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UK School Games: an analysis of policy implementation

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In the study of the sport policy process, implementation has tended to be neglected and has been referred to as the ‘missing link’ in policy analysis. This paper provides an analysis of the UK School Games (UKSG) which are intended to promote change in the way in which participating NGBs organise youth sport competitions. The aims of the UKSG are summarised in six objectives, formulated by the Youth Sport Trust (YST) which has overall responsibility for the event. This study adopts a case study approach which sees the analysis of three UKSG sports: Swimming, Table Tennis and Volleyball. This selection of case studies is based upon several factors, including the sport’s size, history, tradition, organisational complexity and approach to the UKSG’s six objectives. The study begins with an examination of policy implementation which according to DeLeon explores ‘what happens between policy expectations and policy results’ (1999: 314-5). Relevant implementation theory is summarised, giving particular attention to Pressman and Wildavsky’s ‘top-down’ approach to implementation (1973) in comparison to alternative ‘bottom-up’ approaches such as Lipsky’s notion of Street Level Bureaucracy (1980). The role of the YST in relation to the UKSG is then explained before an analysis is provided of the impact of the Games on the policy and practice of the three sports. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. It is concluded that there has been a mismatching of UKSG decision maker’s expectations of impact and the actual impact within the three sports. The importance of understanding the ‘street level’ context of implementation is identified as well as acknowledging the temporal dimension of assessments of impact.