



**AUT SPORTS PERFORMANCE
RESEARCH INSTITUTE NEW ZEALAND**

Secondary School Rugby

Testing Actions to Redress Declining Participation



**REPORT TO
NEW ZEALAND
RUGBY**

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Executive Summary

This report sets out the findings of a study that aimed to enhance understanding of the motivations and experiences of young people in terms of their engagement with the sport of rugby union in New Zealand.

The insights from this report were obtained through a combination of literature research and first-hand focus group feedback.

Literature research was conducted under the academic supervision of Auckland University of Technology (AUT) and with New Zealand Rugby through an internship between March and September 2017.

Focus groups were held with four Auckland Schools as recommended by New Zealand Rugby. Selection was based on the schools' ability to share insights and experiences of the current rugby structure. Informal discussions were held with school coordinators to provide background and arrange timing. Four focus group workshops were held, each comprising eight to ten participants between the ages of 14 and 18 years.

While a big focus was to understand students' perceptions as to what they enjoyed about playing rugby, it was important to get an insight into those aspects that they did not enjoy. By initially focussing on 'fun of the game', students engaged quickly and were also happy to share those less enjoyable aspects of rugby. Four clear and recurring influencing themes emerged: **adult behaviours; social factors; health and wellbeing; and competition structure**. The report provides three main recommendations, each of which is discussed in the recommendations section. The recommendations are:

1. Recognise and prioritise New Zealand Rugby's 'Respect and Responsibility Program' as well as Aktive's 'Good Sports' program for their potential to address adverse adult influences on secondary school rugby experiences.
2. Investigate ways to channel the positive aspects of students' enjoyment of being part of a team.
3. Experiment with non-, or limited-contact formats of the game.

Although the population sample was small, the consistent and recurring themes from the focus groups provide reasonable confidence about some of the underlying issues influencing declining participation rates. The confidence level is further supported in that it correlates well with literature research, and the fact that other countries have implemented initiatives to deal with some of the issues identified by the focus groups.

It is hoped that the insights provided in this research will add to the understanding of the changing motivating factors behind students playing rugby; assist New Zealand Rugby to address declining participation rates; and most importantly; contribute to providing a 'fun' rugby environment for secondary school rugby players, both in and beyond the wider Auckland area.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed from insights gained from the four focus groups held across Auckland secondary schools.

- 1. Recognise and prioritise New Zealand Rugby's 'Respect and Responsibility Program' as well as Aktive's 'Good Sports' program for their potential to address adverse adult influences on secondary school rugby experiences.**

All students reported negative adult behaviours as a recurring and demotivating issue. Apart from initiating support networks for students, it is essential to engage with adult volunteers to improve culture and behaviours on and off the field.

New Zealand Rugby's current 'Respect and Responsibility Program' is an important initiative which has the potential to address some of the current adverse influences that adults are having on the secondary school rugby experience. The current focus of the New Zealand Rugby program is on consent, sexual assault and family violence prevention, as well as by-stander interventions (Toolbox & Responsibility, 2017). It is suggested that the program provides education on expected behaviours to volunteers and staff delivering the rugby experience, as well as providing guidance for students negatively influenced by adult behaviours within the broader rugby context. An example of wider industry collaboration on these issues can be seen through the Australian led initiative; '*Play by the Rules*'. This program

is “a unique collaboration between the Australian Sports Commission, Australian Human Rights Commission, all state and territory departments of sport and recreation, all state and territory anti-discrimination and human rights agencies, the Office of the Children's Guardian (NSW), the Australian New Zealand Sports Law Association (ANZSLA) and the Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW”. (“About Play by the Rules - Play by the Rules - Making Sport inclusive, safe and fair”, 2001, p.1). The programme provides free online and face to face training for child protection, harassment, discrimination, complaint handling, conduct, and behaviour underpinning the organisational culture expected by sporting organisations.

This type of program differs from the current New Zealand Rugby ‘Respect and Responsibility’ initiatives in the sense that there is wider industry collaboration to stamp out poor behaviour in support, with partnership of local and central government, as well as other major sporting organisations to stamp out negative behaviour and increase overall awareness of the expected organisational culture within sporting organisations.

Aktive Auckland’s ‘Good Sports’ program has many parallels with the Australian led model. Partnering Good Sports and New Zealand Rugby could provide opportunities in addressing the concerns arising from negative adult behaviour in secondary school rugby, as well as addressing the changing needs of secondary school students involved with rugby.

2. Investigate ways to channel the positive aspects of students’ appreciation of being part of a team.

The value of team culture and comradery in secondary school rugby is held in high esteem by students, and, adults delivering the game play an important role in shaping the values and beliefs of this student culture. Team culture and pride was a strongly recurring and positive observation across the four focus groups. “Brotherhood” was a commonly used term to describe the sense of belonging. There may be opportunity to leverage this sentiment as part of the “Respect and Responsibility” program.

It is usually the teachers who are instrumental in encouraging students to engage in sports and activities so it is important to understand and account for the role of teachers, and to find ways in which to improve connections with the teaching profession. “Teachers are the key to engaging our students in secondary school sport and we must encourage and ensure

teachers see value in providing sporting leadership to their students”. (New Zealand Secondary Schools’ Sports’ Council Inc, 2017, p.5).

3. Experiment with non- or limited-contact formats of the game.

Injury concern was a consistently recurring factor reported as reason for disengagement. For some groups of students, innovation in playing formats / competitions may mitigate both parental and player concerns over the potential for injury.

Injury/Concussion was stated as being one of the leading factors in secondary school disengagement, and experimenting with new non-contact formats may help provide alternative rugby experiences for students seeking to immerse themselves in the game, without the risk of injury. Further, non-contact or limited-contact formats offer an opportunity to explore a summer version of ‘Touch’ rugby to be delivered in secondary schools, helping to engage more students into rugby and complimenting the current winter structure. This recommendation aligns with New Zealand Rugby’s vision for ensuring rugby has a strong, consistent and positive presence across wider Auckland, while “experimenting with new and innovative competition formats” (Wider Auckland Sport of Choice, 2016, p.13).

Introduction

Purpose

This report sets out the findings of a study that aimed to enhance understanding of the motivations and experiences of young people as regards their engagement with the sport of rugby union in New Zealand, and in particular, to explore the causes of males aged 14-18 years old disengaging with Auckland secondary school rugby.

Context

New Zealand has a long and proud sporting tradition across a wide range of sports. In rugby union especially, for more than a century the country has sustained a performance that is second to none. Throughout the country, in both small and large communities, the sport of rugby plays an important role in the lives and cultural identity of New Zealanders. Stewardship of the game of rugby union sits with New Zealand Rugby and carries with it an onus that goes beyond mere governance and management of the sport, a commitment that is reflected in the organisation's constitutional objectives 'to lead grow and support the growth of rugby in New Zealand'.

Inherent in New Zealand Rugby's constitutional objectives is the notion of 'participation'. To achieve this objective New Zealand Rugby must monitor participation and develop retention strategies to strengthen rugby infrastructure that governs player pathways.

New Zealand Rugby has conducted research to support and guide its strategies, including assessment of retention of secondary school males. The research indicated a trend of fewer males aged 14 to 18 years old engaging in secondary school rugby, while female participation within this age has increased (Youth Participation Report, 2017). New Zealand Rugby has established a strategic priority in its 2020 Strategic Plan, to arrest and reverse the decline in participation of 14-18-year-old males.

This research project has been carried out to support this strategic objective by researching the views of a small population sample from four secondary schools in the wider Auckland area.

Methodology

In its simplest terms, the research methods combine literature research and field observations to test some of the research themes. The observations were gained by collecting and analysing information from focus groups with young people currently attending school and playing rugby, and school sports administrators. This section provides a summary of the overall methodology. Additional detail on selection criteria is contained in Appendix 2.

Data and information was acquired from a combination of literature and direct feedback from the focus groups, the latter via a series of 45minute workshops with focus groups aimed at pre-selected Auckland secondary schools. Selection of the schools was based on the recommendations of New Zealand Rugby.

Action Learning Approach

A collaborative, 'action learning approach' was taken when engaging with school sports administrators and students'. The action learning approach adopted by this project combines both academic and practical learning in that learning takes place by combining both doing and reflection. Action learning tackles problems through a process of first asking questions to clarify the exact nature of the problem, reflecting and identifying possible solutions, and moving toward consideration of strategies and possible action (Ferkins & Fleming, 2017).

Through this process key themes were identified, and the interviews helped bring to light meaningful insights into influences impacting disengagement from the sport, from which it becomes possible to identify ways to address declining participation.

Literature Review - Summary

The literature review drew on academic and practical research from New Zealand and international institutions which were selected because of the parallels in culture and sports governance models. Sources included New Zealand Rugby (including the 2017 Colmar Brunton survey data), academic research papers and reports, information on other sporting bodies, and press reports.

Four main themes from the literature review were identified as applicable to the New Zealand youth sporting environment.

- Adult influences (i.e. conduct and behaviour of coaches, administrators and referees);
- Social factors (i.e. interest, enjoyment, team culture);
- Health factors (i.e. fitness, injuries and player protection);
- Competition structure (i.e. unfair/biased competitions due to age/size/weight factors).

Adult Influences

One of the most relatable trends to New Zealand Rugby retention can be linked to research from Walters Schluter Thomson and Payne, (2011) which found that behaviours of coaches did not always nurture a positive and developmentally-appropriate approach to the coaching of a sport, noting that only 35.4% of experiences with coaches were positive, with 21.6% negative and 43% neutral experiences. Negative coaching experiences coupled with poor side-line behaviour has a significant bearing on the rugby experience in secondary schools, and is a major focus for New Zealand Rugby in addressing retention rates through initiatives such as 'APPLAUD', and Aktive's 'Good Sport's' program. Critical to the success of improving adult behavioural influencers is the quality of support that adults provide children in sport. Programs such as these play an important role in shaping more meaningful sporting experiences for youth, while educating adults around behavioural expectations and their influence with sport.

Social Factors

Team culture is an important social element to consider in the rugby experience, and has a direct influence on the type of involvement a student may have with a rugby team. The

influences of adults within this experience significantly impact the type of rugby experiences within secondary schools, and the way a school or team culture is developed is significantly influenced by the values and beliefs of family, school, and wider rugby community. Secondary school sports teams are in a unique position compared to that of more professionalised teams in the sense that a team's culture can be more diverse from fixed duration team membership, influence of the school cultures, and religious affiliations of the educational institutions.

Health factors

The contact nature of rugby union means that there is always potential for injury, a factor which is widely considered to influence the decisions of many secondary school students to engage in rugby. In recent years, more emphasis has been put on developing rugby policies around player protection and welfare. Injury is an unfortunate risk associated with rugby and a number of researchers have focused on its prevention around concussions.

From June 2016 to June 2017 there were 4,715 active claims regarding rugby related concussion, at a total cost of \$3,284,045 to ACC ("Statistics on our claims", 2017). New Zealand Rugby has underscored the importance of primary prevention efforts, timely identification, and careful clinical management of head injuries (Schulz 2004), while emphasising the danger of concussions through adopted on field testing. The introduction of a Head Injury Assessment (HIA), produced by ACC in consultation with a panel of medical, sport and research experts on sport concussion, was introduced for the 2015 Rugby World Cup. The HIA test is seen to directly benefit player welfare while educating the wider rugby community in becoming more aware on how to deal with concussions by improving recognition, removing the at-risk player, and if necessary, referring them to further care ("Concussion", 2015). New Zealand Rugby has established strategies to address injuries and concussion symptoms. This stronger focus on rugby injuries and concussion means that throughout the recovery process players are more connected with rugby and can reduce the likelihood of disengagement through injury.

Competition structure

Central to the enjoyment of rugby is the notion of a fair and unbiased experience. Unfortunately, opposite experiences often arise in secondary school rugby, often as a result of difference in physical developmental stages in students of the same age group. The varying

rates of maturity and physical size of secondary school players tends to result in greater opportunity for some physically advantaged students', who are often afforded more opportunity and game time due to their physical prowess. This presents particular challenges in children of the same age-group (Wilson, Byrne, & Eston, (2009). The competition structures in school rugby do not appear to allow for significant variations in physical developmental difference, which has led to an increasing occurrence of negative experiences amongst players coaches and parents. It is this bias perception that can interfere with game time and make the game about 'them' rather than 'us' (All Blacks 2013).

Focus Group Interviews - Overall Approach and Strategy

Each of the four-focus group comprised of 8-10 males (aged 14-18 years old) and took place at each of the selected schools. Participant selection at each school was discussed with the school sports coordinators prior to establishing the focus group to ensure that the selection criteria was met and students would be engaged. This process allowed participants to prepare for and better understand the research context which led to more meaningful and relevant insights from the focus groups.

With only 45 minutes available, it was important to quickly engage with the participants and to get them to be involved in the subject. A three-step process was designed.

Step 1 (introduction) was a brief introduction and summary of what the project was about. Step 2 (warm-up) was designed to quickly engage participants without them feeling threatened or under pressure, and especially for them to have an opportunity to express their feelings about the game. The final step (questions) is the important part where participants were asked to respond to four specific questions about their rugby experiences.

- Question 1: "What are the three best things you enjoy about PLAYING Rugby?"
- Question 2: "In your rugby experiences, what is the worst thing about PLAYING Rugby?"
- Question 3: "You will have mates that don't play rugby. Do you know why they don't play, and if not, why do you think they don't?"
- Question 4: "What changes that could be made would help you to continue playing rugby?"

Findings

Findings from the discussions within each of the Auckland Secondary School focus groups identified both positive and negative factors influencing player engagement and retention with the sport of rugby union. These findings can be classified within four primary themes, all of which correlate with the findings of prior literature research:

1. Adult behavioural Influences
2. Social Factors
3. Health and Safety
4. Competition Structure.

The tables in the following sub-sections summarise and explain the key findings arising from each of the focus groups, of which many were a common across all focus groups.

Theme 1 - Adult Behavioural Influences

Table 1 summarises the adult behaviours directly experienced by workshop participants of the individual schools, and which have adversely affected their perception of 'fun' in the secondary school 'rugby experience'.

	School A	School B	School C	School D
Coach's attitudes and expectations (including 'put-downs' from Coaches)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Poor Side-line behaviour	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Parental Bias	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
Overly Emotional Coaches			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Table 1 – Theme: Adult Behaviours

There were two prevailing comments that applied across all focus groups. Firstly, variability in coaching behaviour and expectations was a general issue, with poorer coaches showing behaviours that detracted from the enjoyment of the game, leading to demotivation.

In particular, coaching ‘put-downs’ was mentioned by two of the focus groups eventually resulting in players drifting away from the game in the following season.

Secondly, poor side-line behaviour by adults was mentioned. This behaviour included bad language, aggressive behaviour, verbal abuse directed at referees, and one occasion, abuse specifically directed at an opposition player. Related to this is the issue of parental bias which was brought up at two of the schools – parental bias being exhibited in both team selection, and side-line behaviour.

The final main comment related to coaches who got over-excited, or, in the view of the students, became excessively emotional in their engagement with players.

Theme 2 - Social Factors

Discussion on social factors focussed almost exclusively on the positive side of the rugby experience and led to the most animated responses from focus groups. All groups used the term ‘brotherhood’ to describe the positive sense of shared experience and comradeship that they took away from rugby union, even when things were not going well. Across all groups, the social dimensions of their experiences appeared to be an important part of the reason why players continued to play rugby. The sense of belonging, or being part of something that was bigger than themselves, appeared to strike a chord with the focus group participants. One group was quite expressive in its description of the experience and enjoyment of rugby union, talking up the physical and learning challenges and opportunities afforded by the game.

	School A	School B	School C	School D
The “Brotherhood” of a team	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Self Esteem (School Pride; Family/Friends support / inclusive nature of rugby)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Excitement of the Challenge		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
Learning new skills		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		

Table 2 – Theme: Social Factors

Table 2 summarises the social factors identified by the focus groups and which directly influences their experience in a positive way.

Theme 3 - Health and Wellbeing

The issue of injuries is an obvious area of concern that was identified by all focus groups. Discussion covered both the concerns of parents (especially mothers) and the concerns of the players themselves. Table 3 summarises the health and safety factors directly experienced by workshop participants of the individual schools.

Players’ personal concerns focussed on the risk of general injury and especially concussion. An interesting comment to emerge in the discussion was that injury leading to stand-down, led to players feeling disconnected from their team during the stand-down period. This disconnection was sometimes made worse because of the challenge of reclaiming a place in the team because of replacement players.

On the positive side, one group noted what they perceived to be the “image” benefits of being a fit and strong rugby player.

	School A	School B	School C	School D
Injury and Concussion	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Social Image of a “fit” rugby player			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

Table 3- Theme: Health & Safety

Theme 4 - Competition Structure

A number of factors were identified which generally fell under the broad scope of competition structure. Specific concern and apprehension was raised by a couple of the older participants about the transition from school to club rugby, which involved competition against bigger, stronger and more physical players. Related to this was a concern about the competence of referees to manage games effectively and to deal with on-field thuggery. Concerns about on-field refereeing competence was a point emphasised by a number of participants across all schools. However, there was not sufficient time to go deeper into the underlying reasons for this response.

The discussion on the inequities in the competition structure was a common theme across all participation groups, with some groups being quite vocal in their views in that playing against students who are physically significantly bigger was a big ‘turn-off’.

Overall, when compared to other sporting options, rugby was seen by these participants as being less attractive, especially as post-school life was likely to bring time pressure for other things.

	School A	School B	School C	School D
Transition from school rugby to club rugby (including player pathway)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Size Difference of players on the field	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Poor Refereeing	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Appeal of other sports	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Commitment (time and effort)			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

Table 4 – Theme: Competition Structure

The identification of these themes as key influences in disengagement by Auckland secondary school players validates prior research findings and provides New Zealand Rugby with supporting evidence to help develop interventions to minimise player disengagement. By recognising these themes, New Zealand Rugby can take more tangible steps towards their goal of rugby being the sport of choice, while inspiring and unifying wider Auckland collectively.

Discussion

The wider Auckland area comprises 507 schools and some 264,000 students. Rugby participation numbers more than 40,000 players or approximately 15% of students. Supporting these players are over 350 referees, 2,500 coaches and 2,000 volunteers and administrators. (Wider Auckland Sport of Choice, 2016).

However, despite these impressive statistics, participation rates in rugby continue to decline. "...figures from the Secondary Schools Sports Council show a 29 per cent decline in teenagers aged 13-20, including 848 fewer males, between 2012 and 2014." (Napier, 2017, p.1), while more recent statistics from 2015 (Figure 1 below) showed numbers continuing to decline (Edens, 2017).

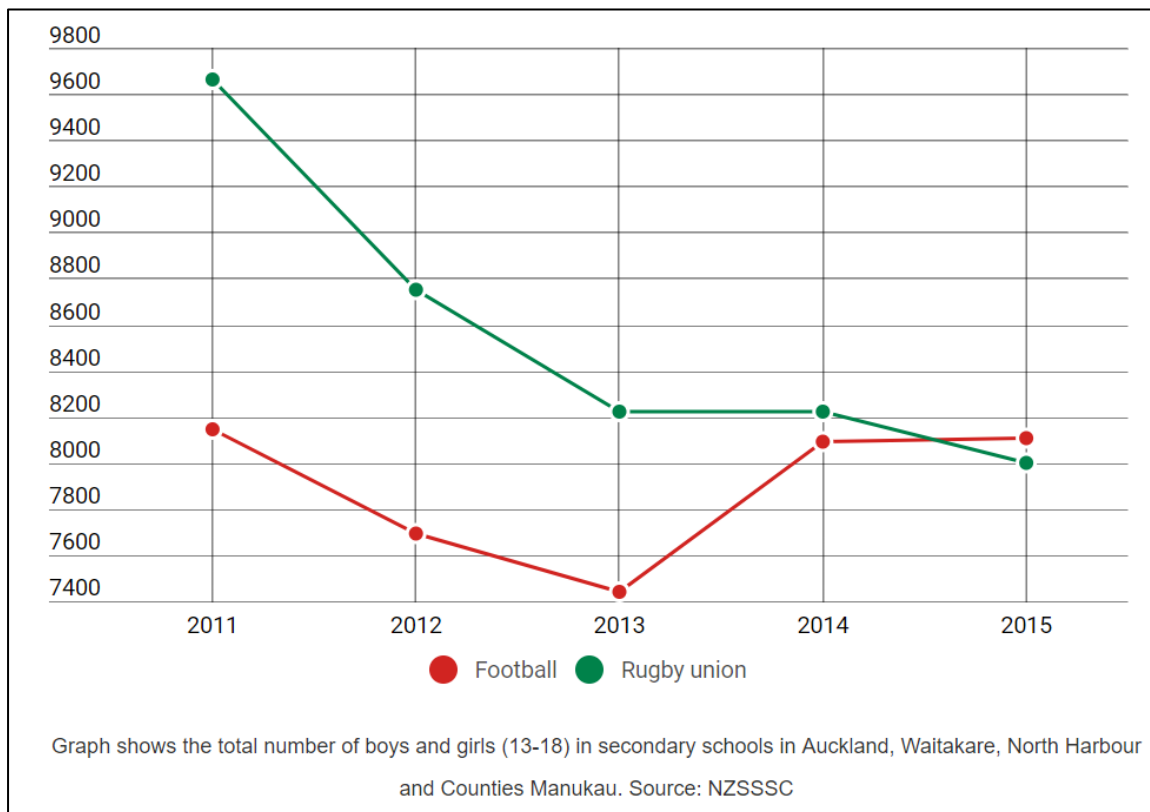


Figure 1 - Auckland Secondary Students - Rugby vs Football

With these statistics as a background, the following sections discuss the findings from the focus group interviews.

Adult Behavioural Influences

Although it is fantastic to see large numbers of adults involved within wider Auckland rugby, a combination of misplaced enthusiasm and/or bias, bad behaviour, or simply a lack of proper training, appears to result in many young players being turned-off the game by the conduct and behaviour of some supervising and/or involved adults. This conduct and behaviour was a common issue raised during all focus groups. While some of this concern could be attributable to a 'reaction to authority', there is both anecdotal and documented evidence to support the contention that adult behavioural influences play an important role in shaping the perceived rugby experience of secondary school students' (Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Deakin, 2005). In this respect, adults are in a position to have a disproportionate influence on the overall rugby experience of secondary school players.

The observations correlate to prior research by New Zealand Rugby (Wider Auckland Sport of Choice, 2016) which identified that adult behavioural influences have a significant bearing on the type of environment created within the rugby context. This influence is all the more significant for secondary school students' during a period in which they are developing as individuals, both socially and physically. The negative impact of such adverse experiences will inevitably influence their longer-term commitment to the sport, and importantly, their perception of 'fun'.

For effective development to occur, youth must experience long-term reciprocal relationships with others, such as parents, coaches, and peers (Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Deakin, 2005). It is therefore not surprising to find that adult behavioural influencers are associated with negative outcomes of the youth rugby experience in wider Auckland, and influence retention amongst secondary school rugby.

Negative adult experiences may also arise from the growing number of untrained and inexperienced adults tasked with fostering secondary school rugby. Several negative aspects of adult behaviour were identified including; inconsistent emotional responses; variance in the quality and competence of coaching staff; excessive influence and unreasonable expectations of parents; poor parent and/or coach side-line behaviour; and officiating bias. All are factors highlighted by the participating schools and seen to be negative influences on the physical, emotional and social development of students'.

For secondary school students to establish long-term reciprocal relationships with adult administrators, coaches, and parents it is important to look at the current influence of coaching from a student's perspective.

Coaches play a key role in delivering the rugby experience, and as school 'B' revealed *"the putdowns from coaches are some of the worst things about rugby"*. These criticisms are influencing the motivation and desire and willingness of students' to engage in rugby. For coaches to deliver a valuable rugby experience in secondary schools it is essential they provide skills in areas such as technical coaching, provide motivation and a safe social environment in which students' feel comfortable and engaged (Aoyagi, Ishii, Shibata, Arai and Oka, 2014). Further, in Auckland's current secondary school rugby environment, the role of coaching is predominantly seen through teaching staff and parent volunteers. This poses challenges in ensuring an adequate quality of coaching. The demands of rising to the challenge of managing a sports team on top of teaching duties, is seen by some teachers as an excessive burden on their time.

It is widely recognised that volunteers play a vital role and have a significant impact on community sport in New Zealand. The success of organised sport is heavily dependent on the commitment and contribution of these untrained volunteers, including volunteer coaches. The less resourced and recognised the volunteers and coaches are, the more difficult it is for them to deliver a positive rugby experience. Similarly, teachers assigned to supervising or coaching rugby in secondary schools (outside of the sports department) can have a significant influence on the coaching environment, particularly if they lack adequate experience to meet the unique social and physical needs for a more engaging rugby experience.

The school 'A' focus group identified the issue of *"emotional coaches taking the game too seriously"*. The affected students felt that the emotional engagement of their coaches was influencing their enjoyment of rugby and that the sport was becoming too serious, with unrealistic expectations from parents and coaching staff. This was further illustrated by one participant noting that *"self-doubt is having a significant impact on the way players feel in the rugby environment, and makes them feel less important and cared for"*.

However, “Coaches, like athletes, are often required to coach in highly pressurised environments, make critical decisions, deal with adversity, and are held to incredibly high expectations” (Hodgson, Butt and Maynard, 2017, p.440).

In this experience of some members of this focus group, the adult expectations generated a sense of self-doubt and undermined the confidence of the student. The emphasis on ‘winning’ rather than playing for ‘fun’ detracted from the participant’s enjoyment of the game.

As with coaching expectations, the influence of parents can sometimes have an undesirable effect within the secondary school rugby environment, and although family support is essential in building a positive social culture within rugby, it can also result in unfortunate side-line behaviour.

This issue was highlighted within the focus group at school ‘C’ as students’ emphasized the fact that parents *“help build you up mentally, but can also tear you down from the side-line and post-game”*. The fact that none of participants knew what New Zealand Rugby is doing to help stamp out anti-social side-line behaviour was surprising. A key initiative within New Zealand Rugby is ‘APPLAUD’. A positive environment for everyone to enjoy rugby is at the heart of the APPLAUD initiative, and aims to encourage supporters to be good sports at schools and clubs and also to stamp out anti-social side-line behaviour (“Applaud - Random Rugby”, 2017). Further, ‘Aktive’ have an Auckland based approach to improving youth sport experiences through ‘Good Sports’. The Good Sport Program, led by Aktive – Auckland Sport and Recreation, and funded by Sport New Zealand, New Zealand Community Trust, Massey University and AUT University aims to:

Create positives sporting experiences for Kiwi kids by supporting and educating the key adult influencers in children’s sport: parents, coaches, teachers and sport administrators. Both practitioners and researchers supporting Good Sports agree that issues in children's sport, such as poor side-line behaviour, early onset of overuse injury, burnout and disaffection with sport, stem from adult involvement in children’s sport and can ultimately hinder success on and off the field (“About Good Sports”, 2017).

Programs such as Aktive's 'Good Sports' are essential to foster a safe developmental culture within rugby, along with the New Zealand Rugby coach education and development strategy. These are important resources for the adults delivering the rugby experience and can help improve the overall youth sporting experience.

Social Factors

Social factors were identified as important elements in the student's experience of the secondary school rugby environment. This section discusses three main points.

- Camaraderie, described by participants as 'brotherhood';
- Team Culture, and;
- Arrogance and elitism.

When asked about what was particularly enjoyable about the rugby experience, every focus group used the term "Brotherhood" to describe the sense of camaraderie and belonging they took from playing with their team mates. The notion of a '*brotherhood*' is reflective of the need for identity and belonging, which serves to emphasise the importance in young people of family, relationships, and school pride. In the rugby context this can be seen as, embracing the challenge, or as one participant said "*...going into battle with your mates*".

'Team culture' is a second social factor identified by the participating schools which is seen as important in creating a greater sense of team camaraderie. Team culture "...is largely defined by how much the leaders and team members of the culture value productivity in terms of achieving results, and how much they value people and relationships" (Janssen & Brandon, n.d., p.56). The creation of a strong and positive team culture within a sports team is illustrative of the positive impacts of the social dimensions of rugby.

Focus group participants observed that their schools were emphasising the importance of 'family' as part of school culture and that this was a positive factor for their rugby experience. Within this 'constructive' team culture, there is a strong focus on relationships, with teammates striving to get along and develop solid bonds with each other. This culture was generally seen as positive, productive and often successful, both on and off the playing field.

However, 'team culture' was seen as having both a positive and negative influence; the positive side being the concept of 'brotherhood' and developing strong relationships through rugby; but the negative aspects being the over-emphasis on winning.

The negative aspect was most discussed at school 'C'. When asked "what are the worst things about playing rugby", there was a lot of talk about arrogance and the emphasis on a mentality too focused on winning, a factor that was seen to be reflected through the attitude of coaches. This emphasis on a winning culture encourages specialisation and achievement, which can actively discourage kids from trying new things or just playing for fun (Hodgson, Butt & Maynard, 2017). Further, focus group participants at school 'B' felt the heavy focus on 'winning' created an intimidating environment for new-comers to the game and led to expectations of coaches on students that were perceived as unfair.

Sport, properly conceived and conducted, can teach important qualities of character, but these qualities do not come automatically, and there are many negative qualities that poorly conducted sport also teaches (Siedentop, 2002). While success is a very important aspect of the sporting contest, the idea that New Zealand's secondary school rugby team culture has become 'too serious' requires some reflection, especially for lower levels of rugby, if New Zealand Rugby wants to create the perception of playing for 'fun'.

As students start secondary school in New Zealand the system of youth sport is geared more towards competitive aspects and is generally designed to meet the needs of the more competitive students. This factor emerged in discussion with all the focus groups in response to the question as to why 'they think their friends don't play rugby'. While the most prominent response was choice of other sports, a recurring factor was the seriousness, level of intensity, and 'professionalisation' of secondary school rugby, which was seen by many of the focus group participants students as detracting from the notion of fun. One comment was that the Auckland rugby culture "no longer supports older kids playing for the fun of it, because of the pressure to be successful", meaning that we expect them to be the best, and if they're not, they're encouraged to cut their losses and focus on areas where they can excel" (Miner, 2017, p.1).

"There are three primary goals that can be put forward to define junior sport programs: the educative goal, the public health goal, and the elite-development goal. There

is a fourth goal that is less apparent but nonetheless important, that of preserving, protecting, and enhancing sport practices” (Siedentop, 2002, p.1). However, having spoken to both the sports coordinators at each school and analysing feedback from focus groups, the rugby culture reflected through the schools is seen to be more in-line with a ‘cut throat culture’.

In this type of culture, results reign supreme. Talent and performance are the sole criteria of success in this merciless and unforgiving culture, whereas character and people skills are often neglected. Winning is all that matters. If you can get the job done, we’ll overlook your selfishness, extreme character flaws, off field antics, and acerbic attitude. (Janssen & Brandon, n.d., p.57)

School ‘A’ focus group identified a strong emphasis on winning amongst its coaches, and expressed a view that unrealistic expectations are sometimes being asked of them within their school’s rugby environment. The most obvious projection of these expectations came from one participant commenting that *“having the expectancy to win week in and week out is creating a lot of self-doubt within the students...”* and *“... they never feel like they are doing enough unless they win. It just isn’t fun”*. Such a culture can create increased levels of anxiety and insecurity amongst students, and can have a major bearing on a student’s willingness to engage in the rugby experience. Perhaps more importantly, the underlying message that “I have to be the best or I’ve failed” can be deeply harmful to students’.

Sport at school is a powerful learning experience which can be hugely influential in helping students build resilience; to cope with failure, and to recover. Building a constructive environment around the sporting experience is something that coaches and educators see as desperately needed within the secondary school sporting environment (Miner, 2017).

Health & Wellbeing

Health and wellbeing of players is an essential aspect to consider within the secondary school rugby experience. In this area, New Zealand Rugby has a strong emphasis on dealing with concussion and injury prevention, providing a safer environment for young people during the game, and advocating for a drug and alcohol-free environment.

During discussions with the four focus groups, participants were asked to share their experiences about the worst aspects of playing rugby. The immediate response from all focus groups was anxiety about ‘injury’, and consequences arising from injury.

Reality is that the contact nature rugby and the risk of injury, go hand in hand. This reality is reflected in Accident Compensation Commission (ACC) statistics, which record that between July 2016 and June 2017, there were 15,809 new rugby related injury claims, 19,878 existing rugby injury claims, costing \$20,430,137 to the New Zealand tax payer. The incidence of rugby-related injuries has led New Zealand Rugby to put more emphasis and resource into player welfare and educating players at all levels about the importance of injury recognition, prevention, and management. The obligation to support the health, safety and well-being of those involved in New Zealand rugby, is both for the good of the game and the communities where it’s played ("Rugby Wellbeing", 2017).

The most common injury concern expressed by the focus groups was that of concussion. Participants clearly indicated that, amongst peers and family, concerns about potential concussions was an influencer in their willingness to engage in the rugby union. New Zealand Rugby has recognised and acknowledged the paramount importance of Addressing concussion and has established initiatives to educate and make aware to referees, players and coaches the importance and seriousness of the injury. The implementation of protocols following a suspected concussion i.e. ‘Recognise, Remove, Recover and Return’ journey, are adopted at all levels of Rugby.

An interesting consequence of concussion stand-down was noted by focus group participants at school ‘B’. Comment was passed that while *“concussions can put them off wanting to play rugby altogether”*, the loss of connection experienced during the stand-down period made it more difficult for them to reintegrate into the rugby environment post-concussion. Because participants were less engaged in team activities and trainings while on concussion stand-down, it meant that, as school ‘B’ highlighted, they *“felt more significant feelings of isolation from their rugby team”*, and also found *“that regaining their position within the team once they were fit to play became much harder”*. This disengagement through injury was seen as a frustrating part of the rugby experience and could lead to players being less likely to continue engaging in the sport.

One of the most interesting findings relating to health and safety within secondary school rugby was the enthusiasm for the non-contact forms of rugby union. When School 'C' was asked "You will have mates that don't play rugby. Do you know why they don't play, and if not, why do you think they don't?" and "What changes that could be made would help you to continue playing rugby?" much of the conversation focused around the lack of opportunity to play non-contact forms of rugby at school and the lack of opportunity to participate in more of a social rugby environment. Although these comments may be reflective of a particular school, it is important to recognise that non-contact forms of rugby could be a way to get more secondary students involved in some form of rugby and help players who are on stand-down periods to continue to engage in the experience. This finding seems to align with New Zealand Rugby's Wider Auckland Strategy, which is experimenting with new and innovative competitions and formats, and which builds on the existing relationship between rugby and touch, to leverage the natural synergies between the two codes and create a 12-month community calendar, in turn ensuring rugby remains accessible and provides positive experiences for all (Wider Auckland Sport of Choice, 2016).

Competition Structure

Competition structure, along with the performance of referees was seen as having an important influence on the enjoyment of players of secondary school rugby. Focus groups identified several challenges and factors relating to competition structure:

- Size difference of players on the field;
- Player transition from school to club rugby;
- Poor refereeing;
- The appeal of other sports;
- Time commitment;

as being the most influential competition-related factors influencing their enjoyment of rugby. In particular, no-one enjoyed games that were excessively one sided, whether they were winning or losing, and participants felt particularly frustrated when subject to what they perceived as poor refereeing. As one participant said "*...a one-sided game that just isn't fun*".

According to school 'B', the size difference between players on the field is one of the most intimidating factors in the current secondary school competition structure. *"Having to play against much larger students makes you feel as if you're playing in the wrong grade and you begin to doubt whether you are cut out to play rugby at all"*.

The varying demographic nature of Auckland rugby means that the game is played by people from many different nationalities and ethnic groups. The impact varies from school to school, but does appear to have a different influence on the students from school to school. Although all schools that took part in the focus groups commented about the relative age effect, it was most emphasised at school 'B'. This particular school fell within Auckland Rugby's 'Central' provincial union which had a diverse ethnic make-up.

Having a transparent player pathway for secondary school students' is an important focus area to stem secondary school rugby's disconnection and at present, fewer players are making the transition from school to club. It is therefore essential that New Zealand Rugby adapt to the changing needs of the Auckland communities and explore opportunities to further develop the game, challenge convention and extend tailored support to those delivering the rugby experience (Wider Auckland Sport of Choice, 2016).

Meeting the needs of current secondary school competitions poses issues around the increasing pressure from a wide variety of sports competing for places and spaces for recreation around and the officials needed to deliver the rugby experience. Within each of the four schools the emphasis on quality of fields and officials drew much attention, and was a considerable factor influencing the engagement of students'.

Highlighted by school 'C' was the increasing prevalence of inexperienced referees, including in some cases referees not having the physical fitness and technical knowledge to keep up with the game. Participants felt a combination of frustration and resentment towards officials and this also adversely effected their on-field experience, and increased the anger from students', coaches, and staff.

Research Limitations

This project comprised a literature research followed up by a qualitative data gathering process involving interview of a sample population from pre-selected schools in the wider Auckland area. Naturally, the research has limitations.

Firstly, the sample population was small as compared to the total population of secondary school rugby players in the wider Auckland area. There are 507 secondary schools in the wider Auckland area and approximately 40,000 total registered players across the region. The sample population of this research was approximately forty students. The small population sample may have limited the ability to establish and confirm a broader consensus, reflective of wider Auckland attitudes and beliefs around the current rugby experience. This limitation may have led to bias in the conclusions and recommendations and further research may be warranted to validate these findings. Therefore, although strong and common themes emerged from the focus group interviews, care must be taken in extrapolating the findings of this research to the entire secondary student rugby playing population.

Related to this limitation is the absence of an originally intended fifth focus group from the North Harbour rugby playing area. Consequently, the research has a geographical bias to central and South Auckland. The fifth focus group was from Auckland Rugby's 'North Harbour' provincial union and it is possible that student motivations and attitudes may have differed.

The third and final limitation relates to the qualitative nature of the focus group interviews and the limited time. Interviews were limited to about 45 minutes and held during the students' lunch time or after school hours. The workshops attempted to explore the four identified themes, but time allocated for discussions did not allow observations and comments from the focus groups to be checked or validated. Therefore, observations and comments of students were taken at face value. Neither did time allow for exploration of other themes, leading to the potential omission of secondary themes.

The results of this research should be seen as a small building block, which aim to provide greater understanding of issues behind a number of key themes. Further research is needed to explore more deeply the key issues applicable to each of the main themes, especially the area of 'adult influences', about which there was recurring commentary. It is suggested that any future study could look towards the athlete-coach relationship and the

significance of this in building a positive socially inclusive environment for increased engagement within Auckland secondary school rugby union.

Conclusion

In exploring the causes of males aged 14-18 years old disengaging in Auckland's secondary school rugby, four main themes emerged, all of which are already recognised by New Zealand Rugby:

- Adult behavioural influences
- Social factors
- Health and wellbeing
- Competition structure.

In seeking insights from the Auckland secondary schools' students, New Zealand Rugby has been consistent with its guiding principles which include being agile and of challenging themselves to be modern and ready for the future through innovation and research (Wider Auckland Sport of Choice, 2016). The findings of this research project between AUT and New Zealand Rugby identified issues of adverse adult behaviour, social factors, health and safety, and competition structures, that are significantly impacting the student perception of 'fun' within the Auckland rugby experience, leading to greater disengagement within the game.

Although this study had an extensive reach within the wider Auckland rugby landscape, one of the most important limitations is the number of participants involved. The research drew from 42 students from four schools within Counties-Manukau and Auckland Central schools. Therefore, this research may not have uncovered other themes that are seen to be influence disengagement in different areas of Auckland, and may not reflect the majority of secondary school rugby players. Further, the absence of a focus group within the North Harbour provincial union means that Auckland's varying demographics are not fully considered within the study.

Throughout this research the purpose was to explore factors influencing secondary school rugby disengagement, and can be seen through the four primary themes highlighted in the findings. However, there has been no means in these themes have been validated, therefore, further research into the key themes is necessary to gain a greater understanding on their exact influence on secondary school disengagement.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Secondary School Focus Group Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Focus Group

Title of Project: Secondary School Rugby- Testing Actions to Redress Declining Participation

Project Coordinator: Lesley Ferkins

Project Supervisor: Simon Devoy

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated dd / mm / yyyy:
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that identity of my fellow participants and our discussions in the focus group is confidential to the group and I agree to keep this information confidential.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the focus group and that it will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.
- If I withdraw, I understand that while it may not be possible to destroy all records of the focus group discussion of which I was part, the relevant information about myself including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will not be used.
- I agree to take part in this research.

Participant School :

Participant Name :

Participant Signature :

Date:

AUTEC Reference number 08/121

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix 2: Selection Criteria

The central purpose of this research paper is to enhance our understanding of the motivations and experiences of young people in terms of their engagement with the sport of rugby union in New Zealand. The work is the result of collaboration between Auckland University of Technology (AUT) and New Zealand Rugby. The research project focuses on declining participation within New Zealand Rugby and targets 14-18-year-old males and school rugby administrators, all from the wider Auckland area.

In its simplest terms, the methods underpinning the research are a combination of literature research and the collection by interview, and analysis thereof, of insights from young people currently attending school and playing Rugby, and school sports administrators.

A collaborative action learning approach was taken when engaging with school sports administrators and students'. The action learning approach adopted by this project is educational in that learning takes place by combining both doing and reflection. Action learning tackles problems through a process of first asking questions to clarify the exact nature of the problem, reflecting and identifying possible solutions, and moving toward consideration of strategies and possible action (Ferkins & Fleming, 2017).

A thematic approach to data analysis was adopted to complement the active learning process. "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.77).

Data collection was acquired through both literature research and interviews, the latter via a series of 45minute workshops with focus groups aimed at pre-selected Auckland secondary schools. Selection of the schools was based on the recommendations of New Zealand Rugby.

This action learning approach has been effective in terms of engaging with students', drawing out the issues from students' and administrators, and enabling transparency in the collection and recording of data. The method assisted the emergence of meaningful insights into influences impacting disengagement from the sport, thereby enabling development of

appropriate strategies to address declining participation. The combination of action learning and thematic analysis has been an effective way to make sense of the qualitative data.

Location

Focus groups interviews took place in Auckland's three rugby regions (Counties Manukau, Central, and North Harbour). The interviews were intended to identify comparisons comparison between some of Auckland's regions and provincial unions, and to provide further insights into the issue of declining participation in Rugby across the wider Auckland area.

New Zealand's schools are attributed a classification rating intended to generally reflect the socio-economic demographic of the area in which the school is located. i.e. the 'decile system'. This attribute is "*...a measure of the socio-economic position of a school's student community relative to other schools throughout the country*" (Zealand, 2017), and provides for better understanding of the needs of a particular school thus enabling resources to be appropriately targeted. The decile is measured through the "*...percentage of households with income in the lowest 20% nationally, percentage of employed parents in the lowest skill level occupational groups; household crowding; percentage of parents with no educational qualifications; and percentage of parents receiving income support benefits*" (Zealand, 2017).

Age

Attendees of the interviews were students aged 14-18, consistent with the project's focus.

Insight

It was necessary to ensure that participants had adequate knowledge and experience with the community rugby context to ensure relevant and meaningful data collection. It is also important to note that both positive and negative perceptions of the rugby experience were accounted for to allow for an honest interpretation of rugby experience through the participants perspective.

Secondary School Selection - School 'A'

School A is a decile 6, State co-educational secondary school situated in Auckland's central suburbs and falls within Auckland Rugby's 'central' provincial union. The schools' current roll is more than 2,800 students with a near 50/50 ratio of boys to girls with 220 current registered male rugby players. School 'A' is widely considered to be among the top sporting schools in the country, with a history considered to be among the top sporting schools in the country, with a history of winning numerous Auckland and New Zealand championship titles within rugby union. All students are encouraged to take part in at least one sport for the physical, social, and character building aspects that sport provides for young people (*"About the school – School A", 2017*).

The school delivers its sports curriculum a number of ways, including via Sports Academies. Rugby union is one of the focus sports for which an academy has been established along with a clear set of values and beliefs underpinning the school, and the Sports Academies. The aim of each academy is to foster a culture of excellence in which students' have the opportunity to reach their potential. The existence of an academy for rugby union is a reason for inviting School 'A' to take part in New Zealand Rugby's secondary school disengagement research project.

Secondary School Selection - School 'B'

School 'B' is a is a decile 4, State co-educational secondary school situated in Auckland's central suburbs and falls within Auckland Rugby's 'central' provincial union. The school's current roll is more than 2,200 students with 160 current registered male rugby players. School B puts significant weight to the importance of sport and also has dedicated sports academies to *"provide students' with in-school time for training and theory lessons on sports performance"* (*"School 'B' Sport | Home of School 'B' Sport", 2017*). The school's rugby academy's objective is to provide a top-class rugby education to our best Year 9 and 10 players.

Secondary School Selection - School 'C'

School 'C' is a Decile 5, State co-educational secondary school situated in Auckland's southern suburbs, and falls within Auckland Rugby's provincial union of Counties Manukau. The schools' current roll is 1,717 students', with 158 current registered male rugby players. School 'A' has a proud history of participation and achievement in sport at local and national

levels. It is an important dimension of the young person's education, particularly at secondary school level. These activities develop physical, mental and social skills. ("School 'C' Sport", 2017).

Secondary School Selection - School 'D'

School 'D' is a Decile 5 State co-educational secondary school situated in Auckland's southern suburbs and falls with Auckland Rugby's provincial union of Counties Manukau. The school's current roll is 1,822 with 130 current registered male rugby players. Although sport is not compulsory, school 'C' provides a vast range of sports for students' to get involved and has a range of rugby teams competing in a number of Auckland's secondary school competitions.

Appendix 3 - Focus Group Interviews – Detailed Process and Questions

Step 1- Introduction

- Introduce yourself and ask the students to introduce themselves to you (2 mins)
- Explain VERY briefly why you are there - Use simple and direct language to provide focus group context.
 - E.g. Rugby is a great sport and New Zealand is the best in the world at playing the sport. School rugby here is the envy of the world – you guys are the best.
 - To stay the best, we must figure out why you enjoy the game, what you don't like about the game, and what it is that you seek for continued enjoyment and playing of rugby.
 - I am here to learn and we are all here to have a bit of fun talking about a sport we love.
 - Allow 5 mins. Address questions but move quickly to the agenda.
- Set out some ground rules for the discussion e.g.
 - Respect the views of your mates
 - All equal
 - No idea is a bad idea

-
- One conversation at a time – don't cut across your mates
 - No put-downs

Step 2: Warm-up

The purpose of this section is to gain insights as to how students' *feel* about PLAYING Rugby. (very open, no agenda). Spend 10 minutes only on this. E.g.

- E.g. *'So I have a few questions I want to ask'. But before we start, I want you to think about how you feel before you go out to play a game, and how you feel after the game.*
- Get them to shout out words and write them on the white board.
- Emphasis around never putting anyone down, don't let the other guys put any of their mates down – all ideas are ok – simply write them up and consider the merits later when reviewing the data.
- A good way to do it is simply to go around the room one at a time and get them to add one idea – don't dwell if someone is quiet – just say – 'keep thinking – we'll come around again'. Once the ideas dry up – say 'ok, that's enough now I want you to use those thoughts to answer three questions'.
- take a photo of the whiteboard to capture their ideas
- Spend no more than 10 minutes on the ideas/feelings brainstorm.

Step 3: Key Questions

- By now the session should have been running for about 15-20 minutes. Must keep the plan moving. Next select three headline questions.
- Allow 6-7 minutes' discussion on the first 2 questions. Note that some of the answers will be a bit of a duplicate of what is already on the white board – but don't worry about that – just let it flow

-
- **Question 1: “What are the three best things you enjoy about PLAYING Rugby?”**
 - If the start is slow, give them some prompters
 - Explore answers – get them to try and explain a bit more about what they mean
 - Get them to talk about what is fun and enjoyable?
 - Write up ideas on a whiteboard and get them to change the words or add ideas.

 - **Question 2: “In your rugby experiences, what is the worst thing about PLAYING Rugby?”**
 - As above
 - What is one thing that would make that worst thing better?
 - If you could change rugby to be more ‘fun’ what’s the first thing you would change?

 - **Question 3: “You will have mates that don’t play rugby. Do you know why they don’t play, and if not, why do you think they don’t?”**
 - Allow the participants to share their thoughts and views – don’t write down names, but make sure to take a careful record of the answers.

 - **Question 4: “What changes that could be made would help you to continue playing rugby?”**