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Short Article

It's football, but not as we know it: Twenty-five years of connection and competence

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Abstract:

This is a personal, reflective account of my long-term participation in a football group involving people living in or working in residential child care and invited guests. It explores the benefits of being part of this group, and the rich potential of such groups and activities for the development of connection and competence. It also discusses the process of developing and nurturing a caring culture within the group, and the caring capacities of its members. It explores what is needed to maintain a group of this kind over a period of decades, concluding with a personal account of my own richly rewarding experience of belonging to this group.

Every Monday evening, in a small town near Edinburgh, something quite unremarkable happens. A group, usually of around 12 people, gathers to play a game of football, of sorts. Our game might initially seem similar to those being played on neighbouring pitches. However, anyone who looks more closely will notice that some aspects of this version of football are highly unusual.

The game involves players of all ages and, more recently, from many countries. It begins with players being divided into teams, but it is not unusual for players to swap teams during the game. Nobody ever seems to know the score, or to care much about it. When a good goal is scored, players from both teams are likely to applaud or congratulate not just the scorer, but all those involved. More experienced players are likely to give newer or younger players a moment to compose themselves before

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tackling them. Players who commit a foul will usually bring this to the attention of others and give the ball back to the other team. If anyone is hurt, even without a foul, the game will stop until everybody is feeling okay and ready to continue. Although 'banter', which often involves teasing or ribbing of others, is common, it has no social hierarchy and is used to include, rather than exclude, and to draw people into the community. More often, encouraging comments will be heard, directed to teammates and opposition players alike.

What started with a decision by a group of young people and adults, over 25 years ago, to play a single game of football, has evolved into a group that has existed ever since, with around 200 participants altogether, and meeting over 1000 times. I think there are things we can learn from how this group was created, how it has evolved, what has enabled it to be maintained for so long, and what it offers its members that might provide useful learning for other aspects of the residential child care sector.

The community in question is a group of people who live or work together in a small residential child care service, along with others who, like me, were part of the community many years ago, and remain connected to it. There is a revolving door of current young people, ex-residents, workers past and present, friends, and relatives. At any time, there are 20 to 30 active members, with around 10 to 15 attending each week.

What is the value of such an activity? Enjoyment is surely an important reason why many people continue to show up regularly over a significant period. In a sector in which desired 'outcomes' often focus on the future; there is a risk that the value of enjoyment and happiness in the present can be overlooked. As Nicholas Hobbs argued, children should know some joy in each day and look forward to some joyous event for the morrow, stating that, for many, playing football on Mondays has contributed positively to this (Hobbs, 1982). Adults, including workers, appear to benefit too.

However, as important as this is, I believe there is more on offer than enjoyment. Steckley (2005a) makes this case convincingly in relation to a residential school football team. In this exploration of the therapeutic potential of football, enjoyment and excitement are clearly evident. Many other important opportunities, including enhancing resilience and promoting pro-social values, arise and are surely more effective for being

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offered in this context rather than in more formal learning or talk-based activities. However, as residential child care takes place in increasingly small settings, the question arises as to whether it is still possible to use team games requiring numerous participants as a medium for both enjoyment and developmental or therapeutic purposes. Also worth considering are the ways in which more informal gatherings that do not involve being part of a team or a league might offer different benefits, as part of an alternative experience.

I will argue that, within the everyday experience of playing football together, developmental and therapeutic benefits abound, and are achieved with minimal planning, review or even discussion. The group simply creates the cultural conditions that enable and encourage participants to make positive contributions, both contributing to and benefitting from being part of the group.

In particular, I want to draw attention to the importance of connection and competence as features that, along with enjoyment of the game, attract participants of all ages. Connection exists at two levels. Firstly, there are important individual relationships. A few of these relationships existed prior to involvement in the game. The group provides a regular opportunity to maintain and develop these relationships. Others have developed as a direct result of involvement in the group, with some having now endured for a decade or more. In addition to individual relationships, there is also an important sense of connection to a community. As well as playing football together, members of this community regularly contact each other via a social media group to make arrangements and check up on anyone who has not been around lately. When we are watching football on TV in our separate homes, we are often connected to this community, as there is frequently discussion in the group as the match progresses. There is a Christmas night out, and occasional games involving other teams. The community is attentive in welcoming and including new members and is open to all, including people who, for various reasons, have not always been included or found positive connection in other parts of their lives. In this group, we all become known and accepted. This is surely the most important function of the group.

Competence is also multi-faceted. There is no doubt that many players significantly improve their football skills and performance

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and that they enjoy and are proud of this improvement and its acknowledgement within the group. Due to the cultural importance afforded to football, this is valuable as well as satisfying. More importantly, group members also develop and expand important social skills and caring capacities. For example, although it is common to emphasise the competitive element of team sports such as football, they are also activities in which the ability to cooperate with others is central to successful participation. Our version of football is designed to amplify the cooperative aspects and reduce, without entirely removing, the competitive elements necessary for an enjoyable game. With practice and support, all participants develop the ability to enjoy doing well alongside a capacity to appreciate others doing well and, on most occasions, to find a balance between the two.

As they move into adulthood, group members also develop skills in supporting younger and less experienced players. Jack Phelan (2001) refers to the process of providing a development opportunity such as this as experience arranging. In experience-arranging, the emphasis is on providing opportunities for young people to experience themselves differently. Becoming a person who supports and encourages others, and having this acknowledged, is a powerful, and sometimes novel, experience for some members of the group. We have been able to witness, and bear witness to, the growth of these capacities in ourselves and within our community over the years. As new members have arrived, most recently from a local homeless project and as newly arrived unaccompanied asylum seekers, the welcome offered by the group has gone beyond its originally intended recipients. Young people arriving in a new country, and often knowing nobody, have met people, sometimes from their own countries, for the first time in our community, and have made lasting friendships. For some group members, other areas of their lives also offer such opportunities. For others, belonging to this group might be a rare and significant opportunity to feel a sense of belonging and being valued by others. In return for offering this welcome, the game benefits from the introduction of new members who value their place in the group and contribute to its caring culture. In addition, widening our circle in this way enables a small residential service to continue to run a viable group.

Steckley (2005b) notes that workers participating in competitive activities with young people need to be able to manage their own competitive

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instincts and their need or desire to perform well in the activity in order to focus on facilitating success and enjoyment for the young people involved. This is certainly true for our group, but it is also something that we encourage, not only in workers, but in all group members, so that the focus can be enjoyment for all, not just the winners. Our experience suggests that modelling is more successful than instruction in achieving this aim.

Although Jack Phelan (2001) suggests that activities that are inherently competitive may be less useful and potentially problematic in terms of creating a 'free space' and allowing for 'experience-arranging' opportunities, our experience with football suggests that, in spite of this potential difficulty, it is possible to create cultures within longstanding activity groups that can alter the activity to make it more amenable to the aims of the group. In addition, I would argue that, by playing a version of a competitive sport together, we give ourselves and each other the opportunity to develop our abilities to manage our responses to competitive situations, as well as to manage feelings of success and failure in manageable doses. While we have all benefitted from this opportunity, for some it is perhaps only within this supportive environment that this could have been achieved.

Holthoff and Harbo (2011) note that when we engage in activities with young people, being competent in the activity is not essential. In fact, lacking competence can present different opportunities. One of our worker community members has demonstrated this magnificently, combining a significant lack of competence with an infectious sense of fun and enjoyment. This models some valuable attitudes to other members. These include that we can enjoy participating without needing to judge ourselves harshly or compare ourselves to others, and that, in doing so, we can accept ourselves as we are, while also enjoying any level of competence that we do achieve. Being extremely competent in other areas, he also demonstrates that we should not expect ourselves to be competent in every area of life and that we should not judge ourselves or others through consideration of competence in one activity. This worker also enables us to model to the group that, in this community, we accept each other as we are and that people of all levels of competence are welcome in the group. It would be difficult for other members of the group, with higher levels of skill and experience, to offer the kind of

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reassurance that his presence in the group provides to some of our more anxious or hesitant members.

The group has become one of those rare situations in our field in which the benefits to all members are significant, and the costs are minimal. Yet, the longevity of the group, as well as its composition, seems to be unusual, both within wider society and within a residential child care context. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that its longevity depends on a commitment to the group that might easily be derailed by other events, or by periods when interest in the group seems to be lower than usual. In our case, the reliable availability of the activity depends on at least one adult participating when they are not being paid to be there. This commitment, more than anything else, has enabled the group to persist through the inevitable difficult spells that have arisen over the course of more than two decades. In addition to its practical benefits, this commitment influences the perception of group members about why we, as adult workers and ex-workers, continue to be part of the group. We are there because we want to spend this time with the group enjoying this activity together. We come to play, not to supervise. Expanding the boundary of our contact with the group transforms the nature of our relationships with each other in ways that would not be possible if the basis of our contact was strictly on a paid-by-the-hour basis.

Most aspects of our game rely on our group culture being modelled by experienced group members and observed and copied by newer members. I have often been surprised, not only by the success of this approach, but by the speed with which it happens. Often, new players join the group and, without anyone explaining, quickly understand and adapt to its highly unusual culture. Even players who arrive speaking no English have little difficulty in quickly understanding the cultural norms therein. Two factors seem particularly important to this process. Firstly, workers model this consistently for others and are accepted by the group as role models. Secondly, additional culture carriers continually emerge within the group and model its cultural norms to others. Feedback also plays a role here. Positive feedback is even more likely to follow when players take actions that support the caring culture of the group than when they play successfully.

In addition to being accepted as role models, it is important that we are seen as ‘safe people’ by the group. There are two aspects to this. One is

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that the group can feel confident that nobody will come to harm or be treated badly through our behaviour. However, it is also important that we are seen as people who can act protectively to maintain the group as a community in which people feel safe with each other, as well as with us. This involves both setting the tone for acceptable behaviour towards each other and being accepted by the group as people who can gently but effectively manage very occasional difficulties when disagreements arise or tempers flare. Our success in achieving this has enabled us to welcome young people into the group who might otherwise feel fearful of being involved. It has also enabled us to safely and successfully bring people together into a group whom it may not have been wise to bring together in circumstances where safety had not been so successfully established.

It is worth thinking about the kinds of feedback that are useful in situations where people are mainly participating for enjoyment but will also gain satisfaction from developing competence. It is common for adult spectators who have brought a young person to the group to offer effusive and generalised 'praise' telling the young person they were 'fantastic'. This comes from a friendly place, but it is not the kind of feedback that is offered within the group. The message that we want to offer is not that people are fantastic, but that they do not need to be fantastic to belong here. For us, this is a message of acceptance that does not depend on performance. As Timothy Gallwey has pointed out, praise may be positive evaluation, but it is still evaluation. Gallwey argues that, above all, we should not tie performance to self-worth. Carl Rogers (1961) goes further, contrasting praise with acceptance, on the basis that acceptance does not rely on positive evaluation. Rogers suggests that acceptance (later described as unconditional positive regard) is a more powerful basis for positive change, due to the 'paradox of change' that 'when I accept myself as I am, then I can change' (Rogers, 1961, p. 17).

Having said that, feedback and acknowledgement are significant elements of our game, and, as with banter, are not hierarchical. As workers, from the beginning, we offered acknowledgement to each other, as well as to the young people. This modelling altered the meaning of feedback and the way it was given and received in our group.

Providing feedback that is specific and recognisable is important to us. Otherwise, we risk requiring people to choose between trusting their own perception of their experience or our effusive description of

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it. Focusing on something specific is also a good general guideline. Even better, matching the feedback to the person concerned seems worthwhile. When playing with a teammate who tends to hold onto the ball rather than pass it, I am more likely to acknowledge a good pass, rather than yet another shot. More importantly, feedback should not only be about performance. Some players contribute a lot to the activity by paying attention to connection, or encouraging the performance of others, especially younger players. This seems worth acknowledging too. I find acknowledgement a better fit for describing what we are trying to achieve than praise. I find Alfie Kohn's (1999) suggestion that praise and blame are, like punishments and rewards, two sides of the same coin, useful. For me, praise often feels like conditional approval, which does not fit well with the message we want to send. Nevertheless, acknowledgement shows that the helpful contribution is noticed and appreciated.

Despite its potential downsides, football has the advantage that it is comparatively easy to persuade people to engage with, and to sustain their engagement over time. This repeated experience seems to be an important element in its success in offering feelings of both connection and competence, that are reinforced strongly enough to compete with, or at least coexist alongside, more negative messages about and perceptions of ourselves. Although there have been several female group members over the years, it must be acknowledged that most group members have been male. Due to this concern, we also started a badminton group. Female membership was proportionately higher in this group, but it did not have the same longevity as the football group, and, in general, engagement was lower. This may be a difficulty that is not easy to overcome. However, it seems likely that providing additional opportunities, rather than restricting this opportunity due to its shortcomings, is likely to produce the best results.

Our experience in this group suggests that positive developments, such as the success and longevity of this group, and the benefits it has offered participants, may not always come about in the ways that we expect successful endeavours to emerge, develop, and be sustained. The popularity of various versions of plan-do-review frameworks might suggest that it is always necessary to know what we are trying to achieve before beginning to develop something new. However, for us, the cycle of planning, implementation, and evaluation, or the idea of planning for long-term outcomes did not play a significant role. One of the reasons

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for this is that it would have been impossible, over 20 years ago, to foresee the long-term success of this group. It would also have been impossible to expect, and difficult even to ask for, the level of sustained commitment, often unpaid, that contributed to its success. Creating and maintaining an environment in which positive things might develop and flourish seems to have been more important than planning for specific outcomes, even if it was not possible to predict with certainty what these positive developments might be and how long they might last. In some activities, as Frankl (2004, p. xv) suggests, 'success, like happiness, cannot be pursued, it must ensue'.

When I ask myself why people continue to belong to this group, sometimes for years, it seems best to start with my own experience. Part of the reason for using my own experience is that the last thing I would want to do to this group is to turn it into a setting in which organisers set 'learning outcomes', and participants are asked to complete questionnaires about the benefits of participation. Instead, I have turned up over 1000 times to experience and witness these things first-hand.

I am not particularly good (or bad) at playing football, but I enjoy it. I enjoy trying to play well, but, for me, enjoyment is as important as winning, and winning is not just about the scoreline. I enjoy belonging to this group and offering a sense of belonging to others. I feel a sense of responsibility to this group, which I want others to feel too. I believe that this is also true for others, and that the personal commitments that we make to each other are more fundamental than simply enjoying playing a game of football together. It would be perfectly possible for me, and others, to enjoy a similar experience with other people, entirely separate from our work life and previous work commitments. However, the opportunity to create our own welcoming space in which we and others can grow and develop offers a much more rewarding experience, requiring little more of us than to turn up, be ourselves, and, perhaps, become more than the sum of our parts.

Looking back over the past 25 years, involvement in this group feels like a significant positive experience for me. I believe this has also been the case for many others. It has cost little and provided much, especially in terms of connection and relationships. It is a game with many winners and no losers. It's football, but not as we know it.

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About the author

Phil Coady has worked in various roles within and connected to residential child care, within the public, private, and third sectors, for most of the past 44 years. Having started by both living and working within a residential community, Phil developed an interest in the development of significant and enduring residential child care relationships and the active use of boundaries that can enable and support relationships. He has also had a long-term interest in the use of shared activities, including sports and outdoor activities, as opportunities for shared growth, learning,

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development, and connection as well as positive experiences of achievement and success.

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