



The Football Workshop

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Context

The Football Workshop Wageningen in The Netherlands originated from a care farm where people with mild intellectual disabilities and challenging behaviour spent time for day activities. Passionate about football, two social workers and a growing number of service users left the care farm to set up sheltered employment at the local football club SKV. Interestingly, this endeavour is at the intersection of sheltered employment, leisure and community.

Here, the service users are called Football Workers and support the volunteers who perform maintenance work at the club, such as upkeep of buildings, parking, pitches, goals, and the surroundings. To date, the group of Football Workers is composed of young men aged 18 to 30 years with a mild intellectual disability, occasionally some with additional psychiatric disorder or rehabilitating from substance abuse. Adjacent to SKV is another football club, a golf club, and a rugby club. In spite of its proximity, mutual contact is scarce or absent.

The Football Workshop aims to discover the Football Workers dreams and to help them materialize it. The dreams encompass, for example, of becoming an assistant trainer at a the local football club, providing training activities to children at the club or children with disabilities, working at a local radio station, and volunteering at a professional football association. Dreams also consist in the perspective of converting into more instrumental ambitions such as "what skills do I need to find a paid job". Most of these dreams have been achieved.

Perspective

The basic idea behind The Football Workshop is to help young adults realize their dreams. Dreams are the starting point and football constitutes the means to bring their dream closer. In fact, it boils down to participating in society and experiencing social recognition, two cardinal elements of social inclusion.

Social recognition

Axel Honneth (1996) thoroughly analysed the phenomenon of social recognition and in particular the struggle for it. He distinguishes three modes of recognition - emotional support, cognitive support and social esteem, and three forms of recognition - primary relationships (i.e. love and friendship), legal relations (rights) and community of value (i.e. solidarity). One can attain feelings of social recognition through social valued roles. The Social Role Valorisation (SRV) is a theory defined as the use of culturally valued means to enable, enhance, maintain, and/or defend social valued roles for people at value risk (Wolfensberger 2000). The overall goal of SRV is to create social roles for devalued populations that enhance their image and personal competencies (Aubrey et al 2013). At the Football Workshop people with mild intellectual disabilities perform valued social roles such as a football player, a team member, a champion, the striker, the keeper, the referee. At training sessions and during the matches they partner up with the social worker who becomes, for a moment, an equal team member. It is customary to address the young men at the Football Workshop as the *football workers*, their official job title. Besides the football matches they play, feelings of social recognition are acquired by what follows from these games. For example, one of the football workers, Nitesh, welcomes the opponents, comes up with warm-up exercises for the opponents, acts as their coach and determines the line-up. He enjoys

being coach of the visiting team. He is prepared for such task and the visiting teams generally agree with him being their coach. The football workers thus usurp leadership themselves, and when successful, the football workers radiate growing confidence by expressing "I can do that too, I can work with visiting teams" on the same level as the Football Workshop social workers and the community sports coaches. Next to the sports activities, the football workers also organize presentations to a variety of audiences, for instance community sports coaches, about the Football Workshop project and their job activities. Others share stories about their personal life, their passion, their work at the football workshop and their ambitions. They also convey information about what it means to have a mild intellectual disability. These presentations are aimed at promoting awareness about intellectual disability. In general, these gatherings are well appreciated and the response visibly affects the football workers positively. Again, one can see the "pride in their faces" and perceive an "I belong" behaviour displaying increased self-confidence. The football workers are proud of the project they are part of.

Inclusion and non-segregation

Inclusion seems a mission impossible if policy and practice maintain segregated settings. Hence, the Football Workshop endeavours for inclusion in a non-segregated setting. General Comment 4 (UN 2016:4) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities poses segregation as undesirable and defines it as something occurring when services are "provided in separate environments designed or used to respond to a particular or various impairments, in isolation from [others] without disabilities". Integration is defined as "a process of placing persons with disabilities in existing mainstream [institutions or services], as long as the former can adjust to the standardized requirements of such institutions [or services]" (UN 2016:4). Lastly, the General Comment 4 defines inclusion as a "process of systematic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, [...] methods, approaches, structures and strategies [...] to overcome barriers with a vision serving to provide [all persons with disabilities] an equitable and participatory [...] experience and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences" (UN 2016:4). Some core features of an inclusive environment are "whole systems approach", a "whole environment approach" and a "whole person approach". As regards to the Football Workshop, it seeks inclusion, but has done this in isolation to the mainstream environment as at yet there has not been any modification in content, structures and strategies in the mainstream environment, i.e. the local football club SKV, that enables and sustains inclusion. The Football Workshop has moved there, inserted itself in that environment, and attempts to participate in the daily routine of the local football club. They associate with the local football club, but remain a separate unit that makes use of the facilities.

Convivial encounters

Non-segregated environments allow for convivial encounters with others visiting the local football club such as volunteers, club members, children, their parents, visiting football teams, random guests. Bigby and Wiesel (2019) put forward convivial encounters as promising opportunities in furthering the social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities and purport that encounters are integral to what it means to be socially included. Convivial encounters are marked by friendliness or hospitality. Bigby and Wiesel (2019) devised a typology of encounters containing shared identification, everyday recognition, and becoming known. Opposite to that, they place three less inclusive types of encounter, to wit, exclusionary encounters, encounters in a distinct social space, and non-encounters. Shared identification means shared activities, shared interest, shared time and a kind of "agreement between people to sustain a single focus of attention" (Goffman in Bigby and Wiesel 2019: 40). Everyday recognition consists in fleeting exchanges. These moments are short and involve friendly interactions between the stranger and the people with intellectual disabilities. However, there is no opportunity for shared identification. Becoming known ensues from repeated encounters and the relation may evolve from being strangers to becoming acquaintances or even friends. On the other hand, encounters can be less inclusive or outright exclusionary. Exclusionary encounters are defined as when "people with intellectual disabilities are met with impatience, fear, condescending remarks, or actions that single them out as not fully belonging or welcome to the community" (Bigby and Wiesel 2019: 43).

Encounters within a distinct social space are not necessarily exclusionary, yet may be little inclusive. Distinct social spaces are more concerned with specialist places, settings where solely professional social workers, people with intellectual disabilities and their families meet, even though the spaces are situated in mainstream settings. Non-encounters imply the absence of any interaction, not even a wink or greeting, and can become exclusionary when non-encounters are the only type of encounter people with intellectual disabilities experience in public spaces (Bigby and Wiesel 2019).

The settings where the Football Workshop carries out its work offers opportunities for meetings. These activities and related potential encounters can be divided into three categories: possible encounters during everyday activities on and around the football pitches and the clubhouse, and possible encounters during regularly - almost weekly - played football matches against visitor teams. These matches are initiated by the Football Workshop social workers as well as employers and employees of companies, political parties, and higher education institutions. The encounters happen during visits to organizations and companies with whom contact was established through the football matches, sponsorship, obligations arising from social entrepreneurship and from sheer interest.

This mainly involves two forms of encounters: everyday recognition and shared identification. The first form takes place occasionally. The second form is only observable during and inextricably linked to the football matches. Everyday recognition occurs during working hours, such as maintenance of the pitches and goals, clubhouse, terrace and parking spaces. Gradually more people within the football club SKV recognize the football workers of the Football Workshop. Club members as well as the adjoining golf club, increasingly dare to enter into some contact that manifests itself in a brief contact in the form of a greeting, a joke or a compliment for the work done. These conversations remain light and superficial. Nevertheless, such encounters have led, among other things, to the fact that a club member has now volunteered to help with maintenance work and that the neighbouring golf club initiates contact and offers assignments such as producing birdhouses for their golf park.

Approach

Underpinned by social inclusion theory, a mix of interventions and approaches is available to the social worker. The Football Workshop's initiators, Wouter Kolthek and Mark Tjihuis, are social workers employed by the service provider 's Heerenloo. They both have been fulfilling an intrapreneurial role, i.e. undertaking a new business activity within a company or organization (Bosma et al 2011). Intrapreneurs are inside entrepreneurs who follow the goal of the organization. Central to the vision of 's Heerenloo is the recognition of everyone's uniqueness and human need for personal growth and development. This ties in with the pursuit of inclusion. At the Football Workshop an eclectic approach of support is employed constituting the solution focused approach, strengths based approach, outreach community care and stresses the practice of human dignity as one of the primary social work values. After briefly addressing these approaches, we zoom in on skills needed to execute the work at the Football Workshop.

Solution Focused Approach

Solution focused approaches originate in the Solution Focused Brief Therapy and have strong ties with positive psychology. A vast variety of methods and interventions have been developed each adhering to the philosophy of positive psychology and the solution focused principles (Bannink 2009). Solution Focused work is a future-focused, goal-directed approach that highlights the importance of searching for solutions rather than focusing on problems. Its core question comprises: how do we achieve what we want to achieve? Some tenets of the solution focused approach are (Insoo Kim Berg 2004, Bannink 2009):

- Resistance is not a useful concept. It suggests that someone does not want to change and puts lack of willingness to cooperate, by definition, with the other person.
- There is always cooperation. The solution-focused professional adapts to the client's way of working together, not the other way around. Bannink (2009:22) compares the collaborative relationship to a "solution-focused tango" where both dance partners are constantly connecting with each other.

- Change is inevitable and only a small change is needed. Clients are encouraged to see and appreciate small changes. This nurtures self-confidence and the belief to have an influence on one's own life. More small changes will follow.
- If it is not broken, don't fix it. Theories, models and philosophies of intervention are not important or useful if the client has already solved the problem.
- Looking for exceptions. All problems have exceptions, that is, when the problem could have happened but somehow did not.
- Asking questions rather than telling clients what to do. Solution-focused questions are a large part of the social workers' toolkit. The specific solution-focused questions prompt the client to contemplate transformation and help to change his life in the desired direction.
- Future is negotiated and created. Rather than emphasizing the past mistakes, misfortune or trauma, it is the basic belief of the Solution Focused approach that focusing on solutions is much more productive and empowering than focusing on past events.

These guiding principles correspond with the strengths based approach.

Strengths Based Approach

Alike the solution focused approach, strengths based approaches stem from positive psychology and value the capacity, skills, knowledge, connections and potential in individuals and communities. It focuses on strengths, however, does not ignore challenges. Struggles are spun into strengths. Practitioners working according to strengths based principles explicitly collaborate with the people with intellectual disabilities encouraging them to do things for themselves. Some guiding principles serve as the foundation of the strength-based approach. Each person possesses a uniqueness that helps him or her evolve and move along his or her journey. These unique characteristics can be either someone's potential, strengths and capabilities. The focus is on individual strengths, not on the limitations. People can change their behaviour and organize and shape their lives themselves. The perception is that a person's environment proffers an abundance of possibilities. What receives attention or focus becomes what someone strives for and eventually becomes a reality (Bohlmeijer et al 2013, Stoerkel 2020).

Outreach community care

The essence of outreach practice is establishing contact with people in their own living environment, despite assumed needs, have no (positive) contact (anymore) with social services, nor do they ask for help. Practitioners actively make contact instead of waiting. Outreach practice is aimed at re-establishing contact with and strengthening the connection between the individual and society. Contact can be directive and unsolicited, but nevertheless seeks to restore and strengthen self-determination and quality of life (Van Doorn & Hoijsink 2017). Entering into a working relationship with people is paramount in outreach work: outreachers are close to the person concerned and their network.

Eclectic approach of support at the Football Workshop

At the Football Workshop, social workers follow the principles of the above approaches. Usually these are tailored to the local context and specific support needs of the people with intellectual disabilities. A first example is the intervention "Op eigen benen" (On your own feet). The goal of this intervention is to strengthen self-esteem and self-reliance of people with intellectual disabilities, enabling them to shape their lives in their own way and get the best out of themselves. It is about effectuating personal control over one's own life, especially in the areas of (independent) living and work. Depending on the service user's wish concerning housing or work, the coach i.e. social worker, maps out the service users competencies with help of the INVRA-Living or INVRA-Labor tools (INVRA is the acronym of INVENTORY of Reliance Aspects). Using the INVRA tools, competence in self-care and health, household, associating with others, and self-esteem is measured. Insight into these competencies may motivate the person with intellectual disability to apply or further develop competencies. Subsequently, the coach and service user formulate learning goals and design a personal training program (Brink 2011).

A second example the Football Workshop has embraced is the Life Goals intervention. This method is aimed at developing various practical and social skills through sports. The Football Workshop has incorporated the act of developing employee skills i.e. practical and social skills, in their daily football exercises and regular football matches. The football workers learn to prepare and lead the exercises for the whole team, they learn to coach each other during the matches, and learn to practice social skills through playing matches against strangers.

In addition to the football training and matches, the social workers encourage the football workers to talk about and reflect on what happened on the pitch, for example teamwork (e.g. saying "time" to your team mate means he has time to keep the ball and look around before passing), what went well, what did not go well, felt frustrations, a difference of opinion or argument. The ultimate purpose is to have the football workers find alternatives to deal with such situations and feelings. Doing so, the football workers learn communication skills such as engaging in a conversation, expressing thoughts and feelings, and dealing with boundaries set by others, for instance some workers wish to play football till the end and do not accept being substituted. Skills development is measured regularly with the help of the INVRA tools. Life Goals has its own monitor, but is no longer used at the Football Workshop. Some indicators are health (for example, to assess whether the football workers can maintain the physical training, which gives an indication about fitness and the ability to play an entire match or part of it), confidence, cooperation, communication, stamina and perseverance, independence and concentration.

Social roles

The Football Workshop team is composed of social workers, interns, volunteers and the football workers. In the competitions, the social worker has an equal social role, to that of a teammate. All teammates share winning the game as the common interest. During and after the football matches, giving and receiving feedback is reciprocal: the football workers give feedback to the intern, volunteer and social worker, and vice versa. While playing the football match, being a teammate prevails as the social role of the social workers. Nevertheless the role of social worker remains, albeit being moved to the background. Occasionally the social workers role is called upon in case a teammate cannot control himself emotionally well. In so doing, the social workers at the Football Workshop perform "merging roles".

Absenteeism and outreach community care

Absence from work is a recurring occurrence due to illness, fatigue, stress, lost motivation, private or personal problems (e.g. in the relational sphere or financial problems) or because football workers walk away angry and leave the training session or work activities unannounced because of a difference of opinion or a conflict. What is the wise thing to do? What is the social workers' responsibility? Keeping work demarcated and not interfering with other social work services providing professional support in other areas of life? Such demarcation can be strictly observed, but can also be viewed as an invitation for interdisciplinary collaboration. This is where outreach community care comes into play. Social workers at the Football Workshop "cross the disciplinary border" of separated work areas, related tasks and responsibilities and working hours. Engaging with people with intellectual disabilities is paramount and is demonstrated by staying in touch with them in various ways. Showing interest by visiting or making a phone call when someone is ill, providing additional - volunteer - services such as a car ride from home to work i.e. the Football Workshop when someone's car is broken, public transport is delayed or out of order, willingness to talk to someone outside of working hours. The Football Workshop social workers are sometimes literally on the doorstep of the football workers home so as to not let absenteeism take its course. Outreach care is strongly committed to the relationship and thus requires moving into the world of the other.

Social work values: human dignity, autonomy, self-determination

Values tell us what we hold to be important and shape the way that social workers practice and how they impact upon the lives of the service users they work to support (Bell and Hafford-Letchfield 2015). Quinn and Degener (2002) suggest four values – dignity, autonomy, equality and solidarity - being of particular importance in the context of disability. Reerink et al (2017) argue for dignity as a point of departure for social workers' practice, placing "expectant acceptance" at centre stage. This holds a continuous collaborative exploration of the possibilities to get to know and expand the preferences of the person with a disability. Dignity is here reflected in a core value 'to flourish' proposed by Beernink-Wissink (2015). In collaboration with people with disability, social workers seek to find a balance between feeling at home, feeling comfortable, enjoyment, feeling safe and secure so as to nourish flourishing and capitalizing on the capabilities one has to its avail. The Football Workshop puts dignity into practice branding it "van mens tot mens" ("person to person") featuring a firm empathic approach. This holds, for instance, when a social worker does not call the Football Worker to account for his absence since there is a plethora of reasons for being absent, be it loss of motivation, undergoing emotionally hard times, facing practical challenges such as arranging a relocation, visiting a hospital, taking a child to school or family and so forth. The Football Workers are given space to deal with such issues. Wouter, social worker at The Football Workshop: "We do not judge them on absenteeism, neither do we interfere in a paternalistic manner nor do we express our discontent. Such courses of action are experienced as getting abandoned. In contrast, we remain vigilant and engaged. In the long run, we build mutual trust, promote self-confidence in the Football Worker, and cultivate commitment in the Football Workplace."

Skills

A wide range of skills apply to social work and the Football Workshop in particular. Mantell and others (2013) have mapped out skill sets including managing self (reflective practice, self-presentation, skills for self-management), building relationships (skills for empowerment, participation, and advocacy, skills for engagement, communication skills), working with others (skills for collaborative working, skills for group work, negotiation skills) and making sense of a complex world (applying legislation and policy, assessing need, skills in working with risk, and decision-making). Skills specifically mentioned by the Football Workshop social workers comprise of *switching skills* (ability to switch between all kinds of situations, tasks, activities, events, keeping an overview), *anticipation skills* (anticipating group dynamics between the Football Workers; unrest, quarrels, problems between the workers), *patience* (being patient and leaving space to be themselves, allowing the Football Workers to express themselves using their slang, sharing and discussing topics of their interest, videos, allowing them to do "crazy things" and to say "wrong" things), and *tolerance*. The latter does not imply no bounds in what a person can say or do. Instead, it signifies that you need to allow political views you disagree with and which may be insulting, discriminating or undemocratic. Wouter Kolthek, social worker at The Football Workshop: "That's what the Football Workers need, the freedom of expression in their fashion. In some cases it is also a lack of vocabulary to express feelings and opinions in a more respectable manner. Nevertheless, the Football Workers must know limits, so I let them know where I stand."

It comes down to skills of building relationships that are linked to a lifeworld-oriented approach (Nachtergaele et al 2017); being interested in the social environment of the person, genuinely paying attention to what motivates and concerns them, their leisure activities, the music they listen to, their thoughts on world issues, and so on. In so doing, the social worker enables himself to easier engage with the Football Workers and join them in jokes and antics. Additionally, *perseverance* and *professional self-confidence* are emphasized. Working with the Football Workers requires the social worker to persevere and have confidence in his pursuit. The success of the Football Workshop is contingent on the Football Workers. However, they do not constitute a stable factor. That is to say, you must reckon with absenteeism and the transfer of the football workers to other sheltered or unsheltered workplaces. Nevertheless, keeping confidence in the Football Workshop project and in the Football Workers is imperative. Perseverance also lurks in the guts to call the Football Workers and collaborating companies such as the local football club to account for their behavior and agreements made.

Impact and implications

We turn to elaborate on some impacts conveyed through lived experiences shared by the Football Workshop social workers, and evaluations conducted by Stichting Life Goals Nederland (2019).

Social recognition and emotional wellbeing

According to the Stichting Life Goals evaluation (2019), three quarters of the Football Workers have developed more self-confidence, two thirds demonstrate increased control of their own emotions and 50 percent reports a more positive attitude towards life. These results are prompted by the activities and valued social roles offered by the Football Workshop for they match the Football Worker's motivation, passion, and identity. Meeting such basic needs nurtures feelings of pride, in particular when they score a goal, win a football match or are approached as 'the football player'. Wouter Kolthek: "When a match is lost, it is a matter of processing, dealing with the loss for half an hour, being silent and discussing the loss. After that, the emotions have subsided again. The football workers have had many experiences of losing and setbacks in their lives, not just in football. In that respect, they have developed thick skin and resilience. On some occasions it is decided to include the opponent in on the personal stories of the Football Workers, that is to say, that we prepare the visiting team for their opponents, the football workshop. For example, "you take a little care of the boys, let them win" bearing in mind that these young people have experienced so many setbacks in their lives." Nevertheless, the competitive element remains. The football workers do not receive the victory as a gift.

A more positive attitude towards life connects with sense of purpose and enhanced pastimes since participating in the Football Workshop. Previously, most football workers spent their time at home, facing (imminent) boredom, and experiencing a lack of meaningful activities. That is foregone since they now have plentiful activities during the week. Social roles and attached activities provided by the Football Workplace appear meaningful for the people with intellectual disability due to a better match with their passion, desires and identity. People with intellectual disability learn all kinds of communicative and social skills partly thanks to the football matches. They demonstrate and develop these skills when they welcome the visiting teams, play and evaluate the match. For instance, dealing with setbacks, frustration when things do not work out on the football pitch. It is questionable, however, what the Football Workers get out of these encounters. One of the social workers notes that the Football Workers reckon they do not get much back from the local football club. A simple thank you is still rare. Attention is chiefly focused on what is not good, less to what is good.

Encounters

The reported increase in self-confidence and positive attitude towards life can be explained by the new encounters the Football Workers have and enhanced meaningful fulfillment of their everyday lives to which the Football Workshop is contributing. All Football Workers have built up new social contacts. The football matches amount to significantly more encounters between people with and without intellectual disability. This does not, however, result in network expansion with people without intellectual

disabilities or more sustainable relationships with community members. There are recurring encounters and events such as the football matches and mini-tournaments. Some opponents now initiate football matches against the Football Workshop suggesting a certain degree of reciprocity. It should be noted, however, that these contacts remain convivial and that the encounters occur predominantly between the persons with mild intellectual disability. The encounters are not based on mere reciprocity. In effect, in most cases it remains charitable or even exploitation in the case that the visitor team's motivation is primarily for business purposes such as merchandising, making good appearances with social activities, or dutifully meeting the requirements of social return on investment (Bredewold 2014; Bredewold et al 2016).

Opportunities to labor force participation

Finally, active participation in the Football Workshop provides perspectives for various work and daytime activities, better formulated as labor participation opportunities. Hitherto the successes have been limited to voluntary work: a Football Worker compiles music lists for the local radio station, and in collaboration with three high school students he produces a radio program for the same local radio and furthermore determines Instagram content for the local broadcaster RTV Rijnstreek. Another success story is a Football Worker assisting in maintenance work at Vitesse, a professional top football club, for two half-days a week. It comprises of similar work being executed at the Voetbalwerkplaats. In addition, two Football Workers support “walking football” activities intended for seniors, which disallows running during the football game. Two football workers are close to entering the labor force: One football worker nearly obtained a permanent paid job, but due to Covid19 pandemic this opportunity got postponed. Another football worker is pursuing a BBL education¹ in order to enter the labor force. For a few other football workers, the Football Workshop served as intermediate station to return to work elsewhere or to resume education.

Future directions

The Football Workshop expresses three ambitions. As yet, the football matches accommodate encounters with community members. However, the initiative remains with the Football Workshop which reflects a one-sided relationship between the Football Workshop and the community. A strongly felt ambition consists in achieving reciprocity with the community, with the organizations that engage in football matches. This implies initiative for playing football matches also be taken by the community rather than merely by the Football Workshop, and where encounters extend to more than simply playing football, having a snack afterwards and handing out merchandising. Consequently, this moves beyond charity or exploitation and reaches towards reciprocity or even sustainable reciprocity (Bredewold 2014). A second ambition is to accomplish internships and employment in the community for people with mild intellectual disability, the football matches thus operating as stepping stone. Lastly, the Football Workshop should operate without being dependent on the initiator. At present, the initiator remains the prime organizer which renders the future of the entity uncertain. In addition, there is a desire to spread and put into practice the conception of the Football Workshop nationwide, that is, utilizing football as a means to accomplish the dreams of young people with mild intellectual disabilities.

¹ BBL education consists in a work-based pathway offering a combination of work and study which is an option in basic vocational education in The Netherlands.

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