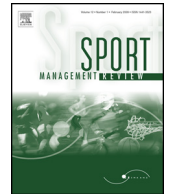




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Power and discourse in the politics of evidence in sport for development

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ABSTRACT

The field of sport for development (SFD) has been criticised for the way that evidence has been produced and used to account for and demonstrate the perceived success of SFD programmes. Much of this critique has highlighted shortcomings in approaches to monitoring and evaluation (M&E), which underpins a perceived weak evidence base concerning what works, why and within which contexts (Coalter, 2007; Coalter & Taylor, 2010; Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Conceptually a lack of evidence discourse (Nicholls et al., 2010) has emerged. This paper explores and analyses the power dynamics that shape this discourse and argues that an understanding of the dominant neoliberal context within which SFD is located is critical. While offering a Foucauldian framework, the power, knowledge and discourse related to political actors in SFD processes are examined. This paper addresses two key questions: what is power and who is it for? Whose interests are served in the interpretation, generation and reporting of evidence? The paper concludes that the role of the sport development practitioner (SDP) is underprivileged and to enable the field of sport for development (SFD) to move forward, the very people who implement the programmes need to be better understood. Furthermore it is argued that a deeper understanding and interpretation of the terrain of the sport development practitioner (SDP) within UK and international shores are a necessity if a more open and transparent knowledge transfer process, surrounding evidence, is to be entered into.

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1. Introduction

The sport for development (SFD) field has witnessed considerable growth over the last decade with huge growth in the number of programmes that use sport as a tool to address social issues. Sport development is a contested term that is often used variably to indicate the application of both policy and practice in encouraging, increasing and possibly sustaining participation in sport (e.g. see Bramham & Hylton, 2008; Girginov, 2010). Conceptualisations of sport development (SD) vary, often according to power and interest differentials and it is quite clear that there is a fundamental dichotomy in understanding how SD is conceived of and implemented within programmes. This polarising division is succinctly captured by the terms development of sport or development through sport (Houlihan & White, 2002). The former, also known as sport for sport's sake (Collins, 2010; Devine, 2013) and/or sport plus (Coalter, 2007), tends to leverage sport participation, for the

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benefit of those participating. Development through sport or plus sport (Coalter, 2007) conversely tends to use sport as a vehicle to address a range of wider social issues emanating from the social problems industry (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Pitter & Andrews, 1997) such as improving health (Edwards & Casper, 2012), reducing crime and tackling obesity (Houlihan & White, 2002).

These two categories of sport development compete in political, social, economic and cultural ways. Politically, each category infers particular policy contexts that condition and construct what might be regarded as politically useable resources (Allison, 1986; Collins, 2008; Darnell, 2012). Socially, each category suggests a particular approach to collective action problems and the meaning of sport for both the individual and society (Adams, 2012; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). Economically, each category sets forth the scale of impact that is possible and implores more of the available scarce resources necessary to make the anticipated impact (Grix & Carmichael, 2012). Culturally, each category addresses separate norms and values that again relate to the meaning of sport, but also address wider issues of socialisation and community development (Coakley, 2011; Lindsey & Adams, 2013). These distinctions and divisions are of relevance to sport management scholars insofar that on the one hand sport development is arguably a sub-branch of the discipline and yet on the other hand it provides a point of tension, an almost dialectic, to the emphasis on managing under dominant contexts in the provision of mass sport opportunities (Adams, 2012). Certainly those familiar with Rittel and Webber's seminal paper *Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning* (1973) will acknowledge the persistence of 'wicked problems' in and through the delivery of sport programmes. Their argument when applied to the sport domain—that many problems with which sport is charged with 'fixing' are poorly defined, lack clarity and are resistant to clear and agreed solutions (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Nols, 2012)—has a clear resonance for sport managers. These distinctions in the utility of sport have led a range of actors to explore how and where sport can be treated instrumentally for particular purposes or with specific outcomes in mind. It is from this latter field of 'development through sport' that sport for development (SFD) has emerged as an umbrella term that captures some of the many roles that sport can play in addressing social issues in different societies. Ontologically SFD is rooted in the idea that participatory forms of sport can be a good thing in making a purposeful, strategic and positive contribution to society. Crucially however, similar to Green (2009), we recognise that it is not sport per se that is responsible for specific outcomes, but rather the manner and context of its implementation.

With an increasing global focus on SFD, the field has regularly been required to demonstrate accountability for investment made by funders via robust and systematic approaches to evidence that centre upon proving the place of sport within development (Kay, 2012). While accepting differences in global contexts, it is clear that similarities persist; none more so than in the dominance of neoliberalism (Hall, Massey, & Rustin, 2013). Globally, idioms of modernisation that share a reciprocal relationship with neoliberal disciplines have dominated the contexts and frameworks within which SFD operates (Coakley, 2011; Green, 2007; Sam, 2009). It is within this broad context of neoliberalism and modernisation, with an emphasis on evidence as the golden goose of validity, that the field of SFD has been roundly criticised. In part this is due to the imposition of performance indicators (PI), which have, in a modernised sport system, depowered delivery agents while reaffirming the dominance of external stakeholders (Coalter & Taylor, 2010; Taylor, 2009). Despite some significant contributions to the field recently concerning the positive attributes associated with SFD (e.g. Crabbe, 2007; Frisby, Crawford, & Dorer, 1997; Schulenkorf, 2012; Sugden, 1991), there still remains scepticism and critique surrounding some of the issues and shortcomings of certain approaches to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) (Coalter, 2007, 2010b; Edwards, 2015; Kay, 2012; Smith & Leach, 2010). This has amplified and exacerbated what Nicholls et al. (2010) call a lack of evidence discourse. Such failings have been attributed to a poor understanding and application of how and why programmes work and a lack of robust, research based evidence concerning the outcomes of sport participation (Adams & Harris, 2014; Coalter, 2007). This amounts to sport being a necessary but not sufficient condition for the achievement of social outcomes (Coalter, 2010a), making sport a contingent variable rather than a lone remedy.

We address two central questions in this article to examine the above issues: (1) how is the lack of evidence discourse constructed and what is its impact and (2) whose interests are served in the interpretation, generation and reporting of evidence? To provide answers we first examine the themes and contexts that make up and shape the lack of evidence discourse within neoliberal derived modernisation contexts; and second use a Foucauldian understanding of power, knowledge and discourse to examine aspects of the power dynamics that shape attitudes and approaches to evidence among different political actors. First, however a quick caveat is needed. In seeking to avoid charges of being overly reductivist or conflationary, we fully recognise that M&E work may come with its own baggage, depending upon time and space. M&E practice occurring in developmental arenas, for example, carries the potential burden of neo-colonial and ideological values. Similarly, when addressing programme delivery, it is likely that significant cultural gaps may exist between those doing the M&E work and those delivering projects on the ground. These issues are not new and resonate with concerns for the value and importance of indigenous knowledge in empowering and enabling local communities for development which was crystallised in the 1999 Kampala Declaration. Notwithstanding these differences, addressed in much of the development literature elsewhere (e.g. Wallace, Bornstein, & Chapman, 2007), contextual synthesis has been an issue in the M&E literature (e.g. Jeanes & Lindsey, 2014; Kay, 2009, 2012).

2. The (lack of) evidence discourse

The evidence based policy discourse is significant in reflecting the dominance of neo-liberal policy agendas in many countries from the 1980s onwards. At the broadest of levels, neo-liberal policies, pursued by national governments and

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