CHAPTER 6

Key concepts and theories in sport development

This chapter is very much a kind of scene setting for some of the key terms used in the academic and professional field. There is an established lexicon of what might be termed conceptual and technical language in sport development (pathways, talent identification, bottom up/top down, implementation, and so on). There is also an emerging new language of sport development in the UK (driven by modernisation, new technology, and professionalisation agendas) that needs exploring. It could be argued that this is a discourse, a discourse being a socially constructed language, set of beliefs, and behaviours that cut across society. By considering the more academic concepts and theoretical ideas around professionalisation and modernisation of sport development, this can offer a point of departure for examining new terms that whilst highly present in industry day-to-day practice are not currently reflected in existing undergraduate sport development texts. In this sense, there is an argument that industry needs to drive academia and this point will also allow staff and students to bring in the idea of research-informed professional practice for students (and staff) as is the case in other areas of public service in particular. A core assumption of this chapter is that students need support in their learning to engage with concepts through case studies, examples, and reference to past studies that have used theory and concepts in the sport development field. In a book from over ten years ago, Girginov (2008) talked of key processes in sport development. First, that of vision setting and the location of issues onto political agendas. Here arguing for bottom up processes from organisations and communities, bottom up here meaning embedding ideas, visions and goals from within and in partnership with local and regional communities as opposed to top down from national agendas. It seems this is a distant memory now, with the complexities in governance of organisations, agenda setting, devolution, Brexit, and funding. Second, he argued for the need for new sets of skills in management as collaboration and programme development extends. This seems ever more present, and is a constant theme within this text. Third, he suggested a focus would be the disadvantaged, under-represented in sport.
Certainly, in the four home nation strategic documents that emerged four to seven years after his book, these did materialise. This linked closely with his argument of a theme in the profession for the need to construct personal identity in specific settings. The final area is one that we turn to below, that of collaboration, co-creation, and partnership working across networks. It is interesting to reflect back on a vision of the pressing issues of sport development at a key time for graduates 12 years ago. I would argue, some areas have sped up, others have developed, and some have been radically reshaped.

Key concept 1: modernisation

Conceptually, the evolution of sport from amateur status and organisation is a core idea behind a historical understanding of sport development. From preformal government intervention in sport through to the codification of sport and into the emergence of NGBs and associated agencies such as Sports Councils and local government provision, it could be argued that there has been an ongoing process of modernisation. Modernisation is the ongoing development of sport development processes, approaches, and focus in society. Modernisation has received its critics (Houlihan and Green, 2009) as agencies have been seen to focus on targets, performance measures, and the delivery of targets sent to effectively ‘discipline’ and reward. A good example is the use of payment by results systems by UK Sport for elite sport and other agencies in Sport Scotland and Sport Wales. Indeed, in 2016 the RFU lost £1 million for not meeting its Sport England participation targets. It could also be argued that modernisation plays out for the professional identities of sport development officers (SDOs) as they grapple with this new, modernising agenda that challenges long established values and practices (Mackintosh, 2012). A good example of a specific study around this is Bloyce et al.’s (2008) empirical examination of SDO identities, which found complex contrasts between those that were experiencing the transition from ‘tracksuits to suits’. Likewise, Thompson, Bloyce, and Mackintosh (2020) have undertaken one of the few studies of organisational change in sport development. The study explores NGB change in a time of great policy undulations and agenda diversification using a figurational sociological lens. As new students of sport development, this new, latest era is perhaps all you have known. But, it is critical to understand the context of recent and longer-term history of your profession.

Key concept 2: governance

The movement away from ‘big’ government towards governance is an important conceptual and theoretical backdrop for sport development policy and practice in the UK. It is not a new one, as the role of networks is well established (Houlihan and Lindsey, 2008; Girginov, 2008; Hylton and Bramham, 2007). In essence, it was the position that ‘large’-scale government invested in ‘large’ regional and local governments through high tax regimes. But, what has emerged is a ‘hollowing out’ (Skelcher, 2000) of the State where there is a far
greater ‘arm’s length’ role. In sport development terms, this concept is played out in the extensive governance networks that ‘run’ sport, from UK Sport to Sport Wales, professional sport clubs, charities, social enterprises, and the voluntary sector. Traditional notions of hierarchies are replaced by horizontal partnerships (see above) where organisations are part of governance systems not linear and traditional forms of government. Governance has also emerged as key policy point of reference in areas such as child protection, doping, ethics, accountability, and funding. From this there is now the UK Code of Governance (UK Sport, 2017). But, this specific policy document should not be confused with the wider theoretical and academic concept of governance. In sport development this is a key term for as students of this subject area, and potential graduates employed in this political environment, we need now more than ever to understand where we are positioned, who is governing, where power lies, and the shifting sands of authority as organisations and the public respond to agenda change.

Key concept 3: professionalisation

The concept of professionalisation is a vital one to command in relation to your position within the sport development landscape, but also your own professional identity in sub-sectors within the sport development profession. It is perhaps first pertinent to examine the very notion of whether sport development is a profession per se. Hylton and Hartley (2012) compared it to other professions such as law, social work and teaching and medicine and examined some of the differences and contrasts with these areas. They summarised that in 2012 it did not meet all the necessary criteria for a ‘profession’. However, past estimates have seen sport development have an estimated workforce between 2500 and 5000 (Pitchford and Collins, 2010). As these three standpoints are all now dated, it is perhaps useful to revisit the notion of a professional in sport development in 2020. For most students looking forward to graduation, this means employment in three areas; ‘sport-for-development’, elite sport, and community sport for sports sake. In different countries in the UK there are slightly different focuses on these three areas, with associated scales of employment and markets for jobs. Many forget that no assessment has been made of the size of sport development graduate market; major employers in areas such as community sport coaching may employ hundreds of coaches. Charities such as Football in the Community at professional clubs and Street Games offer considerable paid work, linked to opportunities for progress in sport-for-development.

With a period of financial austerity (see explanation below) since 2008 in the UK and wider global economy, there has been a scaling back of local government sport employment (King, 2015; Widdop et al., 2017). As the major employer of professionals in sport, this no doubt has had an impact on the size of the market. But it could also be argued that professionalisation (Dowling, Edwards, and Washington, 2014; Taylor and Garratt, 2010) continues regardless and is a closely linked process to modernisation of sport development. A good example
of this is who is working in what roles in the profession. It could be argued that NGBs are now predominantly run by a smaller core of professionals within their day-to-day staff. Many also have directors, boards, and chairpersons that lead the governance of ‘the sport’. In addition, we now see sports reaching out to non-executive directors (NEDs), these external candidates are appointed specifically for their ‘professional’ expertise in non-sport areas such as finance, marketing, and Audit here being the ability to oversee processes of accountability and, often, financial regulation and monitoring of standards within an organisation. Dowling, Edwards, and Washington (2014) suggest that professionalisation is a multi-faceted concept but also one that can be defined in a range of ways dependent on philosophical and theoretical stance of the researcher.

**Key concept 4: evidence-based practice (EBP)**

The use of evidence to consider ‘what works’ (Cairney, 2016; Davies, Nutley, and Smith, 2000; Piggin, Jackson and Lewis, 2009) but also to embed research-informed thinking the development of public services is not new. Students of sport development need to be aware that concepts such as evidence-based practice (and policy) are now firmly at the forefront of funding allocation, grant provision, and the cyclical nature of allocation of money to sports, agencies, and government departments. Essentially, it focuses on the role of research, evaluation, theory, insight, information systems (as forms of evidence) in shaping provision, daily practices, and organisational processes. For some, EBP itself is a contested term and comes as part of the ‘machinery’ of government modernisation (Cairney, 2016; Houlihan and Green, 2009; Piggin, Jackson, and Lewis, 2009). But, as the industry moved long ago towards using research to inform policy and practice, it is what might be termed a contested conceptual argument. For students new to sport development, this is the use of theoretical different ideas and research to argue for and against the presence of, and existence of a phenomenon in society. It is perhaps neatly summed up by the former research officer from Sport Scotland John Best, who argued academic policy researchers never want to do the kind of research the sport development industry wants them to, and industry doesn’t want to hear the research findings academia uncovers (Best, 2009). What is clear is that a veritable industry in ‘insight’ has emerged both in the public, private and charitable sectors (Table 6.1).

**Key concept 5: partnership working**

A constant within the world of sport development policy and practice has been the mantra and rhetoric of the importance of organisational partnerships to deliver policy goals (Baker, El Ansari, and Crone, 2016; O’Hanlon et al., 2020). If there is term that has now come to mean little, but is consistently used throughout industry, it is this concept. It can be argued that it is the areas of mutually beneficial working where two, or more organisations, or individuals
from within organisations collaborate in a multi-agency manner on a project delivery or initiative. For students new to the subject of sport development, it is worth being aware that it has been argued that the origins of this move to partner, collaborate, and work cross-agency to deliver could be seen as stemming from New Labour government’s Third Way politics that emerged in the late 1990s (Houlihan and White, 2002; Houlihan and Lindsey, 2013; Mackintosh, 2011). The theoretical principles here are that organisations now need to work less in silos, perhaps akin to the ‘old structures’ of local government departments and work across teams, divisions, and departments. This is now, 20 years later, a critical and vital component of sport development practice. Few NGBs or major charities in sport development such as Street Games can deliver their organisational vision without getting others to work with or for them. Indeed, since the study of partnerships in public sector began to emerge, specific agencies branded as partnerships in the sector have been set up such as Active Partnerships in each region of England (formerly County Sport Partnerships). Studies in this conceptual area have considered the sustainability of this approach (Lindsey, 2008), power dynamics within the partnership (Baker El Ansari and Crone, 2016; Philpotts and Grix, 2010) and the fragility and complex reality of working through and within partnership (Philpotts and Grix, 2010; Mackintosh, 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Examples of research agencies involved in direct EBP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Public | Sports Council research and insight teams (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and England)  
        | English Institute of Sport  
        | Insight officer – NGB or non-specific roles across 300 NGBs in UK  
        | Insight officer – varied number across 43 Active Partnerships  
        | Local government research team (non-sport specific: ‘policy units’ or ‘insight and evaluation teams’) |
| Private | Sport Consultancy Practices, e.g. Substance, Strategic Leisure, KKP, PortaConsulting, S&L Consulting  
        | Mainstream consultants (sport element), e.g. KPMG, ECORYS, Deloitte Sports Business Group  
        | University-based research consultants and centres – theory and practice-led research |
| Charity | Street Games – knowledge manager (and in-house team)  
        | Football in the Community – researcher (in-house)  
        | Mainstream charities with externally commissioned sport research, e.g. MIND  
        | Charitable sector researchers |
Key concept 6: civil society

The literature will often refer to civil society but for students new to sport development research and analysis as an academic study this will be a new concept for many. It tries to encapsulate the area of society that is located outside of formal structures and agencies of state and government. Often, it might be equated to the voluntary sector; again, by this we mean the volunteers, participants in the voluntary sector, and machinery of support and partnerships that are now at play here. But, it also includes churches, faith centres, and diverse other settings. For sport development, as the largest subsector sector in the volunteering community, this is a fundamental area for us to understand and engage with as professionals. It is also where much of our wider theorising, conceptual work sits and research leans towards. Consider an agency like the Rugby Football League (RFL) or British Orienteering, two NGBs that rely on their members, clubs, and participants to ‘deliver’ the goals and targets of government. Without a grasp of the civil society challenges at large, SDOs may make overly large expectations on volunteers. Research has shown the vital role that volunteers make in the delivery, or, indeed, non-delivery of sport development government policy (Harris, Mori, and Collins, 2009; Harris and Houlihan, 2016; Harris, Nichols, and Taylor, 2017). It is fundamentally important that we are therefore able to have an awareness of not only what civil society encompasses.

It is not just the voluntary sector in perhaps how the sport sector has seen itself. It also encompasses charities, social enterprises, not-for-profit agencies, religious-led projects and neighbourhood self-help-styled sport and physical and activity organisations. This has become a growth area for the sector that is hard to delineate and define but increasingly important (Marsden-Heathcote and Finney, 2018). It has been suggested, for example, that sport education-based social enterprises are the fastest area of growth within social enterprises in the UK (Marsden-Heathcote, 2017). Furthermore, with government policy in 2015 (DCMS, 2015) moving towards an increased focus on social policy outcomes (crime prevention, health, mental health, community development, individual development, and economic regeneration) traditional agencies such as NGBs, Active Partnerships, and perhaps local government were less flexible and less able to respond to this challenge. Civil society is a key concept and one that for all students in sport development remains a complex but important foundation of their subject knowledge, although this does overlap with the concepts of modernisation, austerity and professionalisation. Recent research has shown the sector of 30,967 social enterprise organisations is changing (Social Enterprise UK, 2019). In a study of 1068 social enterprises, there was a long-term trend away from organisations describing themselves as charities towards 33 per cent using the term social enterprise, 31 per cent community business and 26 per cent a cooperative. This could be seen as a shift away from civil society towards more of a ‘business’ community focus. Equally, this national study found that 33 per cent of organisations are under £50,000 turnover in scale and thus can be described as small or micro businesses.
Key concept 7: austerity

A consistent theme over the last ten years of sport development policy and practice has been the use of the term, concept, and political idea of austerity (King, 2014a, b; Mackintosh and Liddle, 2015; Widdop et al., 2017). The essence of the idea is the financial (or fiscal, as it is referred to in economist terms) tightening of budgets in the public sector with less expenditure to reduce government involvement in public services. It is suggested that it essentially arrived with the Conservative government in 2010 that argued it had inherited an ‘overspending’ Labour government from the 1997–2010 period of power. However, it is about more than balance sheets, income, expenditure, and gross domestic product (GDP). Sport development academics in this field such as King (2014a, b), through their surveys of local government, have shown how fundamental changes have occurred in the landscape of sport facilities, sport development, and hence neighbourhood of England. Whilst there are elements of devolution of power and decision making around sport, health, and other public services in the other home nations, central government does control central budgets in national agencies and hence there will be overall impacts on communities. Other authors have examined austerity from the what we might term the ‘lived realities’, or daily existences, feelings, and emotions of both sport workers (Gale et al., 2019; Ives et al., 2019) and local communities affected by austerity (Parnell, Millward, and Spracklen, 2016; Walker and Hayton, 2019). How austerity is influencing the situation in each of the four home nations should also be closely considered. For example, Jarvie and Birnbacher (2018) analyse sport, austerity, and economic choices in Scotland in an analysis of direct government expenditure on sport. This provides a useful backdrop to the context of sport development plans presented by Sport Scotland (2019). Indeed, other authors suggest that public expenditure between 1998 and 2010 had significantly increased since devolution (Houlihan and Lindsey, 2013). Finance remains a complex picture and one where bold generalisations should be avoided. Austerity remains a concept playing out at large for SDOs, the communities they work with, and the multiple agencies of the sector, whether it is SDOs finding it harder to recruit volunteers due to income pressures on families, or more macro issues of reduced funding for national agencies. All influence the landscapes of the profession. They also offer fertile grounds for undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate study as a researcher in sport development.

CASE STUDY 6.1

Putting theory into practice – examining sport coaching policy and practice

Development officers across the sport development workforce, whether in NGBs, active partnerships, Football in The Community set-ups, or in volunteer roles around parkrun, will all experience the above concepts in different ways. A good example to
look at is that of community sport coaching and try to unpick some of the different challenges, understanding, and perspectives of each of these core issues to this textbook. Community sport coaching in the United Kingdom has for a number of years been overseen by SportsCoachUK, now known as UK Coaching (Burt and Morgan, 2014; Dowling, Edwards, and Washington, 2014). Since 2018, this has started to subtly shift across the home nations due to funding shifts and centralisation of support for UK Coaching from Sport England. Increasingly, Scotland, for example, are designing their own independent strategy, approach, and accreditation system. There are approximately 3 million coaches working at different levels of sport and physical activity in the UK. This case study is about trying to understand how they might be experiencing each of the different theoretical concepts but from an industry experience. Remember the previous chapter where we also introduced sociology, political theory, and business management (amongst other theories) as layering these onto the key concept, term, and idea will bring a slightly different view. If we lean towards sociology, we may be interested in people, communities, and individual norms and behaviours around, say, professionalisation or modernisation in coaching. If adopting a political theory stance, we may want to look at which policy coalitions or groups coalesce around a topic or theme linked to austerity or governance such as cuts to leisure centres. Finally, by engaging with theory on marketing in business we could look at how marketing segmentation is used to offer evidence for getting more people more active. At level 5, we then go on to start evaluating arguments around these debates.

So, we are now going to focus on one conceptual theme, that of professionalisation in community (‘grass roots’) sport coaching in the sport of Rugby Union in England. The UK has had an established coach development set of processes based around the United Kingdom Coaching Certificate (UKCC), in place for over 15 years in the four home countries. In 2018, the UKCC Review was undertaken (Mackintosh and Carter, 2018), which recommended changes for UK Coaching, Sport England and Scotland (Wales and Northern Ireland opted out of the review, but received the findings). It was a review undertaken with 1300 coaches submitting responses to an online survey and over 12 interviews with senior policy makers and 12 focus groups with universities, community coaches, and NGBs. The purpose of the review was to establish if the existing system was ‘fit for purpose’ for delivery of professionalisation and modernisation of the community through to elite sport coaching system. The report currently remains confidential.

Put yourself in the position of a potential level 1 rugby club coach who is considering volunteering at a local club and is told they need to do a Rugby Ready course and also a level 1 course (two days over a weekend) and a child protection course (a DBS check would be undertaken regardless by the club safeguarding officer). With this national review complete, CIMSPA are considering implication for national standard benchmarks in coaching and how this will work for each NGB.

**Seminar questions**

- What might a potential club coach feel?
- Why does this matter for the regional RFU development officer and their ‘day job’?
Introducing the sport development landscape

- What should a national coach accreditation system include?
- What are the benefits and challenges of professionalising local grass roots community coaching through weekend ‘badges’?

Extension task

Although a more historical article, explore Burt and Morgan’s (2014) study of RFU community coaches at levels 1 and 2. How does this article advance your understanding of the four questions above?

Suggested reflection task

Consider how your own understanding of your own sport coaching practice has been shaped by this task. Identify ways in which you would work differently as an RFU regional officer responsible for 30 clubs and their coaches as a result of this task.

References


References


PART I ▶ Introducing the sport development landscape


