Implementation of sport England's clubmark into voluntary sport clubs: comparison of boxing, swimming and rugby union

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Aim of abstract/paper

The aim of this study was to analyse the strategies of National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and voluntary sport clubs (VSCs) in the process of policy implementation of Sport England's generic Clubmark framework (a quality mark accreditation). Within the overarching Clubmark framework, other policies (such as safeguarding) that must be adopted by clubs working towards the accreditation (or re-accreditation) standard were also examined.

Theoretical background

Policy makers are predominantly centrally located often a distance from the point of delivery where, it is argued, the environment is highly variable, pressured and political, often requiring negotiation and interpretation during the process of implementation. Historically, implementation analysis adopted two distinct approaches: bottom-up theorists (cf. Lipsky, 1980) suggested that the role of street-level bureaucrats (e.g. club members at the point of delivery) should be the focus for analysis; top-down theorists (cf. Hogwood & Gunn, 1984), assume a perfect rational process as the starting point, although acknowledged as unattainable by the top-down theorists, with the focus being on the central policy-makers. Subsequently, theorists have developed a synthesis of the two approaches, such as Matland's (1995) ambiguity-conflict model. These models have established the theoretical framework that has guided this research.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

This research adopted a qualitative approach using case studies from three sports: swimming, rugby union and boxing. Data collection consisted of document analysis (from both clubs, NGBs and Sport England) plus interviews with club members, NGB officials and a senior Sport England official. Two clubs from each sport were examined (one urban, one rural) which, yielded interview data from between eight to twelve club officers per sport. Club officer selection was based on positions of authority within the committee who had some knowledge of Clubmark. Three to four NGB officials from each sport provided data for the top-down perspective of policy implementation.

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions

The main findings from the research, which will be presented are: a) implementation is not straightforward; NGBs have to be flexible with their strategies and be willing to adapt certain Clubmark criteria due to the varying capacities of clubs; b) NGBs need to be aware of the constraints of a club's environment in an attempt to ensure successful implementation; c) accreditation prestige, hence a clubs' motivation, varied across sports; and d) the role of club members (volunteers), as implementing agents, is fundamental in the policy process. The analysis highlighted the importance of ensuring policy is written for the intended recipients to be effective; understanding the distinct socio-demographics of the street-level bureaucrats (club volunteers) across sport club contexts is fundamental for successful implementation of Clubmark.

These findings are consistent with the implementation literature and application of the theories mentioned in section two, that guided the research, proves effective in developing the understanding of implementation in this particular context. Furthermore, this research has added to our knowledge by demonstrating how the complex and heterogeneous nature of clubs affects the implementation process in sport.

References

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