
WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY IS IT TO DEVELOP YOUNG ATHLETES? THE IMPORTANCE OF SPORT SCHOOLS IN THE NORWEGIAN ELITE SPORT SYSTEM

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Abstract

THE NORWEGIAN SPORT CONTEXT

Literature emphasizes how world class performance depends on a number of “exceptional things”; undoubtedly, this goes for the development of young athletes as well. When interviewing different stakeholders present at the 2012 Innsbruck winter YOG, it became apparent that most of the Norwegian athletes attended some sort of sport school in order to develop their talent (Hanstad, Parent, & Kristiansen, in press). The Norwegian sport schools (covers the age group between 16 and 19) are of major interest as some of them are privately funded. These schools operate in a country where children’s sport participation is protected by strict rules, where grassroots sport is seen as an ideal, and which has a predominantly public school system. One such school is the Norwegian Top sport college (known in Norway as NTG) which offer a combination of sport and school, a non-profit private foundation nurturing the most winter Olympians. The vision of the school which is one of six run by the same organisation, is to become the leading institution for student athletes by supporting both their sports career and make sure that they qualify for a higher academic education. Since the school started up in 1981 for 12 alpine skiers, their former students have over the years taken 22 gold, 13 silver and 11 bronze medals in the winter Olympics.

The purpose of this investigation is to evaluate the role and significance of sports schools within the Norwegian elite sport system, especially in relation to talent development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework chosen is multiple streams (Kingdon 1984) augmented by the concept of path dependency (Kay, 2005). While the multiple streams framework is normally associated with analyses of agenda setting it is argued that it also has utility in explaining policy change. Kingdon emphasized the ambiguity, complexity and degree of

randomness in policy-making, and identified three streams; problem stream, policy stream and finally, the political stream. The concept of path dependency is useful in exploring the relationship between structure and agency in the policy process and is a valuable corrective to the risk of over-emphasising the scope for agency which is inherent in the multiple streams framework.

METHODS

25 interviews were conducted with these interviewees representing the major stakeholders including elite athletes, NSFs, schools, coaches, teachers, parents and other support personnel connected to Olympiatoppen etc, and the interviews lasted between 55 and 105 minutes.

RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The data from the interviews is currently undergoing analysis but among the preliminary findings are the following;

- The contribution of sport schools was more significant than expected within the Norwegian sport context
- There was a significant difference in the perception held by stakeholders of the role of sports schools
- There was also significant difference in the assessment of the success that sports schools had achieved in fulfilling their objectives
- There is ambiguity about which organization should be responsible for talent development which has created a 'policy space' for sports schools to move into
- The acceptance of key stakeholder groups of the role of sports schools reflected the prominence of elite sport success in 'problem stream' and the consequent willingness to accept (tolerate) sports schools as active elements within the 'policy stream'
- There is some support for the view that the emergence and acceptance of sports schools as part of the Norwegian sports system can be explained in terms of path dependency and Sydow et al's (2009) phases of path development with the recognition of the significance of the contribution of sports schools to Norwegian success representing transition from phase 2 (path formation) to phase 3 (path lock-in)

References

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