

## **DISABILITY SPORT IN THE UK: DO WE NEED ANOTHER POWWOW?**

**Nigel Thomas**, Staffordshire University, UK

### **Context**

Whilst structured competitive disability sport may traditionally have been organised and run by charitable bodies, segregated from mainstream non-disabled sport, since 1985, policies have stressed a need for disability sport to be the responsibility of mainstream organisations. For example, the aims of the British Sports Association for the Disabled (BSAD), the recommendations of a Ministerial Review in 1989, the Sports Council's policy on people with a disability in 1993, and the English Federation for Disability Sport's (EFDS) policy in 2000 all focused on shifting the responsibility for disability sport away from disability sport organisations and on to mainstream providers such as the national governing bodies of sport. However, there has been a dearth of literature that has examined mainstreaming in disability sport, how disability sport policy has developed, which agencies have been powerful in the organisational network, and the significance of the values of key actors in the policy process and outcome.

### **Methods**

The aim of this study is to establish whether there is a policy community for disability sport. To achieve this, and using a case study of 1) the formation of the English Federation of Disability Sport and, 2) the issue of the mainstreaming of disability sport, the objectives are to:

1. establish the key characteristics of the disability sport policy process,
2. establish the interests, power distribution and relationships between organisations involved in disability sport, and determine the ideologies of key actors involved in disability sport policy

Data was generated in three phases using an analysis of policy documents, a survey of 162 sports organisations and 21 interviews with key personnel such as the organisations' chief executive or chairman. In Phase 1 semi-structured interviews with key personnel combined with documentary analysis were used to establish how disability sport emerged and developed. Informed by the data from Phase 1, in Phase 2 a survey of governing bodies of sport and disability sport organisations was conducted to establish which national organisations are involved in the policy network, how disability sport policy is formed, the role organisations play and ideologies of key actors. In Phase 3, informed by the data from Phases 1 and 2 and using interviews and documentary analysis, case studies were carried out to examine the establishment of the EFDS and mainstreaming in seven sports.

Data is subjected to a quantitative and qualitative content analysis and discussion is informed by theories of disability, a history of disability policy and sports policy, and three prominent theories of policy analysis: Marsh and Rhodes' (1992) policy network model, Sabatier's (1999) advocacy coalition framework and Kingdon's (1984) policy streams approach.

### **Results**

Findings indicate that organisations concerned with disability sport policy in England do not form a coherent policy community. Typically, these organisations do not reach consensus easily, do not have a binding system of values, do not have a common set of goals or a coherent and potentially unifying professional body, and are vulnerable to government and ministerial intervention.

The first case study established that similarly to the British Sports Association for the Disabled (BSAD), the EFDS finds it difficult to reconcile the advocacy role it plays for other disability sports organisations (DSOs) with its own development work. Support for EFDS among DSOs seems as equivocal now as it was for BSAD in the late 1980s. The DSOs are dissatisfied with the EFDS prompting DSOs to continue with their own activities and developments. There is little consensus in the way that disability sport should develop and the role that the EFDS and other agencies should play.

The second case study established that few actors within mainstream or disability sport organisations agree on what mainstreaming is. While there are examples of disability sport and mainstream sport organisations working together successfully, the relationships, roles, and responsibilities across sports is inconsistent. Despite government pressure on mainstream governing bodies to assume responsibility for disability sport, mainstream agencies have been reticent to do so. The reticence of mainstream agencies has been due to: financial constraints, a dissatisfaction with the co-ordination within disability sport, a lack of knowledge of what and how to progress, and a lack of political will. Compounding this, disability sport organisations have been reluctant to relinquish roles to mainstream bodies where they perceive a lack of commitment and capacity.

### **Implications**

This study reveals that the disability sport policy process involved a large number of agencies with a wide range of interests. The relationships between these organisations fluctuates but conflict is typical. Due to the lack of consensus and poor relationships between organisations in the network, governments have increased their capacity to intervene in disability sport policy yet have also, paradoxically, attempted to keep disability sport at arms length. Typically disabled people and disability organisations have little involvement in the decision making process and disability sport policy is mostly influenced by mainstream sport policy. While disability sport policy has shifted to reflect a social explanation of disability, ideologies indicate diverse beliefs in the involvement of disabled people and the role of disability sport organisations.

Using the meso levels of policy analysis, the study shows that disability sport policy is 'messy' with a range of influences on its policy process (Kingdon, 1984). There have been no obvious policy entrepreneurs since Guttman but his involvement in disability sport during its early development is still apparent. This study concludes that disability sport policy in England forms a loose issue network and, without a shift toward the characteristics of a more tightly bound policy community, key organisations in disability sport are unlikely to influence effectively government policy (Marsh and Rhodes, 1992).

### **References**

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Contact: n.b.thomas@staffs.ac.uk