

INNOVATION IN EVALUATION: RESEARCHING YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS OF YOUTH SPORT POLICY

David Piggott, Loughborough University, UK

Context

The research presented here is part of an ongoing evaluation project concerning the FA's (Football Association) Charter Standard Scheme (CSS). The CSS is a 'kite mark' or quality assurance scheme that acknowledges good practice in coaching, child protection and administration in youth football clubs and schools. Whilst traditional evaluation projects in youth sport policy have focused largely on participation patterns (e.g. Sport England and MORI, 2002) using rudimentary, questionnaire centred methods, the research presented here will attempt to show how innovative techniques could be used to develop a more comprehensive and fruitful assessment.

Legislative developments in the late 1980s (e.g. the Children Act, 1989), in tandem with shifting epistemological approaches to the study of youth sport policy, mean that the youth sport researcher is no longer bound to the quantitative, largely descriptive methods employed in the past. Although often challenging, it has been argued (Prout and James, 1997) that researchers should attempt to access young people's experiences and perceptions of policies that concern them. Such an approach has grown from at least two major influences: first, the moral and ethical influence exerted by legal developments, foremost of which being the UN convention on the rights of the child (1989); and second, a growing intellectual dissatisfaction with the positivist approaches common in the past.

This research therefore required a methodology that placed foremost importance on participants' perspectives, without being first squared with pre-existing theories or hypotheses i.e. as defined by adults. It is claimed that Grounded Theory (GT) is such a methodology (Charmaz, 2000) as it keeps the research agenda focused squarely on the experiences of the research participants – in this case, young footballers in England.

Methods

Perhaps the most effective way to illustrate GT methodology here is with the aid of an analogy. We might conceptualise the research process, very generally, as similar to that of building a house: the data as the bricks; the participants as the builders; the researcher as the foreman; the research supervisor as the architect; and the theoretical framework as the plans or blueprints. In GT however, there are no blueprints or plans; no grand design to help shape the research and no idea of what the finished product might look like. It is indeed a daunting prospect, but can also be an exciting one, depending very much on the researcher's personal outlook.

Some might recognise this as induction, but that would not be entirely accurate. GT negotiates the paradox of induction by introducing the concept of 'theoretical sensitivity', which allows the researcher to enter the field not without prior situational or theoretical knowledge – as some might have us believe – but with a mind open to the perspectives of the participants. As Wolcott (2001) reminds us: 'there is a difference between an open mind and an empty head'. In this sense, the foreman (or researcher) has seen houses before, they have a 'sensitivity' to what the finished product might look like and how they might get there – the technical and procedural tasks or steps – but there is no fixed framework with which to structure the build.

Therefore, the only way to progress is to build a layer of bricks at a time, take a step back, check if it looks alright, and either push on if it does, or make some adjustments if it doesn't. It is a long and delicate process but one that ensures the foreman stays close to their builders and materials throughout. The researcher, then, develops a unique product (nothing one might find on a dull housing estate) and one that remains close to the agenda of the builders (or research participants). Finally, in order to assess the quality of the product, the researcher keeps records of how they went about the research, detailing the logic behind their construction, laying bare the creative decisions they made and the rationale behind them.

In the specific context of this research, GT first entailed the use of focused group interviews with young footballers (ages 8-18). The interviews were, in the first instance, unstructured, with innovative methods such as mind maps allowing the agenda of the participants to dominate. However, as themes were generated, interviews became more structured, and vignettes were then used to initiate discussion along pre-defined lines.

Results

This paper will present some preliminary findings from the focused group interviews conducted with young people in football clubs, schools and colleges. In addition to this, some thoughts on the use of various data collection techniques will be presented with reference to the assistance they provide in obtaining 'good' data when doing research with young people. This is notably difficult, and even more so in the early stages of GT research when one is hampered in asking direct questions.

Discussion/Implications

Despite some of the problems associated with the approach, like France *et al.* (2000), we will argue that the use of a grounded theory style methodology is vital if one wishes to truly elucidate the voices of young people in policy evaluation research. This is a critical argument, and one that is overlooked in much of the sociological literature. Therefore, in order to demonstrate the logic of such an approach, the importance of internal coherence between research philosophy, methodology and methods will be outlined.

In summary, the implications for future policy evaluation research in youth sport are twofold:

Firstly, that future evaluation research in the arena of youth sport attempt to understand and explain the perceptions of those who are subject to the policy concerned. Researchers are therefore encouraged to go beyond the adult orientated, questionnaire-based approaches sometimes taken in the past. Secondly, that those engaged in such work confront the challenges offered when adopting an inductive methodological approach, thereby contributing to a body of work currently attributed to a group of brave and conscientious researchers.

References

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Contact: d.piggott@lboro.ac.uk