

## Youth Sport, Physical Activity and Play: An Introduction

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Whether structured or spontaneous, sport, physical activity and play are fundamental aspects of everyday life. At the same time they are subject to the ebb and flow of political priorities and wider economic conditions. Over the past 50 years this proposition has been clearly borne out within the UK context. During that time government intervention and policy initiatives involving sport, physical activity and play have been utilised to address a whole series of issues concerning health, education, employment and social exclusion (Collins, 2003; Green, 2006; Grix, 2010). In the late 1950s and early 60s, the Albermarle (1959) and Wolfenden (1960) reports began to explicitly promote sport's potential to engender positive lifestyle choices and benefits (McIntosh and Charlton, 1985). The 1970s and 80s subsequently saw sporting provision framed as a necessity in the battle to reduce urban unrest, and to aid policy planning, issues which were poignantly reflected in the Sports Council's earliest 'Sport for all' campaign.

**Comment [D1]:** Is the syntax right here?

More recently physical activity has been associated with having a positive impact on a range of personal conditions and characteristics: increased self-confidence, self-esteem, elevated levels of motivation and well-being, reduced fatigue and depression (Coalter, 2004, 2008). It has also been embraced as a resource which has the capacity to nurture a sense of active citizenship and to promote social interaction and exchange (Nichols, 2007; Muncie, 2009; Theeboom et al., 2010). These claims highlight the extent to which sport and physical activity can impinge positively on individuals and communities. Such qualities and benefits have been widely recognised and acclaimed in government policies and strategies concerning children and young people (see, for example, Social Exclusion Unit, 2002; Department of

**Comment [D2]:** This sentence feels a little clumsy to me. Could we be clearer about what or who has done the embracing at the start of the sentence. This might alleviate the need to include the 'resource which has the capacity' clause which I think adds to the clunkiness of the sentence.

**Comment [D3]:** Are they claims?

Education, 2003; Department for Education and Skills, 2005). Of late there has also been particular interest in the way that sport might positively contribute to the lives of vulnerable people (International Olympic Committee, 2000; European Commission, 2007; Kelly, 2011).

The promotion of physically active lifestyles (especially amongst youth) and the restructuring of sporting governance during the post-1997 era has, of course, been well documented (see Collins, 2011; Grix, 2009; 2011). Yet despite heavy investment by the former (New) Labour government to address this and a range of other social issues, the advent of economic downturn in recent years has led to a climate of fiscal austerity amidst which the continued resourcing of sport has been placed at risk. It is in this, and a host of other ways, that young people are said to be ‘bearing the brunt’ of the current financial crisis. Government cuts to public spending and welfare provision mean that certain groups are now at even greater risk of social exclusion. Cuts to Job Seekers Allowance, Educational Maintenance Grants and soaring Higher Education tuition fees are just some examples of the way in which young people are experiencing the conditions and consequences of economic instability.

How then, we might ask, does government intend to address such issues and what part will sport and physical activity play in the grander scheme of things. The Coalition government has been clear in its intentions with regards to sport policy favouring investment in elite performance and the promotion of competitive games in schools over and above mass participation (DCMS, 2012). At a wider level policy initiatives have an altogether more ‘collective’ feel. On 19<sup>th</sup> July 2010, David Cameron launched the idea of the ‘Big Society’, claiming that it was an innovative approach to dealing with issues affecting local communities. Despite widespread confusion and criticism, the concept rests, it seems, on the notion of promoting the empowerment of individuals to help themselves (Stott, 2011; McAll,

2011) rather than on interventionist techniques (Waring and Mason, 2010) or indeed the model adopted by Labour which relied on increasing income levels, welfare rights and access to socio-economic provision. Public promotion of the Big Society has witnessed the Prime Minister campaigning passionately about devolving power to local communities so as to better enable local people to have a voice in the decisions that affect their everyday lives and the services that they access (such as post offices, public libraries, parks, community centres and housing regeneration projects; almost all of which have been subject to recent public funding cuts).

Although the focus on building sustainable and cohesive communities in and through collective action exposes the social communitarian aspect of the concept, a central strand of the 'Big Society' agenda rests on the regeneration of social, moral and civic responsibility and a sense of altruism (Haugh, 2011; Knox, 2011). According to David Cameron, empowering communities through collective action is fundamentally aimed at supporting the most disadvantaged. Collective localised practices that rely on cross-sector collaborations between the private, public, voluntary and community sectors and social enterprises can certainly offer benefits such as promoting attachments to one's neighbourhood, boosting community morale, and fostering a greater sense of cohesion and belonging (Chanan and Miller, 2011; Haugh, 2011; Knox, 2011). There is a dearth of empirical evidence surrounding the outworking of Big Society rhetoric and only time will tell whether or not this will manifest itself in productive social action. Likewise, time will tell how these political ideals will shape policy on sport, physical activity play and how these elements of everyday life might be seen as vehicles through which to achieve a renewed sense of social cohesion.

Of course, what all of this highlights is that sport does not exist in a social vacuum. On the contrary, it evolves and develops in accordance with a variety of broader factors and forces. Modern-day sports policy looks like it does because it has been (and continues to be) shaped and formed in line with the turbulence of social existence (economics, politics, etc.) which, in turn, makes it what it is. The relationship between sport and young people is no different. This too is a reflection of the way in which sport has increasingly impacted wider society and has progressed from being a marginal social concern to an established feature of political decision-making. It is neither the intention nor the remit of this book to debate the pros and cons of such matters but what the following chapters do illustrate is the way in which related policy has developed over time and how, with this in mind, we might think further about young people's experiences of sport.

**Comment [D4]:** Is it worth saying something about the scope of policy under consideration in this book at this point? i.e. that we are not trying to cover every policy document in a chronological fashion. Do we need to say something about the theoretical underpinnings?

### Chapter structure

And so to the contents. The book is divided into three parts which correspond to its main themes: policy, intervention, and participation.

Tracking the historical trajectory of UK sport policy has been a central pre-occupation for a number of scholars over the years. That said, relatively few have explored in detail either the broader social factors impacting policy formulation or the international comparisons available. Even fewer have been written by those who have experienced life at the forefront of policy change. In achieving all of these objectives Mike Collins kick-starts proceedings in **Chapter 1** with an overview of UK policy development in youth sport, physical activity and play since the 1960s. Crucial here is not only Collins' analysis of the different ways in which successive governments have engaged with sport but, in addition, how wider political motives and decisions have shaped the contours of policy outcomes.

One of the things which is often absent from discussions surrounding the construction of domestic social policy is a broader sense of why such decisions are made and how they relate (or not) to what is going on elsewhere. Building upon the international snapshots outlined by Collins, in **Chapter 2** Nic Matthews provides a detailed analysis of European policy in sport and cognate fields. As a specialist scholar in the area Matthews presents a detailed overview of how, since the European Union established the political and social pre-requisites for an economic union across Europe in 1992, subsequent Treaties and Declarations have facilitated a developing dialogue between European member states concerning sport, physical activity and play. For Matthews the key point about these developments is that in impacting the interdependencies between member states, altering the dynamics between governing bodies, and changing the way that policies are framed, agreements at the European level have led to a whole series of benefits not only in relation to institutional practice but also the promotion and protection of individual rights.

Of course, ~~now~~ where is this notion of ‘rights’ more important than in the lives of children and young people and in **Chapter 3** we look at how social policy formulation has accommodated such issues specifically in the area of play. Over the years, much has been written about sport and physical activity but relatively little about play. This book sets out to offer some kind of corrective in this respect. In so doing this chapter showcases the work of Stuart Lester and Wendy Russell, two well established academics and practitioners in the field. Drawing on a wealth of experience and expertise, Lester and Russell provide a critique of traditional notions of play as commonly articulated in policy objectives and propose, in their place, an altogether new way of conceptualising play in the interests of a renewed sense of spontaneity and informality in terms of its delivery. At a time when the policy landscape in this area appears to be contracting, such debates are not only key to broadening public

understandings of the scope and remit of playwork but also to highlighting the philosophical underpinnings of its practices.

And so to part two, where we take a slightly different tack; one which is concerned with examples of sporting intervention. We begin in **Chapter 4** with the work of Denise Hill and colleagues who, from a practitioner perspective, present a psychological analysis of the ways in which school sport provision might be shaped to accommodate the needs of a group of young people who have disengaged from physical activity and who demonstrate low self-esteem. Hill et al's account provides a classic example of sporting intervention whereby incentive, innovation and empowerment come together to facilitate visible change in the lives of participants. Acknowledging the benefits of physical activity in relation to levels of self-esteem, the authors argue that government policy makers should not simply adopt a 'one-size-fits-all' model of school sport but should instead attempt to better understand why particular activities engage or disengage young people in order to capture the interest and imagination of those marginalised by traditional forms of curricular provision.

Discussions of marginalisation necessarily bring with them notions of exclusion which are also central to Andrew Parker and Rosie Meek's contribution in **Chapter 5**. Whilst the sport-related literature is replete with examples of intervention in community settings, to date few researchers have explored the impact of sport in custody. Parker and Meek report on the findings of one such study. As we have seen, sport has long been considered an antidote to a range of social ills but custodial environments operate in line with significant levels of regulation and, for this reason, the facilitation and delivery of physical activity is often subject to a variety of constraints. Nevertheless, what Parker and Meek show is that where there is a commitment on the part of the host institution to utilise sport both as a form of

personal engagement and as a broader educational pathway, participants may respond positively to this. As a consequence, individual experiences of such interventions may not only prove rewarding in a cognitive, physical and social sense but they may also hold longer lasting potential in terms of heightened aspirations, changing value structures, and improved lifestyle choices.

One of the things that often comes into question when debates around physical activity surface are notions of morality, closely followed by discussions of integrity and character. Amidst more general suggestions of moral decomposition, should we not be able to look to modern-day sport as promoter of positive values and qualities? Alas, sport does not always manage to live up to its historical (and philosophical) roots; fair play, respect (both for oneself and others), physical and emotional strength, discipline, loyalty, co-operation, self control. Of course, British society has long since engendered an affinity for sport and, in particular, its character building qualities. Hence, it is highly appropriate that in **Chapter 6** Mark Elliot and Andy Pitchford present findings from their research into The Football Association's (FA) 'Respect' programme which is designed to address anti-social behaviour within professional and amateur football in the UK. Set against the backdrop of broader policy measures the chapter examines the rationale behind the introduction of the programme and draws upon qualitative data to map the reaction of young people to the series of interventions that have been central to it. The chapter concludes by assessing the extent to which the initiative may impact social relations in football in a way that might engender a more respectful and civil participatory climate.

**Comment [D5]:** Is there a suitable adjective to describe the interventions which would make the end of this sentence sharper?

In **Chapter 7** we move overseas, yet we do so in line with the focus of the preceding discussion, respect; this time the cultural variety. In this chapter we are presented with

sporting intervention in its broadest sense whereby its associated characteristics and attributes are used to carry a series of wider messages in order to aid development goals. With the benefit of their extensive experience in the field of international (sport for) development, Elizabeth Annett and Samuel Mayuni present an overview of how one sporting initiative, ‘Sport Malawi’, seeks to bring about social transformation as a consequence of its work with young people around the issue of HIV/AIDS. Utilising notions of partnership and personal empowerment the chapter draws upon contemporary conceptions of development practice to illustrate the ways in which the building of in-depth, reciprocal relationships with local stakeholders (individuals and agencies) provides a basis upon which to achieve cultural acceptance and social impact. In conclusion, Annett and Mayuni reiterate the need for sport-for-development workers to consider the broader social norms, customs and traditions in play during programme design and implementation, emphasising that without an appropriate appreciation and understanding of cultural heritage, such initiatives may fail to relate to the everyday needs of those who they are originally designed to reach.

**Comment [D6]:** Does this sentence have too many clauses?

All of which takes us into section three where we move to the practicalities of participant experience. We begin this section in **Chapter 8** with a look at one of the key debates of our time, physical activity amongst adolescents. Here Christopher Owens and his co-authors explore contemporary concerns not only surrounding the perceived shortfall in the activity levels of children and young people but also the associated sedentary behaviours ~~that go alongside this~~. Drawing on research findings both from the UK and overseas, what Owens et al. present is a series of explainaions as to why it is important to have an understanding of physical activity and sedentary behaviour during adolescence. At the same time they examine current recommendations and policies aimed at reducing the decline in physical activity levels and the increase in sedentary behaviour through the course of adolescence. In closing

they articulate the need for further longitudinal studies examining the effects of such behaviours and the factors associated with subsequent behaviour change.

In **Chapter 9** we return to the school setting, this time for an analysis of the way in which decisions at the policy level impact curricular provision and, in turn, shape the contours of participant experience. By way of their examination of key philosophical shifts in Physical Education and School Sport (PESS) over the last 10 years, Don Vinson and Matt Lloyd present an overview of two areas of practice which PESS teachers, coaches and support staff have developed over that period, namely: Fundamental Motor Skills (FMS) and Physical Literacy, both of which, the authors contend, have the potential to promote holistic and lifelong learning. On the basis of the evidence presented, Vinson and Lloyd suggest that contrary to recent policy developments, a more diverse physical education curriculum benefits, rather than detracts from, the sporting competence of young people and the likelihood of continued participation. For them PESS has made significant progress in the post-1997 period and there is a very real danger that a return to an emphasis on traditional competitive sports within schools will have a negative impact on pupil experience.

Physical education is not the only context to experience a more recent shift away from performance-oriented sporting provision. Coaching too has witnessed similar change. In **Chapter 10**, Simon Padley and Don Vinson stay with the theme of holistic development to present a series of arguments as to why policy moves of this nature should be viewed as highly desirable given the wider benefits for children and young people in terms of skill acquisition and personal progression. By way of an analysis of contemporary learning theory and a philosophical critique of 21<sup>st</sup> century sports coaching, the chapter challenges coach practitioners to reflect on the methods of delivery which they adopt and to consider the

experiences of the young people with whom they work. Padley and Vinson conclude by suggesting that by embracing contemporary pedagogic theory, it is possible for coaches to meet the demands of competitively-based, UK sport policy whilst at the same time adopting holistically-focussed coaching strategies.

Coaching, of course, is one area which has undergone significant transformation in recent years particularly in terms of accreditation pathways, a process which continues to evolve amidst the quest for professionalisation. Representing something of a historical (and, some would say, outdated) juxtaposition to this is the sporting volunteer, a role which is in rapid decline in the UK. Given that British sport has long since relied on volunteers to facilitate the activities of amateur clubs, and given that such altruistic contributions are at the heart of contemporary government thinking, where, we might ask, will the next generation of sports volunteers come from? This is the question posed by Hannah Mawson and Andrew Parker in **Chapter 11** as they assess the role of one sports leadership organisation, Sports Leaders UK (SLUK), in the perpetuation of these volunteer roles. Through a case study examination of the work of SLUK, Mawson and Parker provide an overview of the current position with regards to youth sport volunteering in Britain and an analysis of the demographic profiles of those who typically undertake SLUK awards. The authors go on to state that whilst in recent years there appears to have been a reduction in the number of young people taking up volunteer roles, there is evidence to suggest a reversal of this trend. In turn, they argue that the ‘Big Society’ model provides an ideal platform for sport development initiatives to flourish, particularly those which focus on volunteers and community empowerment.

In **Chapter 12**, we draw our foray into empirical research to a close with a further look at volunteering, this time in connection with marginalised and vulnerable young people. Taking

up some of the key themes explored in the previous chapter, here Samaya Farooq and colleagues report on findings from recent interviews with two groups of British migrants both of which see their engagement in sport-based volunteering in what might be regarded as non-traditional terms, that is, as a means by which to increase their social networks and employment opportunities and to generate a greater sense of personal stability and security. Farooq et al conclude that whilst the adoption of a pro-active approach to volunteering may have its benefits, such activities alone do not always serve to empower young people particularly those experiencing multiple social deprivations. Findings reveal a series of practical barriers and constraints relating to the recruitment of marginalised young people as volunteers especially around issues of personal background and identification. Needless to say, when such groups experience problems accessing opportunities which are designed to help them, there is a danger that their sense of social exclusion and marginalisation may be exacerbated rather than alleviated.

In sum, *Youth Sport, Physical Activity and Play* aims not only to reflect on the ways in which modern-day policy, intervention and participation manifest themselves and how they might intersect, but also to consider and challenge the underlying values upon which policy objectives are formulated and how this impacts participant experience. We believe that it is by way of such reflection that our understandings of the sporting landscape can continue to develop and, in this sense, we trust that this book will be a useful resource for our readership.

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