

How Does Street Level Bureaucracy Challenge the Implementation of Football Fitness?

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Aim

In Denmark the non-governmental sports organizations (NGB's) is positioning their societal role. In this quest the connection of sport and health plays a huge role and has progressed from a passive and symbolic approach to one that is more explicit and ambitious. An illustrative example is the development of Football Fitness (FF), which is a football-based concept for health. The concept is centrally designed by the Danish Football Association (DFA), operationalised by regional county unions (CU's) and realized by local voluntarily organised football clubs. The aim of this paper is to explore the role of the Football Development Officers (FDO's) working in the CU's. We will ask the question; how does street level bureaucracy challenge the implementation of FF?

A few studies point to challenges that are critical for the implementation of centrally developed health-related sporting activities, such as the willingness and ability of clubs and the limited "hierarchical" legal power to influence club activities (see e.g. Skille, 2008). Most of these studies focus on the club level, whereas this paper concentrates on the CU's. Moreover Ooms et al., (2015) highlights that little research has focused on understanding the implementation context.

Theoretical Background

Michael Lipsky uses the term 'street-level bureaucrats', in which he underlines that the real decision makers are the ones who deliver the initiative to the target group (Lipsky, 1980, 2010). These are for example police officers, teachers and also the FDO's delivering the FF-initiative to the local club representatives. This emphasizes the importance of the FDO's and the importance of their behavior. Among others they are involved within joint-production in collaboration with the target group, meaning that the outcome depends on how the FDO's and club representatives interact. As no club representative nor FDO is alike, the work or the management of the FDO's cannot be regulated in details, causing the FDO's to exercise discretionary judgement. Moreover, they act on behalf of others in a forum which is very difficult to monitor.

Research Design and Data Analysis

The research is based on qualitative methods, including document analysis, an interview and three focus group interviews all important to understand the working conditions of the FDO's. The data has been coded and condensed with pre-existing codes directing the coding in a hermeneutic deductive way (Cresswell, 2007). The textual documents of analysis consist of papers and manuals describing FF, the implementation actors and the implementation structure. An individual interview was conducted with the national FF project manager and three focus group interviews were conducted, including one group of regional FF administrators (three out of four nationwide were present) and two groups of FDO's (twelve out of sixteen nationwide were present).

Results and Discussion

Several decisive aspects stand from the analysis. Firstly, the FDO's are to implement an initiative, of which they have not been asked how to design. This is not a normal working procedure to them, which is causing difficulties. Secondly, they feel restricted in regard to their working condition, in which they are regulated to meet a certain number of club visits. It becomes a matter of the number of visits instead of successful outcomes of visits. Moreover, they feel challenged in relation to regional support from superiors and lack of interest in the clubs. Thirdly no manual of implementation is present, and on an overall level the FDO's did struggle to act most profitable in the joint production, due to lack of ability and commitment in regard to the initiative and the work of implementation. With a view to the classic work by Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) the working conditions of the FDO's challenge great expectations from a central level. In the presentation these results will be backed by illustrative quotes.

Conclusion and Implications

The role as FDO is an extremely important link in the chain of implementation, as the initiative travels 'through' them. FF is just a piece of paper and the impact is depending on how the FDO's are working with it. In fact, the initiative is likely to stand or fall on their work. They may exhibit behaviour which does not benefit the programme, especially if they do not have the commitment and ability needed. This becomes hard to detect and compensate, as it is difficult to monitor the FDO's in their daily work. In this regard the management can work with building capacity, such as adding more staff or providing education and information. Or they can be more goal-orientated and hire FDO's with specific ability and commitment. Or make use of reward and sanctions. The issue regarding these tools, is the lack of knowledge regarding effect (Winter & Nielsen, 2010).

We believe that other NGBs and sports development officers will experience rising expectations in relation to health and other social issues and will benefit from this paper.

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