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The changing status of school sport and physical education: explaining policy change

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This paper examines the changing political salience of school sport and physical education (PE) over the last 15 years. A brief survey of the recent history of school sport and PE based on an analysis of a range of policy documents published by professional bodies and government departments and agencies is followed by a discussion of two theoretical frameworks for explaining policy change, namely the advocacy coalition framework and multiple streams. The empirical section of the paper uses a series of interviews conducted during the summer of 2004 with a range of senior policy actors and analysts to explore the significance of four possible sources of policy change: changing values, beliefs and ideas; interest group lobbying; changes in organizational infrastructure and patterns of resource dependency; the impact of key individuals. It is argued that while individuals are an important explanatory factor their influence needs to be seen in the context of the institutional weakness of interest groups and the generalized, but largely unfocused, sympathy among politicians towards school sport and PE. It is further suggested that multiple streams is a more illuminating analytical framework than the advocacy coalition framework for understanding policy change in school sport and PE.

Keywords: *Sport; Physical education; Policy-making; Multiple streams; Advocacy coalition*

Introduction

The decision in 1991 to include physical education (PE) as one of the foundation subjects in the proposed National Curriculum was greeted with a palpable sense of relief among PE teachers and PE organizations in England and Wales. PE had experienced a prolonged period at the margins of education policy in general and curriculum discussions in particular. However, in the years since 1991 the fortunes of school sport and PE have apparently been transformed. Substantial sums of Treasury and Lottery money have been allocated to school sport and PE projects, specialist sports colleges have been encouraged, political party leaders vie with each other to demonstrate their commitment to competitive school sport and progress toward the aim of providing 2 hours of 'high quality' physical education for 85% of

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pupils by 2008 is being monitored by the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, along with major policy commitments such as cutting hospital waiting lists and getting trains to run on time.

This paper seeks to provide an analysis of the dramatic change in the political salience of school sport and PE based on a review of a range of policy documents published by professional bodies and government departments and agencies and on a series of nine interviews. The nine interviewees were selected on the basis of their involvement in the development, implementation or analysis of school sport and PE policy within the last 15 years. Most interviewees were involved in more than one aspect of the policy process: eight interviewees were currently or had been involved in policy development and included senior civil servants or senior members of interest/professional organizations; six were currently or had been involved in implementation and included senior civil servants, senior members of interest/professional bodies; four either were currently or had been senior academics involved in policy analysis. The semi-structured interviews were conducted during the summer of 2004. Each interviewee was asked a similar set of questions which invited them to assess the extent and character of change in the salience of school sport and PE policy, identify the indicators of change, consider the causes of change and, finally, reflect on the likely future direction for policy. Interviews were recorded and lasted between 40 and 80 minutes. In order to encourage openness it was agreed that interviewees would not be named in the article and that they would have an opportunity to comment on the context within which the authors had placed their words and the interpretation that had been added. Each interviewee was asked to identify additional potential interviewees as a way of confirming and supplementing the authors' initial selection.

Coming in from the cold?

From disdain to neglect

Education policy from the mid 1960s to the late 1970s was dominated by debates over the structure of the secondary school system and the issue of reorganization of the education system along comprehensive lines. Relatively little attention was paid to questions of curriculum at either the school or subject levels. During this period many physical education teachers engaged in repeated bouts of self-doubt regarding the nature and purpose of their subject and their own increasingly marginal status within the secondary curriculum, fuelled, in part, by the stinging critique of 'games' by the educational philosopher R. S. Peters, who discussed the criteria for determining the suitability of a subject for inclusion in the curriculum and concluded that 'games' was not a 'serious pursuit' like science, history and literary appreciation which

illuminate other areas of life ... [and] have ... a wide-ranging cognitive content ... There is very little to know about riding bicycles, swimming or golf ... Furthermore what there is to know throws very little light on much else. (Peters, 1966, p. 159)

The depth and duration of the period of self-doubt is evident from a review of the comments from PE teachers and from those responsible for their training. Throughout much of the 1970s the *British Journal of Physical Education (BJPE)*, for example, carried articles and editorials that expressed doubts about the concept of PE (Editorial, 1970), the lack of recognition of the contribution of PE (Britton, 1972; Quant, 1975), the worth of PE (Westthorp, 1974) and the marginal status of PE teachers (Dean, 1978). In short, PE was 'still regarded by many as unimportant' (Carroll, 1974, p. 103) and 'at best, only of peripheral value in the school experience' (Quant, 1975, p. 77). The general status and salience to government of school sport and PE during this period is best captured in the *BJPE* editorial on the 1975 White Paper *Sport and Recreation*, which noted that just one paragraph in the 19 page document referred to the role of PE teachers and concluded that:

If PE teachers have thought that they had a fundamental part to play in the education of every child, that they provided an essential basis on which active life for work and leisure could be built for everyone, then, clearly, they have to think again. (Spectator, 1975, p. 93)

Moreover, a constant theme running through these editorials was a concern with the disunity within the profession (Bystander, 1973, p. 38).

From neglect to moral panic

The 1980s provided the first signs of a more active involvement of PE and sport organizations in policy-making, although this was an activism prompted more by defensiveness than confident advocacy. Writing in 1982, when working for the Great Britain Sports Council, Sue Campbell argued that 'Perhaps teachers have been too timid in the past in their claims for physical education in schools' (Campbell, 1982, p. 28). Their timidity was partly explained by the lack of philosophical and conceptual coherence among organizations representing PE and school sport interests regarding the contribution that PE might make to the development of pupils (cf. Murdoch, 1987, 1993; School Sport Forum, 1988; Sports Council, 1992; Evans *et al.*, 1993a; Talbot, 1993). Dissensus and timidity were poor preparation for the period of turbulence into which PE was soon to be thrust.

In the late 1980s an emerging concern with the state of the health of young people and the perceived lack of success of elite sportsmen and sportswomen in England combined to push PE and school sport centre stage (cf. Evans *et al.*, 1993a, p. 329; see also, Flintoff, 2003). The immediate catalyst was a BBC *Panorama* programme entitled 'Is your child fit for life?' In the ensuing debates in the media and among politicians much was made of allegations that competitive team games in schools were being undermined by 'wet liberal' PE teachers. What followed was described by Evans (1990) as 'something of a moral panic... about the teaching of Physical Education' (p. 155). However, the public debate on competitive sport coincided with the debate about the content of the National Curriculum and the role of the Sports Council in relation to young people. This was not 'normal' politics. As Evans (1990)

noted, 'PE, after all, has rarely rested high amongst the interests and concerns of either the British media, or political circles or even the public at large' (p. 159). Indeed, Kirk (1992) suggested that the events of the mid to late 1980s represented 'a watershed in British physical education discourse, a new moment in the production of definitions of physical education' (p. 2).

The passage of the 1988 Education Reform Act and subsequent disputes over the content of the National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE) served to intensify and focus the often vaguely articulated concerns regarding sport and PE held by a number of policy actors, including national governing bodies of sport, politicians, educationists and professional PE organizations (cf. Murdoch, 1987, 1993; School Sport Forum, 1988; Houlihan, 1991; Kirk, 1992; Evans *et al.*, 1993a; Talbot, 1993). While PE and school sport was now a hotly debated political issue it needs to be borne in mind that the NCPE working group was the last to be established and that fiercer public debates were generated by the content of the English and history curricula and by other issues such as the relationship of schools to their Local Education Authority (LEA). Nevertheless, intense lobbying by the PE associations for the inclusion of PE in the National Curriculum and the debate on the content of the NCPE, which coincided with growing public concern over the sale of school playing fields, did undoubtedly raise the political profile of school sport and alerted the Central Council of Physical Recreation and the national governing bodies, especially the Rugby Football Union, to the potential implications of PE curriculum redesign for marketing and basic skills development among young people. As Kirk (1992, p. 3) observed 'the debate over the relationship between school physical education and elite sport entered a much more public arena' (see also Penney & Harris, 1997; Penney, 2000).

While Evans (1988) acknowledged the raised profile of school sport and PE, he urged caution in ascribing too great a degree of significance to the flurry of interest and notes that the issue of school sport and its relationship to PE during this period was central to this struggle only in as much as it possessed 'representational qualities' and could be used to 'signify all else that was wrong with State secondary educational provision and to vilify and negate progressive elements in it' (pp. 5–6). In short, as Kirk (1992) observed, these arguments were:

used as a *metaphor* for the perceived rise to prominence and power of oppositional values that threatened the interests of a coalition consisting largely of right wing politicians and their allies, and other groups with specific stakes in the fate of school sport such as journalists, [and] professional sports administrators. (p. 12, emphasis in original)

The appointment of John Major as Prime Minister in 1990, who was far more supportive of sport than his predecessor, gave added impetus to those groups arguing for the 'restoration' (cf. Penney & Evans, 1997; Penney, 1998) of competitive team games to the school curriculum. Moreover, in a 1994 'blueprint for the revitalising of school sport' (Evans & Penney, 1995a, p. 186), the then Minister for Sport, Iain Sproat, advocated that *inter alia* every school should offer five core games, cricket,

football, rugby, netball and hockey. This discourse of competitive team sport (and indeed elite sport objectives, with proposals for the establishment of a British Academy of Sport) was further strengthened in 1995 with the publication of the Conservative government's policy statement, *Sport: raising the game*, (Department of National Heritage, 1995). For Penney and Evans (1997) key elements of this document 'reflect once again the government's privileging of elitism, nationalism and cultural restorationism within the arenas of PE and sport policy' (p. 24). Perhaps more importantly, however, for the focus of this paper, Penney and Evans also argued that 'Clearly it is *particular* values and interests that are again being promoted and legitimated and, in parallel, others excluded and/or subordinated' (p. 24, emphasis in original).

From panic to priority

It is against this background of increasing state intervention in education policy, the implementation of a National Curriculum for schools and the struggles over the NCPE that a New Labour administration was elected in 1997 committed to making 'education its stated top priority' (Bache, 2003, p. 300). Education indeed remained high on the government agenda, as did school sport and PE, which not only maintained its political salience, but also emerged as a significant cross-departmental vehicle for the administration's broader social policy objectives. The linkages between school sport and PE and these broader social policy objectives were evident in the Labour Party's sport policy statement, *A sporting future for all* (Department for Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS], 2000, p. 7), and reinforced in *Game plan* (DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002, p. 14). Targets, initially announced in *A sporting future for all*, were to appoint 600 School Sports Coordinators (SSCos) and to create 110 Specialist Sports Colleges, 'which will have an explicit focus on elite sport' (DCMS, 2000, p. 8). These plans were reinforced in 2003 with the cross-departmental publication, *Learning through PE and sport* (Department for Education & Skills [DfES]/DCMS, 2003), which outlined eight programmes, including plans to increase the number of specialist colleges to 400 and SSCos to 2,400 by 2005 (DfES/DCMS, 2003, p. 2). Considerable resources were allocated to support these policy developments, financed substantially by the Exchequer, with additional funding from the National Lottery's New Opportunities Fund (NOF). The government's new PE, School Sport and Club Links strategy (PESSCL), summarized in *Learning through PE and sport*, stated that:

the Government is investing £459 million to transform PE and school sport. This funding is on top of £686 million being invested to improve school sport facilities across England. Together, this means that over £1 billion is being made available for PE and school sport, and all schools in England will benefit in some way. (DfES/DCMS, 2003, p. 1)

Notwithstanding the fact that much of this 'additional' funding was simply making good the long-term erosion of spending on PE, the fact that this money was

unencumbered by prior commitments provided the government with an important lever to effect policy change in school.

Moreover, with Sue Campbell's appointment as non-political adviser to the DfES and DCMS and the development of the School Sport Alliance (a joint advisory and coordinating committee comprising the DfES, DCMS, NOF and the Youth Sport Trust), the status of and coordination between PE and sport policy has never been closer (cf. Flintoff, 2003). Indeed, from the late 1990s onwards sport and physical activity for young people has emerged as one of the central policy themes within the government's wider social inclusion agenda (cf. DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002; Flintoff, 2003).

Explaining policy change: two frameworks

This brief survey suggests four potentially significant explanatory variables: (i) ideas and ideological change at both the service and governmental core policy levels; (ii) institutional arrangements; (iii) interest group activity; (iv) the impact of key individuals. These variables complement much existing education policy analysis, especially that of Lawton (1984) and Chitty (1994, 2004), both of whom drew attention to the importance of competing national power groups and the significance of departmental traditions (ideologies), while Chitty additionally emphasized the impact of key individuals. In contrast to the meso-level focus of Lawton and Chitty, Ball drew attention to the mediation of policy at the micro-level of the school and the individual teacher in the tradition of Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) and Lipsky (1979). Of particular value is Ball's (1990) exploration of the impact of ideology at both the core policy level (for example, Thatcher's neo-liberalism) and at the service-specific level (the emergence of 'new progressives' and 'cultural restorationists' in the 1980s). Although his focus tended to concentrate on the micro-level, he made a number of valuable observations regarding meso-level processes, particularly the marginal role of professional educators and education bodies in the national policy-making process and the possibility of ministerial beliefs over-riding more considered analyses. Space precludes a fuller review of the existing body of education policy analysis literature, but it is intended that this paper should both complement and contribute to this broader body of scholarship.

There is a rich body of meso-level theorizing, including stages models (de Leon, 1999), varieties of institutionalism (Ostrom, 1999), policy networks (Marsh & Rhodes, 1992), punctuated equilibrium theory (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993), the multiple streams framework (Kingdon, 1995) and the advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993, 1999; Sabatier, 1998). These approaches vary across a number of dimensions and, in particular, in the extent to which they have been applied. We have selected the advocacy coalition framework and the multiple streams framework as the point of entry for our analysis because: first, they are two of the more fully articulated and internally coherent frameworks; second, they have both been widely applied empirically; third, they complement and extend the existing education policy analysis literature.

The advocacy coalition framework

The advocacy coalition framework (ACF) offers the prospect of assessing the significance of at least three of the four variables identified above, namely ideas, interest group activity and the impact of key individuals. The ACF suggests that policy subsystems normally comprise between two and four coalitions which would frequently include interest groups and which compete for influence, although one might be a dominant coalition. Belief systems provide the source of cohesion within coalitions, with beliefs being disaggregated into three levels: first, 'deep core' beliefs, which refer to basic values regarding, for example, gender relations and the sports considered appropriate for girls and boys; second, 'policy core' beliefs, which are the basic normative commitments within the subsystem, for example the relative importance of PE within the school curriculum and the emphasis on the holistic educational function of PE as opposed to a more focused concern with the development of specific skills (Penney, 2000); third, 'secondary aspects', which refer to more routine aspects of policy, for example the range of sports included in the curriculum, decisions about assessment of progress in the NCPE and resource allocation.

Conflict between coalitions, often mediated by a 'policy broker', is a source of policy outputs and policy dynamics, although change can also occur as a result of medium to long-term 'policy-oriented learning' (Sabatier, 1998, p. 104). Policy-oriented learning describes relatively long-term changes in beliefs that result from 'experience and/or new information' (p. 104). Although Sabatier accepted that coalitions will resist with greater determination the acceptance of information that challenges deep core beliefs, he argued for the essential rationality of coalition behaviour. Further sources of policy change include exogenous developments and 'non-cognitive source[s] of change that can substantially alter the political resources of various coalitions and thus policy decisions' (p. 105). According to Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999) exogenous factors include changes in socio-economic factors (for example the growing awareness of child obesity), technology (for example the increasing emphasis put upon scientific approaches to identifying young talent), the systemic governing coalition (the election of the Labour government in 1997), public opinion (the mobilization of public opinion through the media on the issue of competitive school sport) and policy decisions in other subsystems that further or obstruct the objectives of competing coalitions (spillover from health and education). In summary, the ACF provides a rigorous framework for the analysis of the impact of ideas on policy, the capacity of interest groups to exert influence through membership of advocacy coalitions and the role of individuals as policy brokers.

The multiple streams framework

In contrast to the ACF, the multiple streams (MS) framework (Kingdon, 1995; Zahariadis & Allen, 1995) gives greater emphasis to the role of agency, happenstance and opportunism, albeit within an identifiable pattern of institutional arrangements.

As such, the MS framework provides an opportunity to explore the inter-relationship between ideas, individual policy actors, interest group activity and the institutional arrangements that structure (if only loosely) the opportunities for influence. Kingdon regarded policy formation as the result of the interplay of three sets of processes or 'streams': problems, policies and politics. Each stream is conceptualized, for the most part, as separate from the others with its own dynamics and characteristics. At critical points in time the streams are 'coupled' by what Kingdon termed 'policy entrepreneurs.' Thus, the convergence of all three streams significantly increases the chances that an issue will receive attention by policy-makers (Zahariadis, 1999). John (1998) noted that 'problems' are conceived of as public matters requiring attention that may or may not get defined as important. 'Policies' are proposals for change based on cumulative knowledge among specialists in a policy sector. This is where the notion of policy entrepreneurs is significant. Certain highly motivated people propose solutions to problems, mobilizing opinion and institutions, thereby ensuring the idea remains prominent. Finally, 'political' processes such as election results, jurisdictional competition between government departments and agencies and swings in popular opinion influence how the media and other opinion formers define public problems and evaluate the potential solutions. Moreover, John (1998, p. 174) argued that 'It is the circumstances under which these three streams combine to make a policy happen' that is crucial to the MS framework.

A significant feature, therefore, of MS is the notion of coupling, where issues rise on the agenda when the three streams are conjoined at critical moments in time: a 'policy window' which is 'an opportunity for advocates of proposals to push their pet solutions' (Kingdon, 1995, p. 165). The window can open predictably (for example the Treasury's annual spending review) or quite unpredictably (for example in response to a crisis), in which case policy entrepreneurs must be ready and well prepared to promote their particular problems or solutions onto the agenda. Moreover, the MS framework elevates the significance of ideas in public policy-making while at the same time seeking to explain how ideas emerge in terms of their adoption and rejection by the various decision-makers involved. The MS framework conceives of ideas in public policy as not just reflecting power relationships in that 'they originate from a number of contingent and often contradictory selection processes' (John, 1998, p. 175). As John also observed, 'Changing agendas affect policy selection via ripples of influence through policy systems. There are "spillovers" from one policy sector to another' (p. 175). In comparison to the ACF the MS framework gives greater weight to agency, suggests a greater degree of residual randomness in the policy process and identifies the importance of opportunism and the effective exploitation of policy windows. The MS framework thus offers the opportunity to examine the impact of all four variables identified earlier as it acknowledges the significance of ideas in promoting issues (problems), the capacity of individuals and interest groups to further (and resist) policy proposals and to exploit policy windows and the way in which policy windows are affected by the institutional arrangements within the machinery of government.

The rise of school sport and PE: exploring policy change

The previous sections provide the context for the analysis of policy change in school sport and PE which is structured around the four variables of policy change identified earlier: (i) changing values, beliefs and ideas; (ii) changes in organizational infrastructure and resource dependency; (iii) the relative strength of lobby/interest group activity; (iv) the significance of influential individuals. As one senior civil servant at the DCMS explained, during the early to mid 1990s there was ‘a perception that something need[ed] to be done’ about school sport and PE (Interviewee H, 25 June 2004). Moreover, this observer added that if ‘ministers feel that now is the time to do something then you get the momentum building up’. A former senior academic interviewee reinforced this view and suggested that, even before John Major took an interest in school sport, ‘There had always been a suspicion amongst a lot of politicians that this [school sport/PE] was a good thing ... but they didn’t have any facts to marshal’ (Interviewee C, 21 April 2004). The implication here is that politicians sympathetic to the case for raising school sport and PE higher on the policy agenda required a politically acceptable proposal to legitimize, and provide a focus for, their personal enthusiasm. This scenario reflects the MS argument that the ‘very messiness of the policy process, with its complexity and unpredictability’ (John, 1998, p. 173) is the baseline for an analysis of policy change. Indeed, the MS framework suggests that as ‘policies and problems are symbiotically floating in their “policy primeval soup”, so the political stream exercises a powerful influence on agendas’ (John, 1998, p. 175). Within the political stream the role of powerful politicians is important and while the personal influence of John Major has been noted above, school sport and PE was also an issue of significance for Tony Blair. As a senior civil servant at the DfES explained, the emphasis on school sport and PE in recent years

came about ... because the Secretary of State [for the DCMS] at the time was trying to respond to the Prime Minister’s desire to do something about school sport. Now what exactly that was, was up for negotiation really but [there was] a desire to do something. (Interviewee F, 24 May 2004)

This leads on to our analysis of the four key variables of policy change which may help to explain how this ‘desire to do something’ about school sport and PE was achieved.

Changing values, beliefs and ideas

There is little evidence to support the view that the increased salience and status of school sport and PE was the result of sustained policy advocacy from a dominant coalition of actors/organizations underpinned by policy learning. Indeed, our evidence points to a singular lack of coalition behaviour centring on a consensus of values/beliefs that might have helped raise the status of school sport and PE. As one respondent, who has been involved in these debates over many years, observed,

the inability of the two leading PE associations [the British Association of Advisers and Lecturers in Physical Education (BAALPE) and the Physical Education Association of the United Kingdom (PEAUK)] to articulate the nature of and benefits gained from school sport and PE had been a recurring theme during debates on the 1988 Education Reform Act (Interviewee C, 21 April 2004). It may well be the case that the nature of school sport and PE, which draws on values, beliefs and ideas from sport, education and health, compounds the problem of consensus development. A senior academic stated that since the mid 1980s ‘out there in the discursive terrain . . . it’s not the nature of education or PE that’s being talked about directly, it’s sport that’s being talked about directly, it’s health that’s being talked about directly’ (Interviewee B, 17 March 2004). For this observer then ‘these debates haven’t helped us have a discussion about PE [and] one can ask whether it has sponsored a narrowing of interests rather than a widening of our understanding of PE’. There are, therefore, those, such as this last observer, concerned primarily with the value of PE as an important element of the education curriculum. Yet, it appears that part of the explanation for the rise in salience at central government level of school sport and PE lies in the redefinition of the role of PE, such that it is seen as playing an important role in achieving broader educational objectives such as whole school improvement, community development and effecting personal behavioural and attitudinal change among pupils. As a senior civil servant at the DfES explained with reference to the unprecedented levels of funding announced in the PE, School Sport and Club Links (PESSCL) strategy in 2002, ‘There would not be this level of investment in PE and school sport solely for the sake of PE and school sport. It is a much broader [educational] agenda’ (Interviewee F, 24 May 2004).

It is also clear that the lack of value consensus around which a dominant coalition might form is also due, in part, to the persistent debate over ‘a conflict of interests’ regarding ‘values in physical education and sport’ (Lee, 2004, p. 6). Mirroring the debates of the 1970s described earlier, Lee’s argument, set out in the *British Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, crystallized the recurring value dissonance between PE and sport. Lee argued that ‘while PE and sport utilise the same activities—PE also has dance, outdoor activities—there is a paradox because they are based on a different set of values; indeed, there is a conflict of values between the two’ (p. 6). This argument, for Lee at least, appeared to hinge on a conflict between the ‘essentially elitist outcome of sport’ and the ‘universalist, process orientation of physical education’ (p. 8). Consequently, ‘A major problem facing the profession at present seems to be how to develop the talent without comprising educational principles’ (p. 8).

Moreover, until recently the absence of an institutional focus for school sport and PE at central government department level might also help to explain the persistence of a lack of core policy values and beliefs. This argument was borne out by a senior civil servant at the DfES, who revealed that:

the DfES, in the past, despite having [made] the decision that PE should be part of the national curriculum, didn’t really . . . give much priority to PE as a subject or

school sport as an issue I think that's very different now than even three or four years ago. (Interviewee F, 24 May 2004)

This lack of interest in school sport and PE in the central government department responsible for education was compounded by the institutional weakness of the department within which the sport portfolio resided, the DCMS. Interviewee G (28 May 2004) maintained that 'the DCMS is not large enough or funded sufficiently well enough to have the amounts of money needed without forming alliances with the bigger spending departments like the DfES and the DoH [Department of Health]'. However, it is not only at central government department level where there has been an absence of a strong institutional focus for school sport and PE. It was clear from more than one observer that Sport England, and its predecessors, had not been as influential as they might have been in establishing a strong set of values and beliefs upon which policies for school sport and PE policy might have been built. For one respondent, who held a senior position in the Sports Council during this period, the Council was aware of the need to become involved in sport for young people if it was to deliver its increasingly important sports development objectives, but 'was nervous of dabbling in education and did not understand PE' (Interviewee I, 9 September 2004). For another respondent the reticence of the Sports Council to take a leading advocacy role was due to the tensions between the Council and the National Coaching Foundation (NCF) in the early 1990s over the creation and 'ownership' of Champion Coaching, an initiative developed by the NCF in 1992 (Interviewee G, 28 May 2004). The establishment of the Youth Sport Trust (YST)¹ merely served to further isolate the Sports Council from the emerging debates around school sport and PE. Although the Sports Council was involved with the YST in delivering the latter's family of TOP² programmes, which have become standard-bearers for the delivery of education through sport in the UK, the ability of the Trust, and in particular its Chief Executive, to lead on the issue of school sport and PE marginalized the role of the Sports Council. From an ACF perspective the above description of events does not suggest much evidence of 'members' shared beliefs over core policy matters' which provide 'the "glue" that holds an advocacy coalition together' (Mintrom & Vergari, 1996, p. 421).

Change in lobbying capacity/interest group activity

Respondents disagreed in their assessment of the significance of lobbying for policy change. On the one hand, a former senior academic maintained that 'PE's lobbying power' was significant during the period of negotiations over the introduction of the NCPE in the early 1990s and that the subsequent customizing of the National Curriculum guidelines by BAALPE and PEAUK, the first sector to do this, 'impressed the TTA [Teacher Training Agency]' (Interviewee C, 21 April 2004). However, the same respondent suggested that this early influence had not been capitalized upon, commenting that a new body, Speednet, was created with the objective of 'influenc[ing] the government agenda . . . and articulat[ing] the case for

PE ... due to the awful leadership of [a professional body] at the time'. This critical assessment of the influence of PE professional bodies was reinforced by one senior civil servant at the DCMS who stated that 'From what I can gather there are quite strong tensions between BAALPE and PEAUK and if that is the case then that will weaken their argument' (Interviewee H, 25 June 2004). This is a view supported by a senior civil servant at the DfES who stated that 'In this particular arena, I'd give very little weight to the influence of teachers' groups where strong tensions existed between them' (Interviewee F, 24 May 2004). Arguably, there is a link between the absence of a strong lobby group and the lack of value consensus on what constitutes PE. This is clear from Kay's (2003) argument that the long-standing disagreements within the PE profession have 'not encourage[d] Government to seek advice from physical educationalists about curriculum provision' (p. 7).

Further evidence of the weakness of the professional PE groups was provided by a former senior academic, who explained that although there has been some improvement recently, there has been 'a lack of clarity and a lack of focus, too much navel-gazing about what they [BAALPE/PEAUK] were each doing' (Interviewee C, 21 April 2004). Indeed, although a leading figure in PEAUK acknowledged that the two organizations 'now have fairly close contact with policy-makers which we've not had in the past', this observer also stated that 'I would like to say that they have made a difference but the reality is that they haven't' (Interviewee A, 17 March 2004). For this observer the 'biggest difference has been the rapid development of the YST and the positioning of Sue Campbell as adviser to two government departments [DCMS and DfES]'. However, interviewee C, while acknowledging the significance of the YST in policy change, noted that the Trust's influence was due to its capacity and willingness to deliver 'what the DfES wanted delivered' and argued that 'there's a downside to that because I think it [YST] distorted the core PE agenda' (Interviewee C, 21 April 2004). Furthermore, the same interviewee argued that the lobbying activity of members of the NCPE working group and Speednet 'helped to provide the necessary pre-conditions for Sue [Campbell's] appointment' and that the consistent support of the PE associations was an important aspect of her continued influence. Overall, it would appear that advocacy coalitions are far from evident in the policy area. While some clusters of organizations, such as Speednet, could claim to have occasionally been influential, the most consistent source of policy influence has been individual organizations, most notably the YST and its leadership. The increasing institutional strength of the YST and Sue Campbell's significance as a prominent 'policy entrepreneur' are dealt with in more depth within the following sections.

Change in organizational infrastructure and resource dependency

Amongst the senior officials involved in this study there was clearly a sense that a significant change had occurred during the past 4 or 5 years with regard to the strength of the sector's organizational infrastructure and the large amount of

government funding currently being invested in school sport and PE. For a senior PEAUK officer the majority of LEAs 'have now heard that the government considers PE and school sport central to whole school improvement' (Interviewee A, 17 March 2004). The key indicator of change highlighted most often was the investment in the PESSCL strategy. Indeed, interviewee C maintained that 'This [PESSCL] is the beginning of the biggest infrastructure development in any sector that I can remember' (Interviewee C, 21 April 2004); a view mirrored by a senior civil servant at the DCMS, who explained that 'I've never known it [school sport and PE] to be so high up the political spectrum', with 'the amount of money being invested' offered as a key indicator of this heightened political profile (Interviewee H, 25 June 2004).

However, it should be noted that this assessment was not universally shared and was challenged particularly forcefully by respondents who were educationists, former PE professionals and by those currently involved with the professional PE associations. For one senior academic educationist there were concerns about the extent of the change in schools, and primary schools in particular, where, 'because of current policy requirements for Teacher Education in England and Wales, teachers probably are less well prepared now to teach PE than they were 20 years ago' (Interviewee B, 17 March 2004). Such concerns rest in large part on the pedagogical content and nature of current PE teaching practices in schools. This was not an isolated view. Kay (2003), for example, argued that there is an increasing emphasis in PE teaching on 'skill-based, performance-improving ... coaching ... [rather than on] physical education teaching [which] embodies a pupil-centred rationale' (p. 8). Concerns were also raised by a former senior academic who had worries 'about the capacity of the sector to deliver what's expected of them at the moment' (Interviewee C, 21 April 2004). This concern was reinforced and extended by the senior PEAUK officer, who questioned the depth of commitment by senior DfES civil servants to PE and school sport and suggested that some see PE and school sport as just another politically fashionable project which might be good for their careers. Despite these caveats, as one senior civil servant at the DfES explained, there are two factors in particular that help to explain the extent of change in school sport and PE policy. The first factor is the emergence of the YST as the pre-eminent institutional force in the sector behind the recent emphasis on school sport and PE. A crucial aspect of the Trust's influence is the strength and clarity of the institutional message and values conveyed by the organization, namely that school sport and PE initiatives have a significant role to play in helping government achieve policy goals that extend beyond a narrow focus on school sport and PE (Interviewee F, 24 May 2004). As this observer explained, the YST has been the prime mover in events over the past 4–5 years, which has resulted in an increasing understanding that 'PE and school sport can of themselves contribute to achievement ... particularly for youngsters where behaviour or just disaffection is an issue ... PE and school sport ... supports the broader [educational] agenda' (Interviewee F, 24 May 2004).

The second key factor is clearly linked to the first, namely that school sport and PE policy is now embedded within the remit of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit at

Cabinet level. Indeed, a senior DCMS civil servant explained that at a Downing Street seminar in 2001 ‘Estelle Morris [then Secretary of State at the DfES] said that there is no longer any argument to be had about whether sport and PE raised educational standards . . . that message was accepted right at the top of government’ (Interviewee D, 24 May 2004). For a senior civil servant at the DfES, that school sport and PE policy is now under the oversight of the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit ‘has certainly given it another emphasis. That shows how government regards it’ (Interviewee F, 24 May 2004). Equally important, however, is this observer’s comment that:

it’s not simply about PE and school sport. If what we end up with at the end of this is lots of kids having lots of fun [but] making no bigger difference perhaps to behaviour, attitude, motivation and achievement, then actually we will have failed. (Interviewee F, 24 May 2004)

Clearly, the YST has taken the lead in articulating the value of school sport and PE in achieving the type of whole school improvement that the above comments suggest. Part of the explanation for the prominence of the YST is the institutional void created by the weakness of organizations such as BAALPE, PEAUK and, indeed, Sport England. The prominence of the YST and, more importantly, the assertion of jurisdiction over the issue of school sport and PE by the Cabinet and the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit draws attention to the importance of taking account of the impact of institutional arrangements on policy; a position that rests more comfortably within the multiple streams framework than the ACF.

To complete the analysis of policy change, however, we need to investigate the significance of potentially influential individuals and the role they have played in promoting school sport and PE as a potential contribution to achievement of important government objectives, such as improved educational attainment and health and good citizenship. In so doing, the explanatory value of the MS framework is brought into sharp relief.

The significance of influential individuals

Of the four variables of policy change considered, the significance of influential individuals has emerged as crucial to the evident scale of change in recent years. At the highest political level the personal interest of John Major and Tony Blair in school sport and PE provided an opportunity, in the absence of a coherent advocacy coalition for school sport and PE, for a skilful policy entrepreneur to exploit that interest. Clearly, the YST has provided an institutional focus for the delivery of sport and education initiatives, yet the policy entrepreneurship of its Chief Executive, Sue Campbell (who also acts as a non-political adviser to government on school sport and PE), cannot be underestimated. As one senior civil servant at the DfES explained, ‘Sue managed to convince ministers on the basis of believability. She had some way in which she could persuade ministers that this really was a good thing’

(Interviewee E, 24 May 2004). As another senior DfES official related, most important was that:

Sue Campbell... not necessarily the Trust [YST]... has managed to support government, civil servants as well as ministers, to an understanding of that quite complicated picture of how PE and school sport can support the broader academic agenda... and to describe this as a focus of the change or central to the change would be an underestimate. (Interviewee F, 24 May 2004)

The significance of Campbell's influence is clear in that she managed to persuade civil servants and ministers of the potential value of PE and school sport, despite initial departmental scepticism. As a senior DCMS civil servant explained

Sue Campbell clearly had an impact on ministers in both departments [DCMS/ DfES].... What was clear was that senior officials in DfES weren't terribly interested except... if their minister said that Sue Campbell said they had to respond. (Interviewee D, 24 May 2004)

Evidently, Campbell has not only been consistently persuasive, but also skilled at coupling the three policy streams as conceived by the MS framework. As Zahariadis (1999) observed, policy entrepreneurs 'must be able to attach problems to their solutions and find politicians receptive to their ideas' (p. 78). The probability of an issue receiving prominence increases dramatically when all three streams, problems, policies and politics, are coupled. As Parsons (1995, p. 194) observed, a policy window opens because of a 'compelling problem' (for example childhood obesity or the decline in inter-school sport) or 'because of something in the political stream' (p. 194) (for example increased receptivity at Prime Ministerial level). Under these conditions entrepreneurs within the policy stream have the opportunity to promote a particular policy and couple it to a problem. In this case Campbell articulated an alternative view of school sport and PE and skilfully positioned it as particularly relevant to the government's broader social and educational objectives. As one senior YST official indicated:

If you truly want to move government... a lot of it's about passion but an awful lot of it's about evidence but the evidence has to be against their [government] objectives, not yours.... Government haven't suddenly decided that PE is a jolly good thing, they have decided that PE and school sport can help them deliver their agenda, improve standards, a change in school ethos, tackling behaviour, reducing truancy, creating kids with a strong sense of citizenship and increasing creativity and curiosity in kids. (Interviewee G, 28 May 2004)

The MS framework also suggests that serendipity has a part to play in the process of policy change (cf. Zahariadis, 1999). As a number of interviewees noted, Campbell managed to forge close relationships at the right time, with Kate Hoey (former Minister for Sport) and Estelle Morris (former Secretary of State at the DfES). As one interviewee noted, 'some of this is happenstance... [but it is also] about networks and connections [and] the ability to capitalise on them and use them, that's the key' (Interviewee G, 28 May 2004). Thus, as one DfES civil servant noted, the

increased emphasis on school sport and PE 'has been a fortunate coming together of a number of things' (Interviewee F, 24 May 2004), including: a 'passionate' Prime Minister; an understanding within government that PE and school sport is about more than PE and school sport; increasing behavioural problems in schools; the emergence of the YST on the national stage; a political awareness that investment now will be of value for a home 2012 Olympics if the UK bid is successful.

What is very clear here is that Sue Campbell considered that the internal debates within the PE profession in respect of what constituted PE and what constituted sport were hindering attempts to persuade government to invest in the sector. Crucially, Campbell considered that, in order to achieve this goal, the debate around school sport and PE had to be expressed in a different language: the language of educational attainment, learning and development *through* school sport and PE.

Conclusions

The personal interest in school sport and PE displayed by key politicians, most notably John Major, Tony Blair, Estelle Morris and Charles Clarke, the level of enthusiasm of particular senior DfES civil servants and the entrepreneurial skills of Sue Campbell highlight the role of individuals in shaping recent change in school sport and PE. However, while the role of individuals has undoubtedly been significant in explaining policy change, care needs to be taken to locate their impact in the particular context of the policy area. First, opportunities for policy entrepreneurship were created by the absence of effective lobbying by other sports and PE professional interests in the form of an effective advocacy coalition. Both sets of organizations were weakened not just due to their fragmentation, such that neither sports organizations (the major national governing bodies) nor PE professional bodies were able to provide a consistent and coherent message for government, but also due to the reluctance of these organizations to define their objectives in terms of government priorities. The weakness of PE profession lobbying groups is also illustrated by the ease with which government established a set of 'insider' interest groups, of which the YST was central, which effectively excluded PEAUK and BAALPE from key discussions on the direction of school sport and PE policy.

Second, it is important to emphasize Kingdon's point that successful policy entrepreneurship requires a supportive context. Both Campbell and enthusiastic ministers have been, over the last 10 years, operating in a very positive environment. Not only was there the generalized sympathy among politicians across all parties for 'doing something' about PE and school sport, but there was also an increasingly positive spillover from powerful adjacent policy areas and departments, such as community safety (and the Home Office) and health. Moreover, an increased emphasis on school sport and PE did not stimulate activism among opposing groups and interests. While most proposals tend to provoke challenges from opposing interests, the strategy adopted for the implementation of the PESSCL policy (namely

schools have a choice as to whether they seek specialist sports college status and if they do they receive additional resources) tended to undermine grounds for opposition.

Third, it needs to be borne in mind that the promotional commitment and lobbying activity of the key individuals was supported by a steady accumulation of evidence that was persuasive to the more sceptical politicians and senior civil servants in the DfES. The evidence was of three types: the first, produced by a variety of organizations, including the National Playing Fields Association, the Secondary Heads Association and PEAUK, demonstrated the continuing erosion of opportunities for PE and school sport through the selling of school playing fields, the reduction of curriculum time allocated to PE and the lack of trained PE teachers in primary schools; the second was evidence from adjacent policy areas which documented, for example, the growing health problems among young people; the third, commissioned largely by the YST, but also present in OfSTED reports, was evidence of the educational, social and health benefits of sport. The lobbying activity of individuals was, over the last 8 years or so, supported by an increasingly well-established network of organizations, including not just the YST, but also the network of specialist sports colleges and the PESSCL board, all of which helped to embed school sport and PE-related policies in the decision processes of the DfES in particular and of the government more generally.

While the first two types of evidence were important in raising the profile of issues associated with school sport and PE and thus providing a focus for concern and complaint, it was the activity of the third group of actors that provided a focus for action. This gradual accumulation of evidence resonated with the emphasis given by Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier (1993) in their advocacy coalition framework to the importance of policy-oriented learning within a substantially rational policy system in which the growing weight of evidence produces 'relatively enduring alterations of the ... belief system of individuals or of collectivities (such as advocacy coalitions)' (p. 42). However, while the evidence from this study provides some support for the ACF, it is the MS framework that offers a more plausible explanation of policy change. The prominence of Sue Campbell as a policy entrepreneur willing to 'promote a position for anticipated future gain in the form of material, purposive or solidary benefits' (Kingdon, 1995, p. 179) was crucial to the current high political status of school sport and PE. Campbell's position as Chief Executive of the YST and adviser to the DCMS and DfES was a vital factor. As Zahariadis (1999) noted, 'Being a member of multiple arenas or institutional venues ... helps entrepreneurs skilfully move issues from one venue to another where success is more likely' (p. 84). Campbell astutely positioned school sport and PE as a solution to government's policy problems relating to educational standards, learning and achievement, which created a 'spillover' (Parsons, 1995, p. 194) effect or benefit in other politically salient policy areas such as citizenship and health.

In contrast, the ACF appears to offer a less satisfactory explanatory framework. The ACF points to major policy change resulting from policy-oriented learning within a dominant advocacy coalition based on a core set of values and beliefs. For

major policy change to occur, however, the policy subsystem requires some form of exogenous 'shock' (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999). The fear of exclusion from the National Curriculum, the media-generated concern with the decline in competitive school sport or the introduction of National Lottery funding are all possible exogenous factors, but none is a particularly compelling explanation. Moreover, there was little evidence from our study of a dominant advocacy coalition that consistently argued the case for school sport and PE. Rather, there was clear evidence of long-standing divisiveness and fragmentation between the key organizations involved which resulted in a singular absence of consensus over values and beliefs regarding school sport and PE. However, it may well be the case that following a successful period of entrepreneurship we are now entering a period of advocacy coalition formation centred on the YST, but drawing support from an increasingly broad range of politicians, senior civil servants and interest groups, particularly in the fields of community safety and child health. The development of an effective advocacy coalition would contribute substantially to securing the long-term commitment of government to the current policy that one respondent described as the 'most exciting thing that's ever happened in the history of PE' (Interviewee A, 17 March 2004).

Notes

1. The Youth Sport Trust is a charitable organization set up in 1994 to develop and implement, in partnership with other organizations, PE and sport programmes for young people up to 18 years in schools and their communities.
2. The TOP programmes form a sporting pathway along which young people can progress according to age and development. Key features of the programmes are: resource cards, child-friendly equipment and quality training and support for teachers and deliverers.

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