

Perseverance and Persistence: My Laidlaw Summer 1 Research Experience

Conducting my research study was one of the hardest things I have ever done but has ultimately been a truly enlightening experience. Despite the challenges and the setbacks, or rather because of them, my Laidlaw summer one research experience has been one characterised by a great deal of personal growth.

To explain this growth properly, I ought first to outline the research question and personal experiences that informed the foundations of my research project. Having played with and volunteered for Sport Against Racism Ireland (SARI) - an Irish not-for-profit organisation dedicated to inclusion, diversity, and equality through sport - since the age of twelve, I have been committed to the idea that sport is one of our most powerful social tools. I have witnessed football bring people together in a way that would have not been possible without it, and seen friendships form and flourish across societal, cultural, and racial divisions. However, I have also competed in tournaments where the camaraderie on the pitch has not translated to inclusion off of it. Sport can certainly be an effective vehicle for the promotion of social inclusion, but it is not a vehicle that is entirely impervious to the prejudices that permeate wider society.

Having spent the last two summers volunteering with SARI at their Football for Unity tournament, a four-week football tournament held across Dublin's north-east inner city with the explicit aim of showcasing football as an educational tool which can bring communities together, the Laidlaw programme offered me the perfect opportunity to examine the efficacy of the tournament in achieving said aim. Setting out to test the oft-quoted narrative that describes sport as an arena of racial and social equality (Green & Hardman, 2000), as well as a positive tool for the integration of migrant communities (European Commission, 2007), I decided to utilise a mixed-method approach aimed at discovering whether or not long-lasting social connections and strong feelings of social inclusion were fostered by non-Irish natives through their participation in the Football for Unity Tournament. I was excited at the prospect of leading an independent project for the first time, as well as building upon my new understandings of leadership as informed by our first two LEAD days.

Before I could start gathering any data of my own, I decided to conduct a condensed literature review. I set aside my first week of the initial six scheduled project weeks to review existing peer-reviewed articles and various grey matter on the topic of Irish immigration and sport as an integrative tool. This first stage was overwhelming at times, with the sheer mass of papers and articles seeming quite intimidating to a first-time researcher. I struggled to sort through what was relevant to my specific project lens at first, but as I read more I became more confident of my research's place within the established canon. I found it really difficult to balance my social and research time during this stage. I found myself constantly worried that I was not devoting enough time to the project, which in turn led to feelings of inadequacy that negatively impacted upon my motivation levels. Taking on a self-directed project such as this, I found myself disoriented by the lack of set criteria and the absence of the strict rubric normally provided for college assignments.

It was only when I checked in with my fellow Laidlaw scholars that I realised these fears were not unique to me. As quite an independent person, I usually prefer to work on my own. Previously, my idea of leadership has always been about leading by example and completing hard tasks solo. Prior to this experience I would not have considered group work an important aspect of academic research, but surprisingly I found the regular meetings of our Action Learning Set (ALS) extremely helpful. The ALS opened my eyes to the value of talking things through in a constructive manner with others and I got some great advice about checking in with my supervisor regularly. I have come to realise that leadership is not something accomplished on one's own, but rather something that is only successful when practiced with others. Instead of the typical 'solitary businessman in smart suit' image of a leader, I now see a leader as more of a collective entity within which a culture of support and respect is cultivated. I believe I am now more open to accepting outside help and communicating my fears, improving on a goal I had set out in my Personal Development Plan before beginning the research project.

Despite going over my allotted time for my literature review, I went into stage two of the project with renewed confidence and motivation. Having intended to conduct a mixed-method research project from the first proposal, the second step in the project involved creating a quantitative survey that I could distribute to participants in the tournament. I drew up a first draft, incorporating questions that touched upon the themes explored in the

literature. The draft survey included 15 questions in total and took less time to create than I had anticipated. It was very satisfying to use the information I had collected during my literature review to formulate actual survey questions, making sure each question was relevant and theoretically-grounded. As somewhat of a perfectionist, I had finally reached a point in my project where I was happy with what I had done so far. This satisfaction of a job considered well done translated into a greater sense of self-confidence as I organised the first face-to-face meeting with my supervisor since the project had begun. Naturally quite shy, I felt more able to discuss my ideas and plans with Dr Mullen at this point without self-censoring my opinions and backtracking mid-statement.

Once my questionnaire was approved I began distributing it to Football for Unity participants. The tournament was held in three different locations in Dublin's inner city on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday evenings during June and July. With the help of SARI volunteers and staff I handed out surveys to all those eligible for the project and in attendance each evening over the course of a week and a half. It took me ten days to gather up the completed surveys and sort the data, but I remained on schedule thanks to the speed with which the survey was drawn up. It was a little hectic, having to navigate varying levels of English comprehension and catch participants before their games. However, most people were quite receptive to the idea of the study, and I felt very welcomed into what was clearly seen as a safe space.

Out of a possible 300 respondents, I received 118 survey responses (a 39% response rate). 80 respondents were male and 38 female, with 24 different countries of origin represented. The largest ethnic group present beside White Irish (43 respondents) was Black African (34 respondents), with non-White Irish respondents making up a majority 62% of all survey responses. These demographic statistics demonstrate the multi-cultural arena in which the tournament was taking place, and I was curious to see how these findings would compare to the feelings of inclusion expressed and processes of lasting integration recognised by participants in the next stage.

This stage of conducting semi-structured individual interviews was by far the most challenging for me as a researcher and as a leader. As someone who enjoys organising my time efficiently, it was very difficult to suddenly arrange my project around someone else's schedule. I found myself struggling with interview scheduling setbacks that were out of my

control. It was a stressful period, one in which I failed to manage my time effectively and often ended up lying in bed for hours. To try and combat these negative habits I decided to draw up a revised timetable for the rest of the project, focus on the interviews I could schedule, and tried to remain positive. Whereas previously I would have tried to keep working until my eventual burnout, I cut my goal of twelve interviews to eight and found that talking about my fears with family and friends was a huge help in reassuring myself that the course of research does not always run smooth.

In my case the course of my interviews certainly did not always run smooth, but run they did. Conducting individual interviews by myself was scary at first, and I ended up largely using my interview guide as a crutch during that first interview. Utilising themes informed by the survey responses and literature review, I cut across topics and jumped in when my first interviewee paused to think while answering a question. However, as I completed more interviews I became more comfortable in my role as a researcher. I was better able to explain the rationale behind the study and direct the discussion toward relevant topics while simultaneously allowing the conversation to flow naturally. I kept a set of post-interview notes in which I wrote my immediate thoughts after each interview, giving me a clear set of points detailing what I could improve on for the next interview. While transcribing each interview I realised that sometimes I missed opportunities for a follow-up question or asked the wrong question at the wrong time. At first this left me frustrated, hearing my mistakes in real time and yet be unable to rectify them, but as I continued to work through each transcript I came to appreciate the work I had put in thus far. By the last transcript I felt something akin to pride toward my project. Yes it wasn't perfect, but it was mine and it was suddenly tangible, a small set of audio recordings and Excel files on my computer that stood for something much bigger.

The testimonies given by each interviewee were given with such honesty and sincerity that I went into my final report writing with a fierce desire to accurately capture the feelings and meanings entrusted to me. It was so different to hear their experiences first-hand compared to reading dry academic articles and journals on the subject of migration. The media demonisation of migrant communities has often obscured the very human realities of settling in an entirely alien environment. The people I spoke to highlighted themes of 'found' family, of having the opportunity to showcase the positive impact of their own

community within their new area, and of their enjoyment at meeting new people and sharing knowledge during the course of the Football for Unity tournament. A strong sense of resilience was present in each of our conversations, something that cemented my revised image of leadership as something grounded in strong community ties and a personal commitment to putting your best foot forward. I can only hope my report accurately reflects the passion felt toward the tournament by those I interviewed.

My research experience has not been perfect by any means. It pushed me to my limits and forced me to reconsider the size and shape of my comfort zone. I hated feeling so out of control of my schedule and struggled to remain motivated over the course of the eight weeks it took to complete a project originally only scheduled for six. But I can safely say that I am all the more grateful for it panning out the way it did. I am more confident in my research skills, have developed better coping mechanisms for feelings of stress and anxiety, and am kinder to myself when things don't go exactly as planned. Part of what makes a good leader is being able to recognise a job done well and not just a job done poorly. I am proud of my research project and the work I put into it over this summer. I have made some very good friends and opened myself up to others in a way I have never previously had the courage to. The Laidlaw programme has not only made me a better researcher, but a better person as well.

Bibliography

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