

FA Writing Challenges

Evaluation findings

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The Football Association and National Literacy Trust teamed up to create a series of writing challenges for Key Stage 3 students based around the SSE Women's FA Cup. Launched on 28 February 2017, the free FA Writing Challenges used the power of football to encourage students to write for enjoyment. Students practised their descriptive and persuasive writing skills as they were challenged to write speeches, poems and newspaper articles around the SSE Women's FA Cup Final. Each challenge was introduced by inspirational videos of top female players, and supported by a resource pack for teachers with tips and guidance around writing for enjoyment and the links between football and literacy. Each participating class was encouraged to send one entry to each of the challenges. Five winners were selected for a variety of prizes, including tickets for a whole class to attend the final and take part in a behind-the-scenes tour at Wembley Stadium.

The evaluation of the project relies on a survey of teachers and group discussions with participating students. The survey was open for two months and all teachers were encouraged to respond. We obtained a total of 64 responses. In addition, four group discussions were conducted with over 25 Key Stage 3 students, including with the class of students who won the main prize. This report presents the main findings from both the survey and the group discussions.

Below are some of the key findings of the evaluation:

- 80.4% of practitioners have noticed an increase in the students' enthusiasm for writing, 76.1% say they are more motivated to write and 68.2% have seen an improvement in the students' confidence as writers
- 88.4% of teachers say that the students' knowledge of women's football has improved, and 91.3% note that their perception of it has improved as well
- 63.9% of teachers say they are now more enthusiastic about the delivery of football in school, 63.8% said the FA Writing Challenges have given them more ideas for delivering football in school, and 89.1% say they may use football again in the future

to teach literacy. 21% reported that the FA Writing Challenges led to more football being played in the school.

- 51.1% of teachers say the challenges have helped improve the school's relationship with The FA, and students were also impressed and enthused by the involvement of The FA in the competition: *"I think it's amazing, the fact that The FA are putting their money into this competition, because it's like them saying "I'm putting so many pounds into each child, opportunity and chance to become something great". It's like them sponsoring every person here." (Student)*
- 82.3% of teachers say they are better equipped to engage reluctant students with writing. Several examples are provided in the report of reluctant writers who engaged well with the competition and benefitted from it
- The resources were rated excellent (41.3%) or quite good (45.6%) by teachers who praised how easy they were to use: *"Lesson plans make it an easy resource for time-poor teachers to use." "Great resources. Could be used by non-specialists also, perhaps in tutor time."*
- Almost all teachers expressed a wish for more time to engage with the competition: only 40% of teachers submitted a student's entry into the competition, and the low participation was entirely due to lack of time. Note that this did not seem to affect how beneficial the challenges were for students.

Teacher feedback

The overall response to the FA Writing Challenges is overwhelmingly positive. All teachers who made it to the end of the survey say they would recommend it to colleagues and to other schools.

"I am interested in promoting sports for girls and changing attitudes towards sports and this gave me an ideal platform to start discussions about attitudes to sports."

"Loved it - this has been one of my favourite activities all year."

We received 64 responses in total, from English teachers first and foremost (59.4%), as well as a few from PE teachers (21.9%) and literacy coordinators (20.3%). All of them said they felt the writing challenges were helpful, valuable, high-quality resources for their students. The only negative comment, which comes up repeatedly, is the lack of time to complete the challenges and submit to the competition: 60.1% of respondents say they did not submit anything in the competition, and most of them say it was because they found the deadline too short. A few add that they found it hard to select only one entry to submit amongst their students, and some admit that they could not commit to attending the game on a Saturday should their students have won, and therefore chose not to enter the competition.

But this should not deter from the fact that even without actually entering the competition, teachers found the challenges extremely useful for their students. When asked what they thought of the FA Writing Challenges overall, respondents provided a wealth of positive adjectives:



Teachers suggest that the sports theme of the FA Writing Challenges is most valuable to them (60%), followed by the endorsement by The FA (42.2%).

“The FA endorsement gave women's football validity and the female aspect challenges student/societal perceptions about what is 'for' boys/girls.”

The sports/football element was clearly a great motivator for a majority of students, and something that not all teachers would have thought of using themselves. A few respondents saluted the opportunity to work across the curriculum with English and PE.

“[The challenges] are an excellent way to link literacy across different subjects.”

The fact that the focus was on women’s football was generally very well received, although one teacher said that he would like something similar around men’s football. Others, also working with boys, felt the different angle was valuable:

“The first challenge allowed our boys to put themselves in the boots of a player before the SSE Women’s FA Cup Final which helped promote equality in an all-boys school. It also opened up discussions around the role of women in sport.”

The resources were rated excellent (41.3%) or quite good (45.6%) by teachers who seem to have appreciated how easy they made it for them to use the challenges. A few comments suggest that the resources have also sparked ideas which will outlast the challenges and form part of their legacy.

“Lesson plans make it an easy resource for time-poor teachers to use.”

“Great resources. Could be used by non-specialists also, perhaps in tutor time.”

“Some great ideas in the plans to utilise in future.”

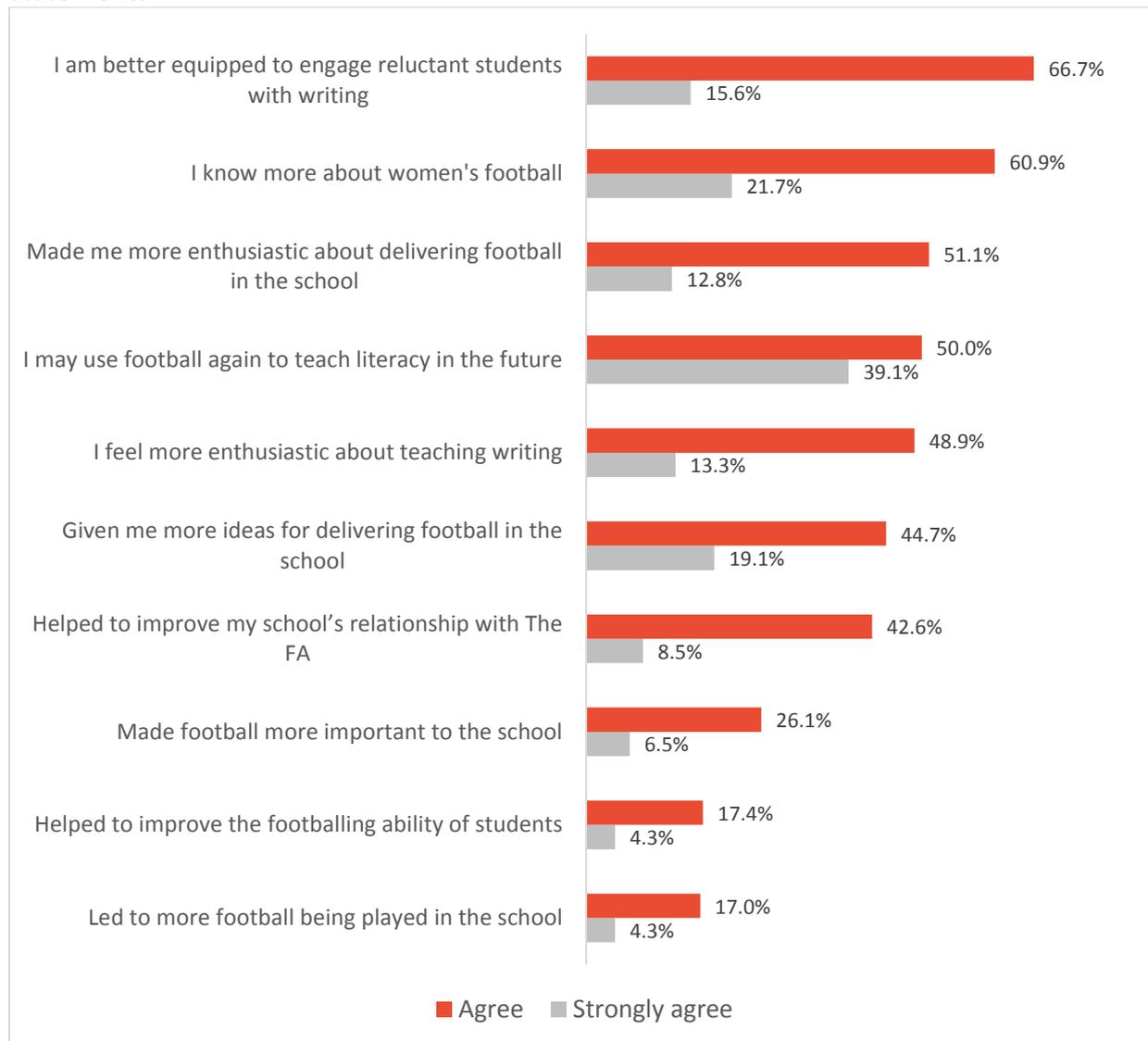
One teacher commented that the quality of the videos was somewhat poor, adding that this was a minor issue only. Others commented on the variety of the resources, how easy they were to use for the teacher, and well scaffolded for students of various abilities.

Most teachers (58.8%) ran the challenges with their whole class, either as homework or as a class exercise. Those who ran the project with small groups did so based on students’ interests in football or writing, or based on students’ need - for example with disengaged students. A few suggest that they would like to run the FA Writing Challenges as a whole-school or whole year group activity next year. The survey suggests that the challenges were mostly used with Years 7 (75%) and 8 (50%), and only to a lesser extent with Years 9 and 10. Two thirds of teachers (66.7%) said they found working on the challenges either valuable or very valuable for their own professional development. This suggests once again that the writing challenges will have a legacy in participating schools.

“I am new to the role of literacy co-ordinator, so this project has helped me see how sport and literacy can be combined.”

Figure 1 below shows how teachers describe the impact that the project has had on their practice. We focus here on the positive answers (agree or strongly agree) to demonstrate where change did take place. Prominently, a clear majority of teachers feel better equipped to engage reluctant students with writing, know more about women’s football, and are now more enthusiastic about delivering football-based projects in school.

Figure 1: Percentages of teachers who agree and strongly agree with proposed impact statements



Student outcomes

This evaluation did not directly measure the outcomes for students in terms of writing skills or writing attitudes and behaviours. Instead, we asked teachers what they felt their students gained from taking part in the challenges. It is important to bear in mind here that the results are mixed, which might be the result of how schools chose to use the resources. For example, some students might have done all three challenges in a small group and submitted an entry to the competition, whereas others may have done only one challenge as a piece of homework. However, due to the number of responses to the survey (64), we are unable to present student outcomes specifically for each delivery method, or to compare the success of a certain delivery against another.

However, we asked the practitioners to give us their professional opinion about whether and how the challenges contributed to their students' educational development. Therefore, what we can present here are the outcomes for students as perceived by the teachers who delivered the Challenges, and who have been working with their students for at least one year.

Once again, the results are overwhelmingly positive and it is clear from the survey that teachers feel the writing challenges were extremely beneficial for their students:

“The girls amazed themselves with what they wrote. It made them view themselves differently.”

“It made some students aware that there are different writing mediums, and that they're not all "boring". One student said he now wanted to become a sports journalist.”

Several teachers point out that it is somewhat early to see any impact as the survey was completed just a few weeks after the challenges were organised in schools. Nonetheless, as can be seen in Figure 2 below, 80.4% of practitioners have noticed an increase in the students' enthusiasm for writing, 76.1% say they are more motivated to write (15.2% say the motivation to write is “much better” than before), and 68.2% have seen an improvement in the students' confidence as writers.

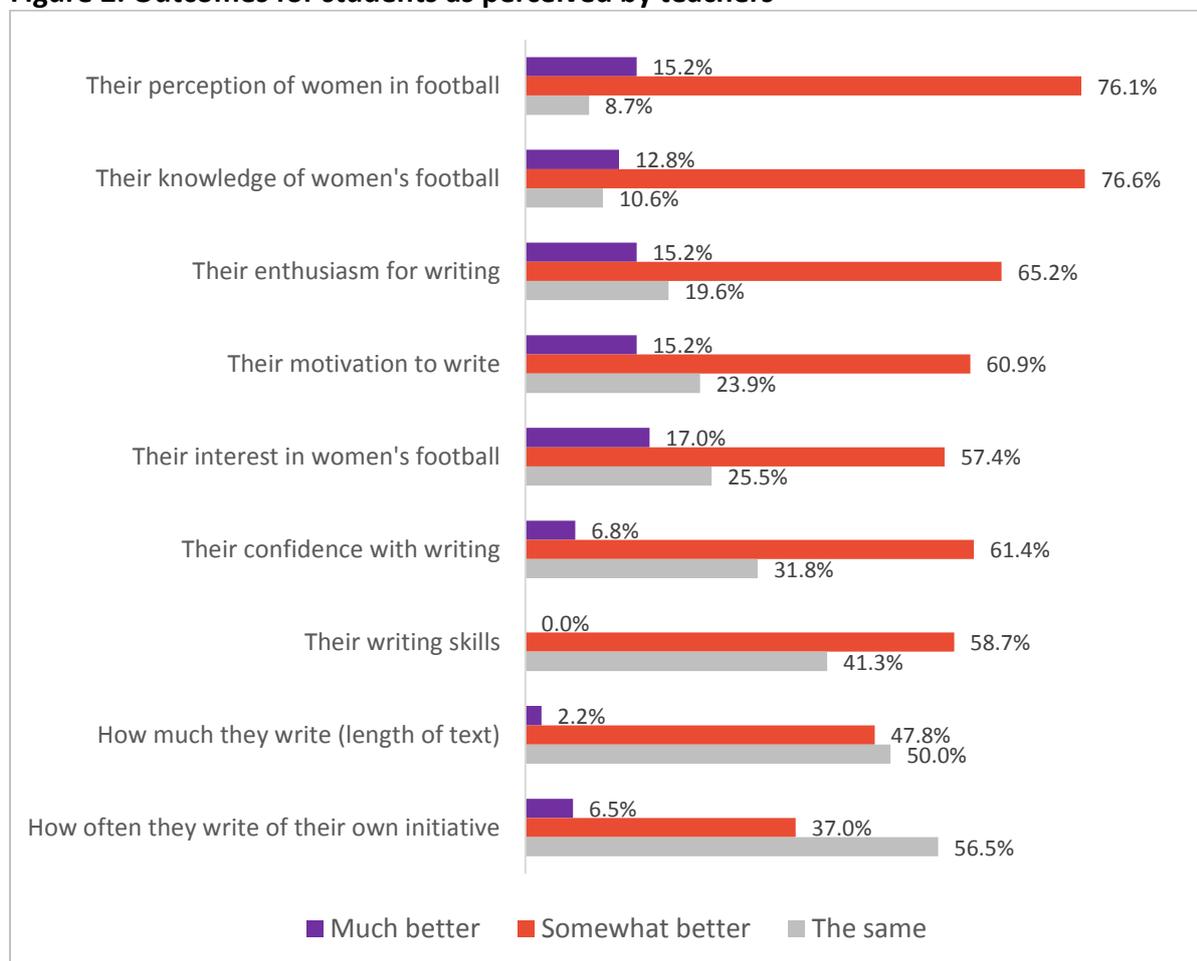
It seems that participating young people also changed their views about women's football: 91.3% of teachers said their students' perception of women in football was better, and 89.4% said the students' knowledge of football had improved as well.

“The poems showed how much students wanted the public to view women's football highly. This is important for our next generation of adults.”

“In a mixed school, girls' football is usually considered second best. This process made the girls feel more assertive about what they do, their skills and it boosted their self-esteem.”

Figure 2 shows how teachers have assessed change for their students in key areas. We received no responses saying that there were negative changes. The graph therefore shows that there were either improvements (“somewhat better” and “much better”) or no change. The results are organised by whether change happened, with the areas with most improvement at the top, and the areas with least change at the bottom.

Figure 2: Outcomes for students as perceived by teachers



We also asked teachers to tell us about one young person, or a group of students for whom they felt the Challenges had been particularly worthwhile. A few examples below demonstrate how varied the outcomes were for very different students.

“Lots of the boys like football already so they were engaged and I was surprised that they were not put off by it being women's football. I think The FA is something they recognise and respect and this is why. The girls were much more interested when they realised it was all about women - it meant something to them to have the class focused on female achievement, writing as women (even the boys) etc.”

“Anastasia who is an incredibly gifted writer, who knew not a lot about the sport, spent a long time reading/watching clips/articles from professional players to gauge the various aspects of the sport. She

redrafted her piece three times and has written in IAMBIC
PENTAMETER - an incredibly difficult skill.”

“One year 7 girl was always polite, does as she is told, is quiet and
operates on the sidelines. She has actively sought out more
opportunities to contribute since participating.”

Student's voice

Four group discussions were conducted to capture the students' feedback about the competition and give them a chance to describe their experience of it in their own words. Overall, over 25 students were recorded in face to face group discussions. The quotes provided in this section are taken from the verbatim transcripts of the sessions.

Much like their teachers, the students are extremely positive about the FA Writing Challenges: all participants seem to have thoroughly enjoyed the activities.

One point worth noting, however, is that the experience varied quite widely from one school to another. Some students only did one challenge, others did three; some did the challenges as a piece of homework by themselves, others did the challenges during class with some cooperation; some watched all the videos and supporting materials, others did not; some won the competition and visited Wembley stadium, while others of course did not. As a result, the feedback we get from students is not always consistent. That's particularly obvious in that some classes genuinely focused on women's football to motivate writing, while others used the competition as a generally sports-related writing exercise.

Regardless, all the young people who spoke up said they loved the FA Writing Challenges.

"I thought it was just really fun to do in the lesson. Rather than just doing the work we do every lesson, to do something different."

"It was very inspirational."

"It was really interesting to try something new and write new stuff like that, because you never know, maybe you're going to be out there saying motivational speeches to the world."

The one aspect that seemed to capture the students' enthusiasm, expectedly, was the connection with sports and with football in particular. Participants explained how much they enjoyed writing about something they knew and cared about, that it made writing "easier" and "more fun". Even young people who were less enthusiastic about football were able to relate to the activities, thinking of their favourite sports (rugby, cricket, lacrosse...) and connecting to the excitement of a big match.

"I think it makes it more interesting and fun, because it's the sport that you play, and then you're writing about it."

"I think it's great because it's inspiring people to write while also inspiring people to look at sport and get into sport."

"I think it was quite a nice idea, as some of us in our class really like football, combining that with English actually made us even more interested in what we were doing."

The endorsement by The FA was perceived as positive and inspirational as well.

“I think it’s amazing, the fact that The FA are putting their money into this competition, because it’s like them saying “I’m putting so many pounds into each child, opportunity and chance to become something great”. It’s like them sponsoring every person here.”

“I think it’s good because once people know that it’s run by The FA, they will be more interested, like people who find English a bit boring, it motivates them because they’re like: oh yeah, The FA, I love football! So that can motivate them to try harder in English.”

Students also said that they really enjoyed the competition because it was so different from what they normally do in English lessons. They found it refreshing and stimulating to try out these new activities on an unusual topic.

“We’re not accustomed to really write those type of pieces. It’s more like stories and poetry.”

“I think just normal English lessons when you’re just learning stuff, sometimes you learn stuff that maybe you’re not so interested in. But with football, obviously, it strikes a chord with many of us.”

“It was different. The three or four lessons we had on it, it was different to usual lessons and it made you more interested because it was more fun, and you were doing more practical things.”

“Because everything else we do is like working towards an exam, and that was quite a nice thing to do. There wasn’t much riding on it and it was just something you could do with less pressure.”

However, although the competition was different and fun, students still made a link to the skills and techniques they normally found in English, and they found the challenges both relevant and useful to the development of their writing.

“We don’t normally do a lot of writing poems, compared to creative writing. So I thought it was a good opportunity to refine our skills at writing poems.”

“Well I think it was good for your creative writing, and like your imagination.”

“For me it’s kind of boosted my confidence in say writing more poems or speeches ... like creative stories, because knowing that I won something to do with that it kind of makes me want to do it more.”

“Now we’ve got another way to write in English, it could surprise the teachers, which could lead to better marks.”

Finally, interviewed students also said that they just loved the fact that it was a competition, the challenge, the attractiveness of the prizes, and the quality of the resources.

“It’s a competition so it makes people want to strive to do their best.”

“It’s kind of like that feeling of let’s write something and win something. And if, for example, the prize was a ball we’d be like okay, we’ve got to do this. But then when everybody heard that everyone’s going to go to Wembley everyone was starting to be like... wow, let’s do this!”

Needless to say, the children who did win the competition and visited Wembley Stadium were delighted. Several said their dads were both impressed and jealous.

The connection with women’s football was not brought up spontaneously as a major aspect of the experience, or as a significant selling point for the competition. However, when asked about it by the interviewer, all students said they had found it surprising and interesting, a welcome change from their usual expectations of football. Girls in particular, especially those who play football, seemed proud to write for a female sports team. It was clear that for some students, the competition had sparked some healthy debate about gender roles and gender equality.

“And the fact that it was women’s football gave us more stimulus because it says how ... how hard it was for women to actually be footballers, and how they had to struggle throughout times. Because women usually don’t get the chance to play football that much, or really often.”

“I just wanted to say, it’s a really good idea to put it for the women’s match, because then people kind of see more, like if whoever won it, they can see now like it’s not just the men’s that you should be considering.”

“I just think it shouldn’t be called women’s football, men’s football. I think it’s a sport, it’s called football, it’s for everyone and I don’t think there should be this divide.”

“This competition is helping people to write better. And it’s taking a step closer to equality as well.”

“You don’t just learn about English, but we learnt about another aspect of football as well at the same time. I think that was helpful.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, while it is too early to claim direct outcomes on students' attitudes to writing or writing skills, the overwhelmingly positive feedback both from teachers and students suggest that seeds have been planted that will contribute to making a positive difference in these young people's personal and academic development, and in teachers' ability to motivate and inspire their students to write.

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