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Sport policy and English primary physical education: the role of professional football clubs in outsourcing

Daniel Parnell, Ed Cope, Richard Bailey & Paul Widdop

ABSTRACT

Sports policy in England has led to considerable recent investment in Primary Physical Education (PE) via the 'PE and Sport Premium'. An outcome of this has been growth in the outsourcing – handing over control of services to external agencies – of PE, including sport coaches from professional football clubs' community programmes. Despite the growing research on healthy stadia, we know very little about the work performed by community arms of professional clubs in relation to delivering Primary PE. This article discusses the challenges of outsourcing PE to coaches who work for professional football clubs, while offering some evidence related to the employment and development of sports coaches. Given that the evidence of sport coaches' involvement in Primary PE is limited and that funding and outsourcing it likely to continue England until (at least) 2020, it is important and timely to discuss critically the role of professional football clubs within the current sport policy.

Introduction

Professional football clubs via their community programmes have featured as a key deliverer on the healthy stadia agenda (Parnell and Pringle 2016; Curran et al. 2014; Hunt et al. 2014). As part of this work, these community programmes deliver a range of school-based sport provision, including Primary Physical Education (PE). The role of external providers of Primary PE, specifically sports coaches, has come under increasing scrutiny. Indeed, many clubs deliver Primary PE services through school-based coaching. As a result of government policy and funding from the English Premier League, the outsourcing of Primary PE to coaches has grown, while research in this area is lacking. As a result, this article aims to explore current sport policy and critically discuss how professional football clubs and sport coaches, within the healthy stadia agenda, are delivering Primary PE.

In May 2010, a Conservative Party-led coalition government assumed political leadership of the United Kingdom (UK). In response to (real and perceived) debt incurred by the previous Labour administration, the new government initiated considerable cuts to public spending, including a raft of austerity measures in its 'Comprehensive Spending Review', which outlined £81 billion cuts to government departments. This spending review ensured that public spending was reduced on a national scale, leaving few government departments untouched. As part of the spending review, local governments had to launch their own reductions (Commission 2011; DCLG 2010). The Department of Communities and Local Government delivered funding cuts of 51% between 2010 and 2015, resulting in grants to local government falling by 27% (Parnell, Widdop, and King 2015). As a consequence, discretionary services, such as sport, leisure and culture faced uncertainty (Collins and Haudenhuyse 2015; Local Government Association 2013; Parnell, Millward, and Spracklen 2014; Parnell et al. 2015). Despite this lack of protection for sport provision in the run up to the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games (hereafter Olympic Games), it was anticipated that funding

support for sport would continue. The 2012 Olympic Games aspired to stimulate political and national interest in sport. Indeed, the 2012 Olympic Games would – it was claimed – act as a vehicle to endorse and promote sports participation for all social groups, particularly children and young people (Department for Culture Media and Sport 2008; London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games 2007). On securing the bid to host the Olympic Games, Public Service Agreement Target 22 aimed to deliver a successful Olympic Games with a sustainable legacy, which included getting more young people taking part in PE and sport (National Audit Office 2010).

The Olympic legacy narrative was explicitly associated with PE, school sport, and talent development and built on earlier policies that sought to transform radically the state and status of these activities for young people (Cale, Harris, and Duncombe 2016; Phillpots 2013; Weed et al. 2012). Talent in schools had been, by and large, little more than the locally networked PE teacher offering direction to more able students towards the nearest community sports club (Bailey 2006). Despite this, Primary School settings have seen a policy shift and financial investment in identifying and developing gifted and talented pupils, including those in PE and school sport. In order to support talented students with PE and school sport, a new contributory initiative emerged, the PE, School Sport and Club Links (PESSCL) scheme (DES/DCMS 2003). This programme involved eight initiatives to increase levels of participation and was predominantly funded by the Treasury (at the time, Labour), who committed £459 million to transform PE and school sport, with an additional allocation of £686 million to improve school sport facilities across England (DES/DCMS 2003), when it was launched in 2002. The strands of PESSCL included, gifted and talented activities, competition managers in schools, multi-skills clubs, academies and camps in Primary Schools and specific jobs with the remit of talent identification, based within new Specialist Sports Colleges as part of School Sport Partnerships (Flintoff 2003; YST 2004). The approach was intended to complement existing talent development strategies, building a stronger school to- club system in collaboration with national governing bodies (NGBs), and necessitated much closer interaction between schools and external coaches. Through distinct curricular and extra-curricular programmes, the scheme aimed to promote a cultural shift towards a system whereby excellence and outstanding achievement were identified, developed and celebrated (Bailey 2007), although it is uncertain whether the objectives of these have been fully realized (Parnell et al. 2016).

Following the 2010 coalition's comprehensive spending review, reduced public spending challenged the maintenance of support for PE and school sport (Parnell et al. 2016). Almost immediately, the new Secretary of State for Education informed the Youth Sport Trust, previously the agency given responsibility for PE and school sport (Department for Culture Media and Sport /Strategy Unit 2002), that the £162 million ring-fenced funding for School Sport Partnerships would end in order to give schools the time and freedom to focus on providing competitive sport (Parnell et al. 2016). A new youth sport policy document, 'Creating a sporting habit for life: a new youth sport strategy' was introduced that called for a new approach to policy and practice that would be a more rigorous and targeted way of thinking focusing on results within grassroots sport and school-club links (Department for Culture Media and Sport 2012). This policy set out to improve links between schools and community sports clubs (Department for Culture Media and Sport 2012) and introduce a new funding initiative.

In 2012, the UK Government announced the launch of 'Primary PE and Sport Premium' funding (amounting to £450 million) for English schools, initially for three years. This equated to an

approximate payment of £9250 per school. The fund, it was claimed, would support the improvement of the quality of PE and sport. The fund would allow Head Teachers to invest in activities such as providing enhanced teacher professional development, increased children's competitive sport, additional education for teachers, and activities for children to recognize the value and benefit of high-quality PE and how it can help deliver whole school improvement (Cope, Bailey, and Parnell 2015). The result of these developments led some stakeholders, most notably Head Teachers, to use the Premium to employ Primary PE specialists as members of staff, offer existing staff professional development opportunities and delivering sport competitions or buying new equipment (such as specialist facilities) (Cope, Bailey, and Parnell 2015). In many cases, however, the Premium was spent hiring external sports coaches (Department for Education 2014), which reflected a shift in focus from central management, to a competitive, decentralized environment. A range of deliverers moved in to take advantage of the new funding space, including small businesses, social entrepreneurs and charities, including the community programmes attached to professional football clubs.

Professional football clubs as deliverers

The focus of professional football clubs' work initially targeted children in community and school settings through their community programmes, and had two objectives. First, it sought to engage and connect with children through football to create lifelong supporters; second, it tried to establish talent identification across local communities (Mellor 2008; Parnell et al. 2013). Since the establishment of similar activities in the 1970s, through the national 'Football in the Community' scheme, and the role of football clubs in addressing social issues and the healthy stadia agenda has continued to grow. Football clubs now work with a number of key target groups in addition to children, including adult men and women, families and older adults for several key policy agendas, including health-enhancing physical activity, social inclusion and general health (Parnell, Millward, and Spracklen 2014). As a result of this, professional football clubs have developed a range of stadia-based and outreach programmes. To date, research on this area has been limited with only preliminary evidence about how this type of work is delivered by professional sport clubs (Drygas et al. 2013). Exploring healthy stadia extends beyond a settings-based approach to health promotion, to include community outreach, such as school-based programmes (Drygas et al. 2013; Parnell, Pringle, Mckenna et al. 2015; Parnell et al. 2016). The growing body of evidence on the role of professional football clubs in delivering interventions in the community has been mainly concerned with health improvement programmes for men and women (Bingham et al. 2014; Curran et al. 2014; Hunt et al. 2014; Parnell and Richardson 2014; Rutherford et al. 2014; Parnell et al. 2015; Parnell and Pringle 2016). There is, however, limited evidence available about child- and youth-focused interventions (Parnell et al. 2013). In the light of the appearance of increasing opportunities for professional football clubs working in Primary PE settings, the urgency of such research is considerable.

Professional football clubs operate a broad range of activities and services broadly housed within Primary PE and school sport. This includes the provision of football/sport coaches for PE, breakfast and after-school clubs, reading and literacy programmes, and appearances by professional football players. For example, Premier League Reading Stars is delivered in a partnership between the Premier League, associated clubs, and the National Literacy Trust. It is claimed that this project helped three out of four children make at least six months' progress in reading over a ten-week

period. Added to this, two-thirds of child participants reported that seeing a Premier League footballer read made them want to read more (Pabion 2015). Another example is the Premier League 4 Sport initiative, which aimed to contribute to the legacy of the 2012 Olympics Games (from September 2009) by helping young people get involved in sport in their local community (Premier League 2016). This was a collaborative project between the Premier League, Sport England and the Youth Sport Trust, and was funded by a £3.8-million partnership with the UK Government. The project aimed to facilitate Premier League clubs to become hubs linked to community sport facilities and local secondary schools to create satellite sport centres (Premier League 2016). The scope and purpose of professional football clubs working and delivering community programmes within their stadia through outreach within Primary PE settings has clearly grown in both investment and scope, making clubs a considerable provider to schools.

The growth of professional football clubs delivering sport in schools is no doubt a result of the 2014 announcement that the English Premier League would launch of a substantial investment in a 3-year programme of support and delivery of Primary PE. This funding was generally welcomed insofar as it aimed to increase the quality of Primary PE, improve sports participation, increase physical activity, provide talent development and identification pathways, and build connections between clubs and their local communities. While this appears laudable, the academic community has offered a more critical perspective within wider discussions of the state and of Primary PE, and the use of sport coaches. Zwolinsky et al. (2016, 242–245) have challenged the claims attached to this activity (such as improved concentration, behaviour, educational attainment and overall physical health), stating that little is known about whether these outcomes actually happen as a consequence of delivery. This suggests that more work must be delivered by strategic stakeholders to capitalize on such investments, to enhance the system from a strategic and operational level in terms of evidenced-based practice and research. It does, however, ignore the substantial evidence base suggesting associations between these and other participation in sport and other physical activities, and that many of these outcomes do not appear to be affected in any way by the employment status of the teacher or coach (Bailey 2006; Bailey et al. 2012).

Critical discussion of outsourcing in Primary PE

External providers, in the form of football and sports coaches, are now established stakeholders in the delivery of Primary PE in England. This has led to intensification of the discussion surrounding their employment. To summarize, research in this area has focused on: (1) the appropriateness of coaches' skill and knowledge to deliver high-quality PE; (2) the impact coaches have on assisting in the professional development of generalist teachers; and (3) generalist teachers' competence, confidence and enthusiasm to deliver Primary PE. The following section will discuss the current state of knowledge in each of these sub-areas before a more general discussion highlighting the need for future work in this field of study.

The appropriateness of coaches' skill and knowledge to deliver high-quality PE

A frequently mentioned concern has been that football and sports coaches have been given responsibility to deliver Primary PE without a recognized formal teaching qualification. The minimum statutory requirement to coach within English Primary Schools is a Level Two qualification for each

sport delivered. Therefore, if a school employed a professional football club's services to deliver football and hockey, the expectation is that the coaches delivering these sports will have a Level Two qualification in both. Typically, Level Two courses require coaches to engage with 30–40 h of face-to-face delivery, with a similar quantity of hours of home study and/or evidence of coaching practice, and qualifies the coach to plan, lead and review coaching sessions and programmes independently. These courses are relatively short in duration, which is perhaps not conducive for optimal professional learning (Armour and Yelling 2004). Furthermore, there is an overriding focus on developing coaches' content knowledge (Cushion, Armour, and Jones 2003; Nelson and Cushion 2006). This means that coaches have a highly developed understanding of 'what' to coach, but not necessarily 'how' to coach.

The courses that have previously been prescribed for sport coaches were not developed with Primary PE delivery in mind, and so a focus on developing coaches' knowledge and skills in delivery of this subject in this context were without precedent. The extent to which these courses, alone, would be able to contribute towards preparing coaches to deliver the entirety of Primary PE has been questioned (Blair and Capel 2011; Parnell et al. 2013, 2016), leading to specific question being raised over coaches' abilities to plan and assess effectively (Griggs 2010). In some cases, coaches themselves have acknowledged how little they know about curriculum requirement (Blair and Capel 2011). Furthermore, Rainer et al. (2012, 429–446) found many of the head teachers in their sample were dissatisfied with the coaches they had employed as they were 'inexperienced', 'inconsistent in their delivery', and only interested in 'self-promotion'.

Shifting the focus from sport coaches to Primary teachers, it is important to acknowledge their limited preparation to teach the subject, too. English Primary teachers are generalists and have very little time in their training allocated to learning how to deliver high-quality PE. It has been reported that Primary teachers receive between 6 and 9 h of face-to-face content dedicated solely towards learning how to teach Primary PE (Talbot 2008). So, while there is no doubt that teachers will often enjoy greater opportunities than coaches to develop a wide suite of pedagogical knowledge and accompanying skills than coaches, the extent to which these could be applied within a PE context is uncertain. Delivering quality PE requires different pedagogical knowledge and skills than teaching in a classroom. For example, the way the lesson is structured is obviously different, as are lesson progressions and assessment (Bailey 2001). What is needed is pedagogical content knowledge, which is knowledge of both what to deliver and how to deliver it (Cassidy, Jones and Potrac 2009; Herold and Waring 2016).

The impact coaches have on assisting in the professional development of generalist teachers

The Association for Physical Education (AfPE) – the subject association for PE in the UK – have argued that outsources provision is most effective when coaches working in Primary Schools do so alongside teachers, rather than displace or replace them. This seems a plausible option, as the potential shortfalls in coaches' professional training could be balanced by the generalist teachers' knowledge and understanding. A supplementary argument could also be made, namely that the collaborative model of delivery offers a degree of sustainability if cuts were made to government funding, or the Primary PE and Sport Premium funding was abolished altogether, as teachers would have had the opportunity to improve their professional knowledge in PE by working with specialist

coaches. There is some evidence to suggest that this already happens, and even providing teachers with the opportunity to observe coaches delivering PE can be beneficial for their professional development (Harris, Cale, and Musson 2012). Given the limited evidence base, it is difficult to make judgements on whether or not teachers and coaches working alongside each other is typical within English schools; our suspicion is it is not.

These changes for funding and delivery have resulted in the development of an additional qualification, designed by AfPE, to provide coaches with a greater understanding of National Curriculum for PE programmes of study, as well as the wider educational and statutory environment in which they will be operating. The Advanced Level Certificate in 'Supporting the Delivery of Physical Education and School Sport' quickly became a requirement for external providers of Primary PE. While the qualification was not equivalent of a teaching qualification, it was a clear move towards providing coaches with a firmer educational foundation of knowledge, skills and understanding.

Generalist teachers' competence, confidence and enthusiasm to deliver Primary PE

Evidence suggests that Primary PE is mainly taught by generalist teachers (Hunter 2006), and that it is often of poor quality (Kirk 2005). This situation seems to be the result of a combination of factors, including: insufficient teacher training; limited subject knowledge and the necessary pedagogy in PE; and limited professional development opportunities once initial training is completed (Hunter 2006; Kirk 2005; McKenzie and Kahan 2008). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that a significant number of Primary School teachers have low levels of confidence and do not feel competent teaching PE (Decorby et al. 2005; Morgan and Bourke 2005; Morgan and Hansen 2008; Sloan 2010). This situation raises an interesting question for educational leaders: is it better that children are introduced to formal physical activities by a qualified, generalist teacher who has no in-depth knowledge of that subject, or by a coach who has sport-specific knowledge, but a limited understanding of wider educational issues? Few would deny the potential problems that result from wide-scale replacement of Primary School teachers by sport coaches in PE, yet the absence of confidence and competence of generalist teachers in the current situation is also problematic.

Summary

Given the current evidence base, it is unclear who is best placed to deliver Primary PE. On the one hand, it seems reasonable to assume that teachers will generally better understand the learning and developmental needs of children; on the other hand, football and sport coaches are more likely to have an enthusiasm and expertise to teach sporting activities. To be clear, this argument is not a condemnation of the practices of generalist teachers. On the contrary, it is important to acknowledge their broad base of knowledge and skills required to teach the whole curriculum and the pressures associated with this. It also does not follow that from the evidence cited above, as a matter of policy, sports coaches ought to replace generalist teachers in the delivery of Primary PE lessons. Despite the evident difficulties experienced by Primary School teachers, there are many who do feel confident and competent to teach PE, and some are genuine specialists, with highly developed and practised skills. However, as Zwolinsky et al. (2016, 242–245) highlighted, while there is much acclaim attached to Primary PE, especially by those offering sport coaching services (but

including those in education), few have been able to evaluate and articulate evidence of success. There is a deficit in our understanding of the effective delivery of Primary PE (Kirk 2005; and Parnell et al. 2016; Zwolinsky et al. 2016), and it is necessary to avoid speculation of the impact of such delivery and partnership working. Furthermore, sport coaches, teachers, head teachers, managers and policy-makers (and researchers) need to understand more about which parts of Primary PE work, who they work for and in which circumstances they work (Parnell et al. 2016; Zwolinsky et al. 2016), which will only be achieved through evidence and evaluation.

It is also important to consider the present political and sport policy landscape. The Conservative Party won the 2015 general election, taking full control and leadership. The public and politicians were left in no doubt about whether the reduction in public spending would continue. The Prime Minister David Cameron stated that there was a need for 'a leaner, more efficient state' in which 'we need to do more with less. Not just now, but permanently' (quoted in Krugman 2012: 1). Indeed, what would be termed 'an age of austerity' would continue in an attempt to manage national economic recovery. Conn (2015) noted that local government spending had been cut from £1.4 billion in 2009–10 to £1 billion in 2013–14. The impact of austerity and now super austerity on sport is largely unknown, however there is preliminary research highlighting that there could be significant repercussions (Parnell, Millward, and Spracklen 2014).

In late 2015, a new spending review was announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer (the Finance Minister), George Osborne, which would influence a number of departments, including the DfE (which was responsible for PE and school sport) and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (which was responsible for other aspects of sport). The DCMS was delivered administration budget cuts of 20% of its funding, as part of the Government's new Sporting Future strategy in December 2015. However, the strategy outlined five claimed contributions that sport can make to wider society. Interestingly the DfE highlighted a key leadership role in school sport policy for Primary PE (Parnell, Widdop, and King 2015). However, there was little detail about how this unspecified commitment would be implemented or fulfilled. The positivity of such a loose commitment within a quickly developed strategy documents threatened to be overshadowed by the continued and growing uncertainty surrounding Primary PE. The announcement in the Chancellor's budget of 2016 that a sugar tax levy on sugar in drinks would be used to double investment in the Primary PE and Sport Premium from £150 million to £320 million per year by 2018 is a huge nod in the direction of continued and growing outsourcing of Primary PE (YST 2016).

It seems likely that there will be continued growth of outsourcing Primary PE throughout the duration of the next sport strategy. It might also be expected that the English Premier League will grow as one of the main providers. Indeed, the English Premier League has recently announced that, in partnership with the Government, it will reach every child in the country through the delivering of Primary PE. The partnership seeks to double the Premier League's current reach from 4158 schools to 10,000 schools over three years and extend it to all Primary Schools within six years in England and Wales (Wintour 2015). As such, professional football clubs both from the English Premier League and English Football League will have a major role to play and a responsibility to improve the quality of children's sporting experiences and contribute to getting children more physically active. The challenges observed in the provision of football will no doubt resemble the experiences of other

NGBs wishing to participate in the delivery of Primary PE, and wish to access part of the Sport Premium funding, and potentially boost their sport's participation figures. Indeed, challenges will include upskilling sport coaching staff (Parnell et al. 2013). Recent years have witnessed significant changes to international standards in coach education, and this has partially addressed concerns related to the adequacy of coaches' skill for the delivery of Primary PE (Cope, Bailey, and Parnell 2015).

Moving forward, English Premier League clubs have an opportunity to address concerns related to coaches delivering Primary PE within the broad healthy stadia agenda. This includes investing in a broad and Primary PE-specific professional development programme for coaches and investing in research and evaluation. This will not only attend to issues of quality and effectiveness, but would offer programme feedback on practice and guidance for improvements alongside offering strategic leadership in this unique element of the sports industry when other professional sports, NGBs and in some regard the DfE have remained quiet. Through engagement in the delivery of Primary PE, professional sport clubs have an opportunity to positively affect the quality of provision in sporting activities for large numbers of children. In recognition of the critical debate in this area, it is important for future research to offer greater rigour and insight into the effectiveness of the delivery of Primary PE before making any substantive claims associated with the impact of Primary PE. The importance and potential impact of this opportunity is substantial. Such changes and research could contribute to the healthy stadia agenda in terms of both community outreach and engagement, creating local impact and enhancing sporting and education outcomes for children.

Note

1. Education in England is overseen by the departments within the UK Government. The equivalent systems in the other three home countries are the responsibility of the legislatures in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

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