

Safeguarding children in sport: a view from Rugby League - the policy process, participative cultures and local relationships

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Abstract

The national governing bodies of sport in the UK are now heavily involved in developing and delivering child protection policies. Research in this area is in its infancy. The impact that such policies have on sport and its participants is important to explore. This paper is based on the findings of the first phase of a research project which is evaluating the UK Rugby League's child protection policy. The article identifies the current 'state of play' concerning child protection policy in sport and advocates for a clear policy process for individual sports clubs; the development of a participative culture which 'voices' children within sports clubs and organizations; and the development of identifiable relationships between statutory authorities and sports bodies.

Keywords: Children, protection, sport, policy

Introduction

The national governing bodies (NGBs) of sport in the UK now have a mandate to produce, disseminate and embed child protection policies (Sport England/NSPCC, 2003). This departure indicates a significant point in the development of organized sport. One outcome has been that NGBs and their affiliated organizations have increasingly come into direct contact with bodies whose statutory responsibility or voluntary mission is the well-being of children. This has presented a considerable challenge for sport and as such warrants analysis. The authors are undertaking an evaluation of British Rugby League's child protection strategy with a view to developing a theoretical framework for 'good practice' in this area. This article draws upon findings from the first phase of an evaluation of Rugby League's policy process and extends the analysis elsewhere presented by the authors (Hartill & Prescott, 2007). Although the research focused on Rugby League, the findings have been set within British Sport's response to contemporary child protection policy imperatives. The article provides amplification and extension of the key findings from the policy research and, in so

doing, argues for clubs in all sports to use a clear, distinct policy model and to develop a 'participative culture' for children and young people. It also recommends the development of direct, clear and identifiable relationships between statutory authorities and sports bodies. The paper is above all concerned with when and how child protection policy is finally delivered at 'club' level.

Lasswell (1948) essentially argued that public policy should be seen as a form of public education (cited in Hudson & Lowe, 2004). It is a part of citizenship where people learn to engage with their society for their own improvement and for the betterment of society as a whole. The policy process needs to be explored at all levels, macro, meso and micro. In the context of child protection policy in sport a significantly large group of people are being engaged and educated in contemporary constructions of, and policies concerning, child protection and the safeguarding of children. Key issues therefore arise concerning the development and implementation of child protection policy in sport at the macro level where different countries are part of a global movement in

this context and indeed part of wider discourses of the globalisation and cultural politics of childhood. This article, however, focuses on the meso and micro levels of policy analysis. The meso level analysis here, often seen as the middle part of the policy process, concerns itself specifically with the development of child protection policies in sport and “the structure of the institutional arrangements in which policy is defined and eventually implemented” (Hudson & Lowe, 2004, p. 9). The micro level focuses on ‘ground level’ individuals and their role in the design and implementation of child protection policy and practice, at the heart of which is a structure-versus-agency debate.

Sport’s response to the child protection agenda

Child protection policy and sport can certainly be seen as part of changing child protection discourses within UK society and of the concomitant policy process in this field. Sport has ‘come late’ to the child protection arena and could therefore be in danger of just accepting traditional protectionist approaches to children’s welfare and indeed the current safeguarding of children agenda which can be seen as particularly protectionist in its intent (Parton, 2006). However, sport has the opportunity to forge ahead with developing a policy that clearly advocates for, and ‘voices’, children and young people. The ‘late in the day’ label that can be attached to child protection within sport does appear to support, to some degree, Lindblom’s (1959) view of the policy process as being incremental. It took a number of relatively high profile abuse cases before the issue was taken seriously. Here too is an example of a reactive approach to meeting children’s welfare needs which has been seen to be symptomatic of social policy for children in the UK in the past.

In sport, the recognition of child abuse as a problem can be seen to have arisen out of

feminist concerns about sexual harassment (Lenskyj, 1986; Brackenridge, 1987). Through the 1990s pressure mounted on practitioners and policy makers to implement change as the number of academic studies (Brackenridge, 1992, 1994 & 1996; Kirby *et al.*, 2000) and media reports (British Broadcasting Corporation, 1993; Spencer, 1995; Nack & Jaeger, 1999) on childhood sexual abuse in sport grew. In 1993 Paul Hickson, a former Olympic swimming coach, was convicted of rape and sexual assaults against female teenage swimmers previously in his care. This case attracted considerable media attention and proved to be a catalyst for more widespread calls for the reform of sport and how it treated children. Similar revelations of abuse followed in Canada (Robinson, 1998).

The Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) was the significant outcome of this pressure for change (Boocock, 2002). This partnership between the NSPCC and Sport England falls under the remit of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and is the most significant political response to concerns over child maltreatment within international sport (David, 2005). Nine fundamental standards for child protection, a three-tiered accreditation system (preliminary, intermediate, advanced) and a clear timetable for implementation¹ are linked to central funding for English governing bodies (Sport England/NSPCC, 2003). The preliminary level relates to the development of a child protection policy and a plan for its implementation; this has been achieved by the Rugby League, and the majority of centrally funded sports. However, “it is known that some NGBs [National Governing Bodies] initially failed to meet the required minimum standards” (Brackenridge *et al.*, 2005, p. 260).

The *Strategy for Safeguarding Children and Young People in Sport, 2006-2012* (Sport England/NSPCC, 2006) follows up these ‘Standards’. As the recent *Change for Children* agenda in the UK has

demonstrated, there is often a role for organised sport where social policy initiatives are introduced to address child welfare. Culture, sport and play organisations have a unique role to play (DfES, 2004) and, as Brackenridge *et al.* (2007) recently concluded, “youth sport ... may now have assumed the status of the ‘sixth social service’” (p. 205) where sport is constructed as a ‘purity system’. However, Brackenridge *et al.* also note the ‘transformative effect’ such policy developments have had on “ethical reflection in sport” (2004, p. 334). Thus, child protection policy may be viewed as a necessary and welcome addition to the world of organised sport.

Questionnaire: the method

The authors have undertaken the first two phases of an evaluation of the UK Rugby Football League’s child protection policy (RFL, 2003) and the findings reported are concerned with the initial response to a child protection agenda from amateur and professional clubs across the UK (Hartill & Prescott, 2005). The study focused on what happened when the policy reached the organizations and individuals who were expected to work with it. A critical analysis of the policy process, that is the impact of the development, dissemination and early implementation of a child protection policy in the context of a specific sport, Rugby League, was produced.

Data collection was via postal questionnaire to all rugby league clubs with a junior/youth section affiliated to the RFL (N=205). Follow-up telephone calls to all non-respondents produced an overall response rate of 37% (N=75). While the respondents were not representative of all levels within the RFL they were the specific individuals held responsible for the implementation of policy at club level, in other words, designated child protection officers (CPOs)². This was a sample survey and the respondents were a representative group in

the contexts of sport, rugby league and their specific role as CPOs. The research deliberately focused upon the thoughts, feelings and opinions of the CPOs with regard to the impact of the policy on themselves and their club.

A thematic analysis of the data was undertaken (Gomm, 2004) and the questionnaire results were coded in the sense of employing a technical process of indexing the data to indicate what themes appear and where. Clearly, the themes suggested themselves as a result of repeated reading of the data. This grounded the themes, and their interpretation, in the data whilst still acknowledging the imposition of structure on the findings. The research findings generated a spotlight on two particular areas of the policy process: first, the presentation and delivery of the policy; and second the impact in individual clubs of that presentation.

Discussion of findings

The discussion here provides a sharper focus and an extended analysis of the first phase findings. This focus is on three areas: the policy process and the impact of a child protection policy; the development of a participative culture and the ‘voicing’ of children and young people; and sports clubs’ external relationships with local authority safeguarding bodies.

The response from one club CPO illustrates some of the difficulties faced by those in rugby league sensitive to child protection issues:

I am regularly dismayed to hear comments that such policies are the thoughts of ‘do gooders’ and there are no such problems in junior rugby league.

The RFL policy states: “All clubs must identify a designated person to be titled the Club Child Protection Officer to handle child protection issues” (2003, p.16).

Although some clubs had not appointed a CPO 12 months after the launch of the policy, findings indicated that clubs had generally responded in a positive manner.

Presentation and adoption of the policy

The manner and format in which policy and guidelines are presented to individual members of sports clubs is a critical indicator of the legitimacy and importance afforded to the policy by the club. Unfortunately, some time after receipt of the policy, over a fifth of the respondents said they had not presented the policy to their members. Further, whenever the policy had been presented directly to club members, with one exception, it was in the context of either a general meeting or a meeting exclusively for coaches or limited numbers of club personnel.

A key concern arising from the data was that child protection should not be 'slipped' into the general agenda, sometimes as an 'AOB' [Any Other Business] item. A typical response was that the policy:

Has been an agenda item and is located in central office file.

This does suggest a lack of prioritization that, it has been argued, occurs through fear of creating a 'moral panic' and frightening away potential players, their parents and coaches (Hartill & Prescott, 2003). This does construct child protection or at least the policy as only one of a number of competing issues in a context that has no previous record of considering such matters.

'Specialist' meetings for selected personnel do not encourage ownership of the policy by all members of the club and, importantly, do not involve children. The issue of 'gatekeepers' who fail to facilitate the dissemination of knowledge is problematic. For example:

I distributed the essentials of the policy document to the coaches only.

Children's individual and collective voices are expected to be included in all processes affecting them (Children Act, 1989; UNCRC, 1989) and the promotion of participation is underpinned in England by such initiatives as Quality Protects (1998) and *Every Child Matters* (2003). Awareness at club level is crucial to the achievement of children's rights, in any sporting context. Annual general meetings and other formal meetings do not make any allowance for children's participation and, even if they did, children and young people would be unlikely to offer their views without appropriate participatory and/or advocacy provision being put in place.

Increasing the sports community's awareness and knowledge of issues of child protection is a key feature of the policy process and the impact of the policy on Child Protection Officers' knowledge is therefore of no little importance. Measurements of this are inevitably subjective because CPOs were asked to say whether the policy had added to their knowledge about the problem of child abuse. Some respondents may have identified an increase in knowledge that, in reality, did not occur while others may have underplayed the increase. However, the question did allow CPOs to express how they had perceived the usefulness of the document.

Nearly half of the research respondents felt that their awareness and knowledge of child abuse had either been increased or reinforced. The following examples are indicative of this:

Opened my eyes to the different ways children could be abused even without violence.

Some people think child abuse is sexual, it has made them more aware of other

types of abuse, e.g. shouting and name calling – bullying.

Brought the obvious and not so obvious signs to the front of our minds with a better ability of how to deal with problems as they arise.

The Rugby League's policy states, "ideally, they [CPOs] should have a background in working with children" (RFL, 2003, p. 16). Therefore, it was not surprising to find a reasonable degree of awareness amongst identified CPOs. However, some concern arose when responses explicitly stated that the policy document had had no impact on their awareness/knowledge or that the management of the Rugby League was overreacting in some way:

Don't think it has impacted on our knowledge in any way.

[The policy has] increased awareness but I do feel this is a bit of a sledgehammer to crack a nut situation in Rugby League.

CPOs were then asked about how the policy had impacted upon their club. It is reasonable to suggest that as 'gatekeepers' these designated CPOs are in the best position to determine whether the policy has been well received by club officials and members. Such information is crucial when considering relatively 'closed' environments, such as private sports clubs. Overall, the majority of responses from individual rugby league clubs were positive. The Rugby League community has begun to accept, and in some cases embrace, child protection issues as part of the fabric of their sport. This is an encouraging step forward as it represents a break from the silence which has shrouded child abuse in sport (Kirby *et al.*, 2000) perhaps particularly in male-dominated, 'manly' sports such as Rugby League.

Embedding knowledge, awareness and policy concerning child protection into practice with children and young people in sport clubs has to be seen as a significant venture. There is evidence of some scepticism on behalf of the rugby league clubs' CPOs with regard to the efficacy of a child protection policy in the 'safe world of their clubs'. The workload and key responsibilities of the people involved, in the context of their largely voluntary capacity, need to be taken into account. It has to be acknowledged that multiple roles increase burdens of responsibility. An approach that does not overtly and practically prioritise child protection policy might be identified as a 'reductionist approach' and this has been shown to be a dangerous position to take (Brackenridge, 2001).

The written policy is clear about procedures to follow after the disclosure of abuse and the duty to inform local statutory bodies is pre-eminent in this. Recently, there has been considerable development in terms of child protection practice with the advent of safeguarding boards and the current emphasis on interagency co-operation, interdisciplinary training and a more ecological approach to meeting children and young people's needs in vulnerable situations. Sport England (2006) identifies partnership working as a key strategy in its approach to safeguarding children. However, the research suggests that clubs do not consider it particularly important to develop 'early' relationships at a local level with teams or individuals responsible for child protection assessments, training and professional practice.

Overall, three key areas arise for consideration:

1. A policy process model for individual clubs – 'the club schedule'

A range of issues emerged from the research with regard to policy process, and therefore,

ultimately, practice with children. Generally, quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation need close scrutiny. Child protection policy needs to be systematically monitored as part of each sport's responsibility and each club's response within that is of critical importance. Sport England states that individual sports have to demonstrate that, "arrangements are in place to monitor compliance with child protection policies and procedures and with recruitment and selection policies and procedures" (2003, p.13). This requires a clearly structured feedback process which an individual club policy process model can facilitate.

It is a cultural change that is required. A more formal and disciplined model of policy implementation may be part of the catalyst for such change. Even if a policy process model is only a very small part of a cultural shift then it is worth adopting. It may be part of such change because a model addresses the issue of seriousness with which safeguarding children is viewed by Rugby League and other sports clubs and is part of that educative process originally identified by Lasswell (1948) for public policy. The importance of a clear process model is further supported by Brackenridge's (2001) argument, identified earlier, that any reductionist approach to child protection is dangerous. The role of child protection officers in Rugby League has to be prioritized and the policy process plays a major part in emphasizing their position and responsibility. The importance of producing a defined process model is also reinforced by the need to embed the integrity of adult responsibility towards children and young people in all individuals, clubs and in 'sport' itself.

In order to improve the impact that child protection policies have within sports clubs, it would be more effective to produce a process model that provides a clear schedule for presentation, training and implementation within every individual club

(see Hartill & Prescott, 2007). This is likely to both improve knowledge about child abuse and increase child protective behaviours within organizations. These objectives have been identified as achievable, particularly in the context of a two-way communication process that delivers the policy and is able to explore such issues as motivation and intention (Howse, 2003). Further, knowledge and protective systems require regular reinforcement and re-emphasis.

2. A participative culture: 'voicing' children

The opening up of a space for children to legitimately contribute to issues that have an impact upon them goes to the very heart of a children's rights agenda (Goddard *et al.*, 2005) which appears to be gaining a foothold within sport policies. Many authors have characterized this world, or elements of it, as a patriarchal, heterosexist, performance-driven domain where violence and sexual violence is legitimated (e.g. Curry, 1991, 1998; Messner & Sabo, 1994; Brackenridge, 2002) and as such displays the qualities and characteristics of an institutional setting conducive to the abuse of children (Etherington, 2000; Brackenridge, 2001). It is clear that such a setting has provided little space for children's voices to be legitimated (Brackenridge *et al.*, 2007). The socio-cultural analysis of sport over the past twenty or so years identifies a wide gap between the cultural character of organised sport and the child-centred philosophy of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Therefore, it is crucial that child protection policy is presented as a process that *fundamentally involves* children. It is apparent that this is generally not the case, despite the fact that Standard Six of the National Standards at least clearly identifies that "mechanisms [should] exist for young people's views to be heard" (CPSU, 2007, p.10). Rugby League and organised sport in general should produce guidelines and enforceable procedures to

engage children and young people in decision-making at all levels. This would underpin sports' child protection policies with constructions of childhood and youth that see children and young people as extant, competent social actors.

The impact of the child protection policy on Rugby League club members appears to be uneven. This unevenness can be seen in both the breadth of impact (across all clubs) and in its depth (the reactions of individuals to the policy). This is not necessarily surprising; however, a steadier impact can be achieved if those at the heart of the policy actually become its real focus. As *Every Child Matters* (2003) suggests, it is by placing children and young people at the heart of the process that their needs can be voiced. Such an approach can have the most influence on the credibility and impact of policy that concerns them. As previously argued, Rugby League and indeed all sports organizations could respond to this by establishing children and youth councils/committees (Hartill & Prescott, in press). Representations could be made to these councils on issues that might affect children within that organization. This would enable children's opinions to be considered at committee level and representatives of these councils should be invited to sit on committees at all levels of sports organizations including governing body and local club level.

Sport England states that one of the key outcomes of its new six-year safeguarding strategy is that, "children and young people engage in decision-making in sport" and that "sports bodies will have a commitment to empower children and young people by advising them of their rights and how they should be treated" (Sport England, 2006, p.7). The clear articulation of such an ambitious objective within sport is highly desirable and represents a clear response to the spirit and demands of the Convention (UNCRC, 1989). Sport England/NSPCC make no explicit reference to how the

involvement of children will occur (within the five areas identified as key to achieving policy outcomes) but guidance on how children will actually be empowered through sport needs to follow; the suggestion for increasing children's involvement could therefore be seen as one (established) way of working towards policy objectives in a way that individual clubs are able to immediately engage with. It is also important to note in this context that participation alone does not necessarily achieve change or improvements in policy decisions. Research has identified that even within participatory climates children and young people are not always convinced that they are listened to nor are they fully aware of the purpose of their involvement (Gunn, 2006). Sport has an opportunity to get behind the national and international rhetoric of participation to uncover practical ways to lead children to the heart of policy making rather than just providing a vague 'space' for them somewhere in the policy process. If Children's Councils are to have substance rather than rhetoric within sport, sports clubs and their governing bodies need to give serious consideration to the development of a 'participative culture' within their policies and practice.

In support of this suggestion there is a wealth of research and literature concerning theoretical perspectives, policy and practice focused on children and young people's participation (Lansdown, 2001a; Kirby *et al.*, 2003). Managerial support and, indeed, vision may be the first but not the only requirements. Ways to embed the principle of participation in minds as well as policy and practice need to be given careful thought. Sociology and the law have produced constructions of children and young people as both independent social actors with their own culture and characteristics as well as the subjects of rights and entitlements (UNCRC, 1989; James & James, 2004). Importantly, in the specific context of child protection policy in sport, participation should be seen, in a

holistic sense, to not only improve confidence, self esteem and well-being but also to better protect:

More fundamentally, however, the recognition that children have agency and competences demonstrates that they can and do make a positive contribution not only to their own welfare but that of others. (Parton, 2006, p. 183)

Sport is likely to embrace traditional approaches to the adult-child relationship where adults protect and control, and children listen. If children are to be part of a policy debate this dominant discourse will have to be challenged because it constructs children and young people as incompetent and not knowledgeable (Davis & Edwards, 2004). Participation needs to be seen as having different levels and dimensions and the complexity of power relations within this must not be ignored. It has been argued that even organisations that embrace “a child liberation philosophy find it difficult to find a clear and meaningful starting point” for participation (Brady, 2007, p. 33).

It has been clearly identified that barriers do exist in terms of many adult attitudes and pre-conceptions concerning children’s rights, in general, and participation in particular. These are often hidden within organisations (McNeish, 1999). Given the concern with the lack of awareness of child abuse identified earlier in this paper, adult attitudes in Rugby League and sport in general towards participation do need to be carefully explored.

Sport can and should embed in its philosophy, policy and practice what has been seen as a new model of children and young people as social actors. Doing so will complement and “... reinforce governments’ increasing recognition that children are competent citizens whose views should be sought and enacted in legislation, policy and practice” (MacNaughton, *et al.*, 2007). As those authors suggest, even for

the youngest of children, this envisages an equitable and collaborative adult-child relationship. The aim should be to make children and young people’s participation part of the fabric of the formal and informal ways that sports clubs and organisations make decisions (Kirby *et al.*, 2003).

3. Local community relationships

UK Government strategies under the current ‘Children’ and ‘Youth’ agendas encourage all organisations involved with providing services to children, including sport, to team up in new ways, share information and work together, to protect children and young people from harm and help them achieve what they want in life. Every local authority is expected to work with its partners to find out what works best for children and young people in its area and to act upon it; the government identifies the local community as an important part of this process (DfES, 2004). As identified earlier, local authorities and partners need to ensure there is a good level of participation of children and young people in the design and delivery of services to ensure they reflect their needs.

It is argued that keeping the *Every Child Matters* outcomes framework in mind helps to focus on how services can better be brought together around the child, young person and family. Sport England (2006) has identified this, however, if “the outcomes are to be really effective in driving change, it is important to be clear what they mean in practice and how progress towards them will be measured” (DfES, 2004). The outcomes framework acts as a basis for agreeing local priorities and planning local change. The development of what has been described above as ‘early’ relationships at a local level with teams or individuals responsible for safeguarding children is clearly indicated here. Immediate relationship-building between sports clubs and professionals in the local community is recommended in the

context of sport's developing child protection agenda.

Conclusion

Brackenridge (2002b) found that, in 1999, 39% of voluntary sports clubs in one English Midlands county had a child protection policy, from a sample of 130 clubs across 19 different sports. We found that, in 2004, 85% of our sample of English Rugby League clubs (voluntary and professional) had a (newly appointed) child protection *officer*. This represents a major development within organised sport in the UK with regard to child protection. As Brackenridge predicted: "the introduction of a set of NGB standards for child protection by Sport England should have a considerable impact on the future uptake of both codes of practice and policies for child protection at club level" (2002b, p. 109). However, each CPO role is only as effective as the individual that takes it on and each policy is only as effective as the people who implement it. The manner in which a child protection policy is developed, presented and prioritised is a central issue for every sports club.

The planning process for child protection policy bears critical analysis. Planning can be viewed as an attention-shaping activity and not one that is purely concerned with an instrumental approach to the policy process (Habermas, 1984). It can be argued that more attention might have been paid, in the planning of the Rugby League's policy, to the more subtle effects that shape and mediate policy processes. It is important to note that key messages that concern awareness and understanding of child abuse and the means to safeguard children may be diluted or distorted through weak communication systems. A means to develop a deeper 'communicative competence' could be explored by future child protection policy planners; the individual club policy process model (the 'Club Schedule'), participative cultures that

embrace children's councils and the development of clear relationships with Local Authorities are three ways of facilitating this. The development of a policy process model and children's councils can be seen as specific methods by which individual clubs can achieve at least one of the outcomes/objectives set down in recent sport policy (Sport England/NSPCC, 2006) whilst clearly working within the 'principles' of that policy. The development of clear, local relationships with child protection professionals would be a robust response to Sport England's recent "commitment to work in partnership with parents, guardians and others to increase their knowledge of the theory and practices of safeguarding children" (2006, p.7).

The need for, and complexity of, cultural change in the context of child abuse and the nature of the adult-child relationship which lies at its heart must neither be ignored nor underestimated. Only the broadest community of interest is sufficient to impact on a social problem of this kind. Sport can have a key role to play in this community given that its practices and texts are cultural agencies able to work on its participants and consumers in an ideological way. Sport, now more than ever, wields considerable ideological power over its participants and consumers (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2002). Nation states, organised religion and global corporations have not been slow to recognise this fact. However, to date, the egalitarian promise of sport, frequently extolled, has barely been realised. The mission statement of Sport England's (2006) policy strategy is to, "lead the way in keeping children safe from harm". If sport is truly to assume a key role in this community, the grass roots of sport that are its lifeblood, must be more aware of and more supported in the task of prioritising children's interests *through* sport, rather than assuming that sport will (and is designed to) serve children's best interests *per se*. Such an assumption, which exemplifies the domination of a welfare

discourse rather than a children's rights discourse within policy, has been identified as potentially dangerous and, at best, non-protective of children and young people (Lansdown, 2001b). Policy strategies should focus much more on children as creative human agents and participation processes should be part of the routine experience of all children (Williams, 2004). An underpinning philosophy is required that embraces the authentic empowerment of children and young people in "the complex human activity of policy making" (Gunn, 2006, p. 135). Effectively, the participation of children and young people in the policy process must become part of sport's organizational culture (Wright *et al.*, 2006).

Endnotes:

¹ 'Intermediate' level must be achieved by March 2007 and 'Advanced' level by March 2008.

² The Rugby League's policy document currently uses the term 'child protection officers' whilst Sport England's accreditation scheme 'Clubmark' refers to 'child welfare officers'.

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