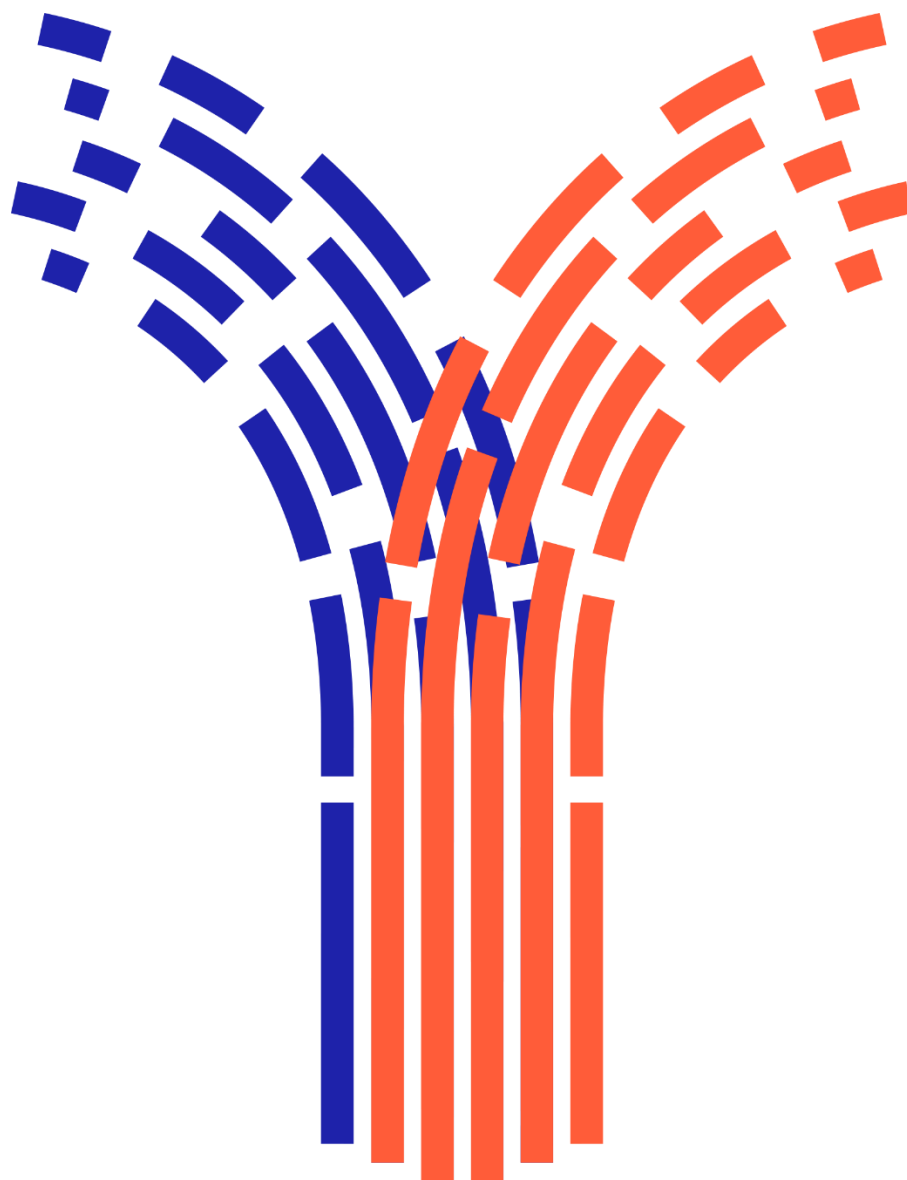




Birley Academy: Case Study



June 2021

Believing in every child's future

Birley Academy Case Study

Context

Birley Academy is a Secondary school located in the south east of Sheffield. It is part of the L.E.A.D Academy Trust. They embody four core principles; strong leadership at every level; empowering every pupil to aim high; giving every pupil the opportunity to achieve and constantly driving for improvement.

The school has an Ofsted rating of requires improvement (January 2020) and has over a fifth of young people eligible for Free School Meals (21.7%) which is slightly higher than the national average in England. There are just over 1000 young people aged 11 to 16 on roll.

The PE department is relatively small consisting of four members of staff, three of which have additional responsibilities around school. They offer young people a variety of sports including Gaelic football, Rugby, Futsal, trampolining, T-Tennis and Yoga. The school also run the Sports Leader qualification giving older students opportunities to volunteer in local primary schools.

This case study report was informed by a visit to the school in June 2021, an observation of the football club, two focus groups with girls in year 7 and 8 and an interview with the Head of PE.

Activities

The biggest challenge the PE department face is teachers' time and capacity to support extra-curricular clubs. They work creatively to consider potential solutions to this challenge. For example, the school work with the Sheffield Hallam University volunteer scheme where sports degree students are connected with the school and come in and run sports sessions. In addition the teacher is exploring potential parental support moving forwards with parents coming in to run sessions where appropriate.

Football

For boys there is an extensive competition offer in the local area, with regular fixtures. This is currently less so for girls, with more tournament style competitions on a less regular basis as not all schools have girls football teams. Over the last few years they have seen the number of girls who play football outside of school in the community decline. The school prioritises running the extra-curricular football club for the girls as not all of them have the opportunity to access football outside of school so the club ensures that

This Girl Can Week

This year for This Girl Can week the school put on a programme of activities both within curriculum and extra-curricular time. They launched the week in assemblies to promote the activities for all girls and provided incentives such as house reward points for attending. Girls at the school were given the choice of what types of activities they would like to do. In the focus groups some girls felt that in future This Girl Can weeks they would like more options to choose from. Having the programme for the week gave it a celebratory feel and many of the girls who tried new clubs that week have continued attending.

they get some chance to experience and play football. The girls football club is the most popular extra-curricular club they offer at Birley.

Impact

Engaging the Disengaged

Katie did not really engage with curriculum PE, often forgetting her kit or not attending. The Head of PE noticed this and used the girls' football curriculum block to try and get to know her better. Through this he learnt that she engaged in sports outside of school like boxing and fitness and was actually a very competent sportswoman. Just by having a conversation and making the time to get to know her better enabled the teacher to re-engage her in PE where she now brings her kit and joins in with the sessions. She has also started attending the extra-curricular girls football club and is developing in her confidence.

'I don't want the club to only be on one day I want it twice a week! Not just twice a week – everyday!' Girls' Football club participant

'They are telling us they are loving it by their attendance by them turning up.' Head of PE

Opportunity for informal fun

Girls felt that having fun was a big motivator for themselves and their peers to be active. They enjoy the girls' football club as it provides them with a safe space to have fun with their friends. The key things they talked about missing during lockdown were playing football and being with their friends – the football club provides them with an opportunity for both. Girls have started to bring their friends along to the club which is a positive sign that they are enjoying the club and want to share the experience with their friends.

'We just enjoy it more and we build up memories.' Girls' Football club participant

Social mixing

A key impact of the football club is bringing together a group of different girls from different friendship groups, backgrounds and abilities. Girls are talking to and playing with girls that they may not otherwise have done so with. In addition there is a small group of girls who attend the club who are new to both the UK and the school, being part of the club has given them the chance to meet other girls who have similar experiences as them.

Role models

The lead teacher identified the important role that role models make to girls engagement in activities. They are hoping that the work they are doing here will support girls in the future to see other girls 'like them' playing. This further highlights the importance and benefits of having a varied group of girls engaged.

Making Friends

Talisa only moved to the UK in November 2020 and has found that football and being part of the girls' football club has given her the opportunity to mix with different girls as well as meeting girls who have had similar experiences as her. She was born in Sri Lanka, where she was able to play football but it was mostly mixed playing with boys. Talisa talked about how sometimes girls feel shy when they are wearing shorts and the boys are watching. This reiterates the importance of the girls' only space enabling girls to feel comfortable to play.

'if we have a new shy year 7 who is thinking about football well actually she may now do it because she sees these other kids who are accessing it' Head of PE

Increasing Opportunities

Akilah has recently returned to the UK from Iraq with her family and siblings who also attend the school. The girls' football club gives them the opportunity to play football, something they would not have been able to do in Iraq. The girls' only football club provides them with a safe space to play and feel comfortable being active with their friends.

Skill development

The girls identified that going to the football club not only enabled them to develop their football skills but also key life skills like confidence, teamwork and aspirations. Girls were aware of the opportunities that playing football could provide them with, whether that was playing professionally or commentating or coaching.

Challenging perceptions

Girls felt that generally the boys at the school had more opportunity to play 'informal' football for example before school and at lunchtime. However they felt very strongly that both boys and girls should

be able to play football and that equal access is important. Although not many of the girls felt confident enough to play with the boys at these times, they felt that by having a successful club and team they would be able to begin to challenge negative perceptions that some boys have around girls playing football and increase the profile of girls football within the school.

Recommendations for other schools

Provide a girls only space

Providing a safe space for girls to play is key. One where they do not fear judgement from others and where they feel they can 'fall down and get up again' without being laughed at or embarrassed. This was especially key for the newer players who want the chance to improve their skills first before playing in front of others.

'They've told me they feel safe when they are girls only.' Head of PE

Understand your girls

Take the time to understand the target audience and their barriers, then work to remove as many as you can. Each group, cohort and individual will be different and be experiencing different barriers and enablers. A simple example of this at Birley school was that initially the girls did not want to play as they did not like putting on the smelly bibs that the boys had used. The school invested in a new set of bibs for the girls which removed that barrier quickly and easily.

'Knocking down the barriers till there are no more and then generally you get there' Head of PE

It is also important to know what the girls are aspiring for and not project assumptions onto them. For example, the boys playing want to progress to play competitive matches whereas this may not be what the girls are aiming for. They

may be happy continuing just to play with their friends. Empower opportunities for student voice, ensure staff listen to the girls and understand what they want.

Importance of family influence

The importance of family influence was identified by both the teacher and girls. Girls felt that playing football with their family was a key part of why they played and enjoyed football. The girls talked about playing football with their families during lockdown as being really important. Lack of family engagement or support was identified by the girls as a potential barrier to playing.

For the teacher, getting the buy in of families and guardians was key to support the girls to engage and maintain participation. This was something across all sports and clubs, with sometimes young people not realising it was okay for them to stay and participate.



Next steps

There was a mixed picture on where girls wanted the football club to progress to. Some of the more confident players were keen to play more competitive fixtures however some of the newer players were nervous about this. They enjoyed the club as an opportunity for them to develop their skills further until they felt ready to play in front of others and competitively.

Moving forwards the school want to continue to embed a real culture of activity in the school. They want to use their current baseline to continue to build engagement and participation for all young people and provide more leadership opportunities for older students to then be seen as role models for new students.

YST RESEARCH

The Youth Sport Trust (YST) is a national children's charity passionate about creating a future where every child enjoys the life-changing benefits that come from play and sport. YST Research offers research, analysis, insight and evaluation services to organisations with an interest in the wider children and young people's sector. Our research expertise is focussed on improving the wellbeing of children and young people through sport and physical activity.

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