

Building pathways from school to clubs: the champion coaching scheme on Merseyside

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Introduction

Many countries have attempted to address the ‘problem’ of youth sport and much effort has been expended in developing understanding of the issues involved in promoting youth sport opportunity (De Knop *et al* 1996). Much of this work has focused on what was first identified by Lord Wolfenden in 1960 in the UK as a ‘gap’ between school based and adult participation in sport (CCPR/Wolfenden, 1960), which subsequent policy has attempted to bridge. However, despite many years of interventions at national and local level, evidence remains patchy on the impacts of programmes designed to facilitate better school-club links. As shown by Collins *et al* (1999) much of the evidence on sport programme impacts neglects to demonstrate outcomes and tends to focus on outputs, such as the number of children taking part. This presentation focuses on evidence gathered as part of PhD research into one of the most significant youth sport programmes of the 1990s in Britain – *Champion Coaching*. This scheme was originally designed and managed by the National Coaching Foundation (NCF), which later became SportscoachUK (scuk), funded by the Sports Council, and was delivered by over 140 local authorities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Significant funds were invested by the agencies involved, estimated at over £2 million pounds from 1991-1999. A new multi-sport programme geared at performance-oriented children, Active Sport, eventually replaced the programme. This presentation features the results of an evaluation of Champion Coaching (CC) in two local authorities, both metropolitan Boroughs on Merseyside, in the NW of England, in a multi-method approach to the programmes legacy, impact and outcomes.

Methods

A postal survey of participants and their parents on CC was conducted from 1-4 years post participation, in each of the local authorities, resulting in response rates of 40% and 26% in each of the local authorities (n=78, n=54). This set out to establish the participants views of the programme and also what their parents felt about it, and was compared to the results achieved by Collins and Buller (2000). The establishment of regular sporting participation and particularly sports club membership was investigated, as club membership was considered an outcome of both effective coaching programmes and as a measure of the effectiveness of local sporting pathways leading from school to clubs. Visits to local schools (5 in total) across both of the Boroughs to discuss with teachers and pupils in equivalent year groups took place to add to the understanding of how young people perceived pathways and whether the programme had left any sustained legacy in sporting opportunities. Schools were selected based on their referrals to Champion Coaching, to examine whether schools referring low or high numbers of children differed. Additionally interviews were conducted with Sports Development Officers, coaches and Education Advisors to add to the holistic approach, in a ‘realist’ evaluation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997).

Results/discussion

The findings show that young people selected to take part in Champion Coaching went on to enjoy greater rates of club membership than their peers, or in comparison with national surveys (Sport England/Mori, 2003). In St Helens, 70% of the group were members of a sports club, up to four years after their course. This was not related to the sport, age, or parents’ ratings of the sport courses. Similar rates were found in Knowsley, with 59% of children members of a sports club, 2- 3 years after their course. It was mainly teachers, rather than coaches or parents who were most influential in introducing children to their clubs, and most children continued to play sport after school. This reinforced the importance of teachers and PE departments work in linking with clubs. The study showed that the Champion Coaching courses were successful in making individual changes in the perceptions of young people about their competence and confidence, which may have enhanced their potential to join a club. However, the scheme had not always been able to demonstrate the sustained links from school to club, once funding for coaching had been discontinued. There appeared to be gaps, which Champion Coaching could not fill, in the clubs and junior

sport opportunities in Merseyside, despite the successes of these programmes. Lack of resources in clubs continued to limit the potential for young people to continue their interests in sport outside of school. Children in schools attributed the lack of participation to a mixture of poor facilities, lack of clubs or lack of interest in the sports available. Teachers noted the particular problems of young people from more deprived households in accessing opportunities if they were held in distant venues or at inconvenient times. There was little difference in the approaches used to promote clubs in different schools.

Though patterns of recruitment onto the programmes varied between the two authorities, there was some relationship to the relative deprivation of the district in one, with no relationship in the other. This was attributed to both the pricing and promotion for the scheme in local schools and the choice of venues. The area with the highest levels of deprivation (Knowsley) was able to overcome the expected barriers to such opportunities through these methods and showed no difference according to district, in regular sports participation or club membership. Given that the majority of participants in both Borough's were girls, these results were particularly important. However, there was still some lack of opportunity for girls in clubs, particularly in Knowsley, compared to boys, even though the scheme had resulted in some positive changes to the way schools and community sports development currently worked.

The evaluation of the programmes was problematical, due to the time elapsed and lack of access to an adequate sampling frame to allow for random sampling of all participants. However, use of the case study approach allowed for a realistic and holistic appreciation of a complex and multi-faceted scheme. Problems were compounded by a lack of management information and the problems of non-response. Despite these limitations however, such longitudinal research is essential if convincing evidence is to be gathered which can demonstrate that schemes, which seek to promote long-term change, can deliver the outcomes sought. Schemes which continue over three years or less are less likely to be able to demonstrate these long-term outcomes.

There was clear legacy in learning from this scheme, as had been shown in the officers concerned, when they had applied their experience to the successor scheme. However, there was less evidence of policy learning on a wider scale, as there had been a lack of systematic review of the process and outcomes, prior to the introduction of the successor scheme, Active Sport. Player and coach development systems currently being promoted by Sport England (e.g. Balyi, 2001) need also to consider how schools and wider sports communities co-operate to provide more successful and effective player pathways, which can benefit all children, not just those with greater resources or talent, and such schemes will be more effective if schools and clubs work and plan such opportunities together in a complementary approach.

References

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