people including those identified with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), and there was no special requirement placed on participants in terms of gender, ethnicity, education level, or sexual orientation. Participation was voluntary. All data were anonymised and aggregated.

All data is collected in line with LFC Foundation governance policies and procedures as outlined in the organisation's Privacy Policy (LFC Foundation, 2023). Ethical considerations of all aspects of the programme, including design and data collection, were discussed and agreed upon with key stakeholders, including LFC Foundation's Senior Leadership Team and participating schools. Furthermore, insights gained via feedback from previous cohorts were used to improve the procedure over time.

Measures

In line with the objectives of the programme, the questionnaires were devised from a number of different sources including young people's aspirations, self-efficacy regarding coping and resilience, and behaviour and risk. The Onside team discussed the question options and what should be included in the questionnaire, a review of this is undertaken annually based on the data and insight obtained.

Young Peoples Aspirations (Strand and Winston, 2008). Three questions were taken from research into young people's level of aspiration, commitment to schooling sub-scale, measuring how young people are involved at school, and how school and work can have a positive impact on their future. Items are scored on a 10-point Likert-style scale, ranging from 0 (Totally disagree) to 10 (Totally agree). The items were scored pre- and post-programme. Cronbach's alpha was of .76, indicating a good internal consistency.

General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES; Schwarzer and Jerusalem, 1995). The GSES is composed of 10 items, measuring coping and resilience. An example of an item is: "I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough". Items were scored on a 4-point Likert-style scale (1 - Not at all true; 2 - Hardly true; 3 - Moderately true; 4 - Exactly true). The GSES was scored pre- and post-programme. Cronbach's alpha was of .89, indicating a very good internal consistency.

Behaviour & Risk. Risky behaviours were assessed with 8 items. An example of an item is: "Bully, threaten or hurt other people". Items were scored on a 5-point Likert-style scale (1 - Not like me; 2 - A bit like me; 3 - Quite like me; 4 - Just like me; 5 - Don't know). Cronbach's alpha was of .69, indicating a good internal consistency.

Procedure

From September 2021 to September 2023, the Onside programme has been delivered in 18 secondary schools, many with multiple interventions across different year groups. In year one, 29 programmes were delivered, increasing to 71 in year two (a 145% increase) due to increased demand for the programme and an increased staffing resource to deliver it. In total, 1,109 sessions have been delivered, totalling an aggregate attendance of 6,756. Students have attended an average of 8.74 sessions each, with each student engaging an average of 26:46 contact hours during the programme. Most significantly, school leads selected students who demonstrated continual absenteeism and overall low attendance. However, the average attendance rate at sessions was 95.38%, which is a positive finding.

Participants' Demographics

The final sample was composed of N = 468 participants, ranging from 11 to 17 years old, with a majority between 13 and 15 years of age (74%). The sample was slightly more male-dominated (59.2%) and from a White British ethnic origin (83.9%).

Gender. School leads identify the participants, these have been heavily male-dominated, however, as the programme curriculum is bespoke and developed with students' needs in mind, later years have seen an increase in the number of female students attending the programme and the number of female-only cohorts delivered.

Ethnicity. White British demographics is representative of the wider school and LCR demographics. However, there has been a 7.84% decrease in White British participants since year one (2021/2022 academic year), highlighting the continual effort by delivery staff to ensure school leads are referring young people from diverse backgrounds.

SEND. Although over 9.06% of participants ($n = 70$) have been identified as SEND, based upon feedback from school leads, there are a number of participants on the Onside programmes who have undiagnosed needs such as SEND or learning difficulties. There have been 13 participants (1.68%) who have highlighted Prefer Not to Say regarding SEND, with staff working alongside schools and guardians to address specific needs.

Data Analysis

At a univariate level, frequencies were conducted on demographic and items pre/post-programme. At a bivariate level, Pearson's moment correlations were conducted to assess the relationship between each scale for pre and post measures. Furthermore, paired-samples t-tests were conducted to assess the impact of the programme on each measure. Finally, at a multivariate level, Multiple Linear Regression was conducted to assess how Young Peoples Aspirations and GSES predicted Behaviour & Risk after the completion of the programme. Previous studies have revealed that the current sample size is sufficient to find small to medium effect sizes across analyses (Longpré et al., 2022ab). Analyses were conducted with Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 29 (IBM, New York, USA).

Results

Pearson Correlations

Pearson correlations were conducted between scales. A higher score on the School & Work Involvement increased GSES ($r = .304, p < .001$ [PRE]; $r = .172, p < .001$ [POST]). A lower score on the School & Work Involvement increased Behaviour & Risk ($r = -.254, p < .001$ [PRE]; $r = -.346, p < .001$ [POST]). In other words, at PRE level, engagement (low) was correlating with self-efficacy (low) and Behaviour & Risk (High). Similar correlations were found at POST level.

Table 1.
Pearson Correlation between Scales (Total Score)

	Pre			Post		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
School & Work Involvement (1)	1	.304***	.254***	1	.172***	.346***
General Self Efficacy Scale (2)		1	.022		1	.035
Behaviour & Risk (3)			1			1

Note. *** $p < .001$

Paired-samples t-tests

Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to assess the impact of the programme on each scale. School & Work Involvement was increased by 13.87% (Mean = 19.32 [PRE]; Mean = 22.43 [Post]; $t = 6.750$; $p < .001$); GSES was increased by 9.69% (Mean = 26.56 [PRE]; Mean = 29.41 [Post]; $t = 6.090$; $p < .001$); and Behaviour & Risk was reduced by 14.10% (Mean = 26.56 [PRE]; Mean = 29.41 [Post]; $t = 6.090$; $p < .001$); (Mean = 45.70 [PRE]; Mean = 38.37 [Post]; $t = -3.009$; $p < .001$). In other words, the programme both significantly improved engagement and GSES, whilst reducing Behaviour & Risk.

Table 2.
Paired Samples t-test

	Pre			Post			t
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	
School & Work Involvement	364	19.32	6.447	364	22.43	6.439	6.750***
General Self Efficacy Scale	364	26.56	5.518	364	29.41	7.251	6.090***
Behaviour & Risk	364	45.7	44.659	364	38.37	41.28	-3.009**

Note. ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Multiple Linear Regression

Multiple linear regression was conducted to assess how Young Peoples Aspirations and GSES predicted Behaviour & Risk. As expected, GSES was not a strong predictor of Behaviour and Risk, but School/Work Involvement was a good predictor. In other words, while focusing on GSES can increase overall wellbeing, the best target to reduce Behaviour & Risk is to focus on School and Work engagement.

Table 3.
Multiple Linear Regression - Predictor of Behaviour & Risk

	B	β	t	p
School & Work Involvement	-2.325	-.366	-7.273	0.001
General Self Efficacy Scale	0.554	0.097	1.953	0.05

R-Square = .068; $p < .001$

Overall Outcome Impacts

Participants Feel Inspired and Engaged. As the programme incorporates qualifications, the ownership and responsibility to complete work to the deadline are reiterated to students.

The importance of completing work can also be transferred to outside of school, and a large number of students scored a high pre and post score, indicating a perceived relationship between success in work and success in life ([Q2] average 7.31 rising to average 8.10). Additionally, a high number of students reported that doing well at school was important to them, a sentiment which increased at the end of the programme (6.4 to 7.5 respectively).

Participants Develop Skills and Knowledge. Students were encouraged to venture out of their comfort zones and learn through problem-solving activities. This was reflected on the questionnaire, showing an increase in problem-solving confidence from baseline (Q4, average 17.5% improvement / Q5, average 18.5% improvement / Q9 average 21.7% improvement / Q11, average 22.8% improvement, Q12, average 20.5% improvement, Q13 average 22.5% improvement).

Participants' Improve Confidence and Self-esteem. The Onside programme aims to instil confidence, with staff becoming role models to participants and helping them achieve goals. Confidence in sticking to aims and achieving goals increased 17.6% from baseline (Q6). Students often find themselves in difficult situations with family members and friends, alongside input from local agencies. Results suggest an average of a 27.9% increase in participants stating they have improved their own coping abilities compared to baseline (Q10). Leadership qualities are developed through continually encouraging young people to become more resilient. Participants showed a 19.1% improvement in confidence in dealing with unexpected events (Q7), alongside a 22.8% average increase in students reporting that they are better equipped to deal with unforeseen circumstances (Q8)

Participants' Feedback

A sub-sample of participants (n = 270) completed a single point feedback questionnaire, via an anonymous "Your Voice Counts Survey", on the Onside programme for the purposes of gaining insight into students' perceptions on the provision and delivery, in addition to ideas for change in future cohorts. They were asked to provide feedback on their overall appreciation, as well as areas to improve, both with a questionnaire and with open-ended questions. Feedback was largely consistent and positive, indicating a good level of quality (see Table 4).

Table 4. Insight on students' perceptions

- 9.2 out of 10 average students' rating for a session (0 = low and 10 = high)
- 9.01 average rating from students when they are asked if they would recommend the Onside programme to their friends (0 = very unlikely /10 = very likely)
- 84.44% of students indicated the sessions had improved their mental health and well-being
- 81.85% of students indicated the sessions have improved physical health and fitness
- 97.78% of students indicated they feel included at sessions

- 96.30% of students indicated they have fun at sessions

Due to ongoing reflection and adaptations to the Onside programme, students were asked for feedback on things that they liked and should be kept in the programme for future

cohorts. Overall, participants provided positive feedback on the programme about community building peer inclusion, supported by quotes below:

Ext 1. "Everyone was included. We did different activities every session".

Ext 2. "It was very fun and enjoyable, and I had a good time doing all the activities. I also think it was good working with people I don't normally work with and do things out of my comfort zone".

Ext 3. "Playing against each other in netball and doing activities you necessarily didn't think you would like and then ended up enjoying it".

When asked about potential improvements, participants reflected on the need for a longer programme and more opportunities to be actively involved:

Ext 4. "Going outside and playing football I really enjoyed, and I actually enjoyed the coursework it made me put effort into it, and I felt passionate about it".

Ext 5. "We asked students to provide two areas for improvement with the quotes below:

"Go on for longer so we can learn more and get stuff done for the end of the sessions".

Ext 6. "Maybe it should go on for longer so we can learn more, and we get stuff done without rushing".

Ext 7. "Do it more than once a week".

Completion of Award

Ninety percent of young people on the Onside programme completed both the Sports Leader Level 1 and Prince's Trust Achieve Award, achieving two recognised qualifications. The success of the programme in delivering the Sports Leader Award was highlighted by Sports Leaders who quality assured the delivery scheme of work and student portfolios. The provision was highlighted as Outstanding, with Sports Leaders now identifying the LFC Foundation as a "Centre of Excellence".

Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

The importance of working with children and young people to build pro-social identities and develop positive and constructive young person/practitioner relationships cannot be overstated. Indeed, a key part of PYD is relational practice and a young person-centred ethos, which is pivotal in facilitating healthy development and enabling young people to thrive within their communities. This paper has reviewed the benefits and challenges of Liverpool Football Club (LFC) Foundation's approach to youth intervention, which is underpinned by an ethos of PYD. It has explored the participation of children and young

people within 'Onside', an LFC Foundation intervention programme aiming to raise the aspirations and motivations of its participants to achieve, both inside and outside of secondary school.

By utilising the lens of positive youth development (PYD; Crowther et al., 2022), this paper has presented data and insights into how the programme can act as a *protective factor*, enabling participants to thrive in their communities. The research has highlighted how the Onside programme can lead to positive outcomes by actively involving children and young people and empowering them, promoting their individual and interpersonal *life skills*. The programme has enabled young people to engage through a bespoke curriculum developed and adapted to suit their needs, incorporating both the Prince's Trust Achieve Award and the Sports Leaders Level 1 Award. Furthermore, there were noticeable improvements in school performance, increased aspirations, positive attitudes, and future plans for life.

Achieving goals has increased participants' self-confidence, and they feel satisfied to improve their school performance. Onside has supported the development of *cognitive skills*, such as problem-solving, and *emotional and interpersonal skills*, such as communication and leadership skills. Participants were involved in learning activities that supported personal achievements and encouraged them to become more resilient and positive in dealing with unexpected and sometimes traumatic events. Within youth interventions, there is a focus on offering bespoke care and education that is supportive and encouraging through capturing and being responsive to the experiences and views of participants who are in receipt of assistance and coaching. There is a commitment to adapt the focus of interventions and a periodic review of provision as a result of feedback received on the perceived efficacy of the approaches implemented.

The Onside programme's activities seem to positively impact personal *resilience*, which is a relevant skill for children and young people who are facing challenging adversities and traumatic or stressful experiences, for example, conflict and abuse in the family and serious personal and family health problems (Masten and Barnes, 2018). Furthermore, feedback from children and young people indicates that they are *feeling inspired and supported* by positive role models and mentors who have facilitated the activities within the schools. Involvement in sports can contribute to improvements in emotional health and well-being. Young people can also develop skills and knowledge as sport can be a useful mechanism to facilitate positive youth development opportunities. Through relationship-building, young people can engage with practitioners who act as positive role models and trusted advocates. Crucially, this work should be undertaken on a voluntary basis to maximise opportunities for participation and meaningful engagement. In other words, there should be no coercion involved, not least because when young people are compelled to co-operate, they can feel disempowered and marginalised. It is relevant to note at this point that young people are not mandated to attend the youth intervention sessions delivered by the LFC Foundation.

Results indicate that involvement in the programme seems to increase young people's self-esteem and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Schwarzer and Luszczynska, 2008). This result is consistent with previous research showing that active involvement in sports and pastoral activities increases self-confidence, self-esteem, and interpersonal skills (Raymond,

2018). Moreover, a focus on *protective factors* and nurturing children's resilience offered a more constructive and community-friendly (Pollard, 1999) approach to addressing the needs of children who tend to reside in disadvantaged social contexts with limited resources and opportunities (Ashton and Bussu, 2020; 2023) and face school exclusion and attrition (Bussu and Pulina, 2020; Cottrell-Boyce, 2013; French and Conrad, 2001). In this regard, it is important that the football charity sector and its partners continue to design and deliver interventions that are in the child's best interests. All work should be constructive and seek to divert from stigma (YJB, 2021).

The football charity and its partners occupy a crucial role in fostering positive outcomes by adopting the principles of *Positive Youth Justice* (Case and Haines, 2018; Crowther et al., 2022). This approach emphasises interventions that prioritise the child's well-being, are constructive by highlighting their strengths, prioritising prevention, and diversion, and enabling young people to engage in leisure and social activities (Burns and Creaney, 2023; YJB, 2021; 2023). Importantly, the strategy encourages collaboration by involving children in the design of services (Hargreaves et al., 2023; Peer Power, 2021; YJB, 2021).

Acknowledgements

Special thanks are also due to all the young people who contributed to this study. We would also like to thank the Onside programme funders, the Premier League Professional Football Association and the LFC Foundation Red Hearts donor for supporting the project.

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