**The Child Protection in Sport Unit – Supporting Nation Governing Bodies in Hearing the Voices of Children: An Evaluation of Current Practice**

**Abstract**

Sporting environments provide contexts in which a range of abuses of children have occurred. While there is an increasing awareness of the need to improve child protection in sport, the extent to which listening to children's voices can support this has yet to be explored. This paper reports on research commissioned by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's Child Protection in Sport Unit to understand the way in which the expression of children's voices is facilitated in sport. Thirty-four National Governing Bodies of Sport in the UK responded to an electronic questionnaire exploring expression of children's voices in their organisations. Findings indicate that challenges concern: children's perceived lack of interest; confidence in self-expression; time, resources and logistics; and organisational culture and attitudinal change. ‘Good practice’ was identified in: formal structural communications; tailoring contributions to interests and strengths; use of primary research; and sharing ideas remotely. The projected value of listening to children's voice includes understanding children’s perspectives and identification of potential concerns. The expression of children's voices is of value to National Governing Bodies in Sport and there is potential for this to prevent elements of abuse in sport.

**Key Practitioner Messages**

* National Governing Bodies of sport believe the expression of children's voices in sport can positively inform practice.
* Material and cultural limitations can prevent expression of children's voices.
* There is potential for an embedded expression of children's voices could support intervention prior to abuse occurring.

**Key words**

Physical abuse, Child voice, Child sexual abuse, Child exploitation, Children in sport, Sports coaches, Sport

**Introduction**

This paper presents findings of a study commissioned by the UK's National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's Child Protection in Sport Unit (NSPCC CPSU) to investigate the provision of opportunities for children to express their voices within the National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs). Within Human Rights legislation, children are to be consulted on policy issues that affect them (Nairn and Clarke, 2012; Everley, 2018; Hartill and Prescott, 2007; Cremin *et al.*, 2011) including in the organisation of sport (NSPCC CPSU, 2018). Good safeguarding practice involves incorporating children's views and is crucial to understanding needs and enhancing participation in decision making (Willow, 2014; Goh and Baruch, 2018; Dave and Rao, 2012) . With early intervention significantly determining the efficacy of subsequent support where problems are identified, listening to children's voices is crucial in improving safeguarding practice (Healy and Rodriguez, 2019).

There have been a number of recent cases of current and historic sexual abuse in sport. Perhaps most notably are the cases occurring in the sport of gymnastics in the USA in 2016 when team doctor Larry Nassar was sentenced to up to 175 years in prison for the sexual abuse of women and girls. His abuse was not limited to gymnastics but took place in dancing, figure skating, basketball, softball, swimming, rowing and track athletics. In particular, Nassar was acknowledged as exploiting what he presented as a natural power imbalance between himself and those he worked with (Taylor, 2018). Often, solutions for all kinds of non-accidental violence are directed towards coach education (Nurse, 2018). However, as many recollections of abuse by those that experienced exploitation as child athletes indicate, it was their enforced silence that allowed the perpetrator to continue their abuse.

Providing children with defined opportunities to express their voices in general practice could lead to early identification and, potentially, prevention of abuse situations. This paper discusses the extent to which sports governing bodies currently work with sports clubs in order to provide the opportunity for children to express their voices. It is the initial phase of a three-phase project funded by the NSPCC evaluating provision by national governing bodies and will be followed by work evaluating clubs (phase 2) and perspectives of children (phase 3).

While a plethora of evidence claims the value of sport lies in the social, cultural and psychological development of children (Baker and Byon, 2014; McPherson *et al.*, 2016), its conception as inherently positive has been exposed as illusory (O'Gorman and Greenough, 2016; Papaefstathiou *et al.*, 2013; McMahon *et al.*, 2018, Brackenridge *et al.*, 2005). Assumed moral benefits of sport are criticised for being based in political and ideological presumptions that obscure the nuanced cultural contexts of sport (Brackenridge, 2003). This prevents the expression of children's voices and veils abuse (Brackenridge *et al.*, 2004). Although researchers problematised this issue in the 1980s (Hartill and Prescott, 2007) it took key events such as convictions of prominent coaches for assaults in the early 1990s to trigger the introduction of policy approaches to child protection (Hartill, 2013; Lang and Hartill, 2016).

Within the UK, a ‘National Action Plan for Child Protection in Sport’ was ratified in 2000 (Papaefstathiou *et al.*, 2013) and its implementation supported by the establishment of the NSPCC's Child Protection in Sport Unit (NSPCC CPSU) in 2001 (Brackenridge, 2003; Brackenridge *et al.*, 2004). This made the country one of the first to have a state-funded body overseeing safeguarding of children in sport (Rhind *et al.*, 2017). However, the socio-cultural environments that existed within sports organisations continued to be widely criticised for providing potential contexts for the exploitation of children (McMahon *et al.*, 2018). Ultimately, events such as the USA gymnastics case highlight the impact that this can have and the continued need for change globally.

There is also awareness that sports organisations require support to ensure high quality means of protecting children. Within the context of the 2018 ‘*Working Together to Safeguard Children*’ (HM Government, 2018) all organisations funded by Sport England or UK Sport must ‘aim to meet the Standards for Safeguarding and Protecting Children in Sport as set out by the Child Protection in Sport Unit’ (NSPCC CPSU, 2018; HM Government, 2018, p. 71) and encourage a ‘culture of listening to children and taking account of their wishes and feelings both in individual decisions and the development of services’ (HM Government, 2018, p. 56) . As the CPSU advise, it is crucial that with respect to policy, procedures and systems, children involved in sport have both an awareness of and opportunity to express their views (NSPCC CPSU, 2018). To underpin such progress the NSPCC CPSU has identified a need to explore the empowerment of children in protecting themselves. This paper reports on elements of research commissioned by the NSPCC CPSU to understand the way in which children (participants under the age of 18 years) are given voice in sports organisations. The data discussed here focus on that specifically generated by governing bodies.

**Research context: The culture of child abuse in sport – power, secrecy and exploitation**

The nature of abuse of minors in sport is acknowledged as taking a range of forms - sexual, emotional, moral and physical – impacting all aspects of wellbeing (McMahon *et.al.* 2018*;* Papaefstathiou *et al.*,2013; Brackenridge *et al.*, 2004; Baker and Byon, 2014; Rhind *et al.*, 2017). Of key concern is the nature of sporting contexts, both material and relational, that enables the continued abuse of children.

Exploitation of power differentials between performer and coach have frequently been identified in the perpetration of the mistreatment of children (McMahon *et al.*,2018; Parent and Demers, 2011; Fasting *et al.*, 2018; Stafford *et al.*, 2015). In some instances, the sports coach has been identified as having greater influence over children than other significant adults (Raakman *et al.*, 2010).

Therefore, this has led to suggestions for the need to involve parents more in the organisation of sport (McMahon *et al.*, 2018; O'Gorman and Greenough, 2016). Representation of the vulnerable by interested adults is an important factor in supporting safe engagement. However, concerns have been expressed regarding the neo-liberal orientation that some parents have towards their child's success as being reflective of their own competence (McMahon *et.al.*, 2018). This potentially means that even those most responsible for children may prioritise ‘success’ above welfare. Evidence also shows that sometimes parents themselves become problematic as a result of pressures they place on their child to compete (O'Gorman and Greenough, 2016).

There is also the question of power differentials that may exist between the coach and parent (McMahon *et al.*,2018). Parents rarely challenge the authority of coaches (Parent and Demers, 2011) who are perceived as having a superior knowledge base and who control the dissemination of information. Thus relative status and engrained culture frames child experience. Further, rationalising discourse between stakeholders is sometimes used to justify elements of abuse and normalise their integration into sports culture (Papaefstathiou *et al.*, 2013; Stafford *et al.*, 2013). This means it comes to be seen as a necessary contributary to successful performance and accepted practice (McMahon *et al.*, 2018).

A lack of research into stakeholders' interpretation of child protection policies has been a cause for concern in the last decade (Papaefstathiou *et al.*, 2013). Sports activities that are organised by adults mean children and young people are disempowered in the process of taking responsibility for their own participation (O'Gorman and Greenough, 2016) and this includes reference to doing so safely. Hartill and Prescott (2007) identified that it is crucial for child protection policy to be presented as a process that necessarily engages children and gives them a voice (Brackenridge, 2003). Within the UK, this means striving to meet the requirements of government and the CPSU; a prerequisite of this is to understand the leadership of sport and the way in which child voice is currently being expressed.

Essentially, it is the unequal power distribution in sport that has provided a cultural context that allows exploitation. From a Foucauldian perspective, ‘experts’ shape the behaviours of others (Brown, 2012). However, power is not ‘held’ by one group over another in a static sense (Barker-Ruchti and Tinning, 2010) but can successfully be renegotiated. As NGBs of sport hierarchically frame provision offered by clubs, their work provided the starting point for this investigation.

This paper analysed findings according to a Foucauldian conceptualisation of issues of power distribution as underpinning the basis for exploitation.

**Methodology**

All NGBs working with the NSPCC CPSU (n=74) were invited to complete a questionnaire in order to avoid sampling bias (Hazel *et al.*, 2016).

An electronic web based survey was distributed to potential participants thus all were contacted simultaneously regardless of geographical location and afforded the ability to respond at their own convenience (Couper, 2008; McInroy, 2016; Wyrick and Bond, 2011).

The survey comprised four key areas in addition to demographic information about the organisation:

* Current communication arrangements
* Current arrangements for listening to children
* Challenges faced in processes of listening to children
* Predicted value in developing the extent and quality of providing opportunities to listen to children.

A range of questions generated qualitative and quantitative data as recommended in previous child protection research (Brackenridge *et al*., 2004). Using questionnaires clearly delimits responses and therefore each section invited the participants to add or expand on points as they wished. As recommended by Couper (2008) the survey was divided into ‘pages’ with a running header indicating the percentage complete for each stage. The survey was constructed in consultation with the NSPCC who provided ‘expert reviews’ during the process (Hazel *et al.*,2016). A pilot study ensured that the process should take around 15 minutes subject to the detail being provided. The project information and associated consents were incorporated into the survey design.

In order to differentiate between different levels of performer being discussed, some questions distinguished between ‘talented and elite’ participants and ‘community’ participants referring to those children who play recreationally/grass roots level competition (or equivalent). To account for potential differences in geographical range, this was also incorporated into question presentation.

An initial email containing the web link to the survey was distributed through the NSPCC CPSU to staff with responsibility for child welfare/safeguarding for each organisation. Two follow up emails were sent to encourage non-responders during the one-month period that the survey was open. Contributors were encouraged to present detail as they felt able, but omit questions if they wished. The numbers of responses to each question therefore varies throughout this paper.

Assurances of anonymity were given and no individual response is linked to identifiable NGBs. Ethical approval for this project was granted by the University of Chichester.

Thirty-seven participants completed the survey in the first instance. Data from three respondents were subsequently excluded as their identified organisation could not be validated as an NGB or equivalent. This final response rate at n=34 (46%) was significantly higher than is expected in online surveys which is typically below ten per cent (Van Mol, 2017). This was potentially due to positive relationships that NGBs are likely to have with the NSPCC. Clearly, this also raises an issue of response and non-response bias; although a ‘high’ response rate here, it is not possible to ascertain whether the quality of responses can be deemed representative of NGBs as a whole; as other research has warned; higher response rates do not ensure less biased data (Mulvany *et al.*, 2019; Hazel *et al.*, 2016). However, 31 different sports with varying organisation size in terms of junior members (largest 285 000, smallest 28) were represented within the responses. The NGBs and their equivalent represented organisations across the UK. Figure 1 identifies the areas of responsibility:

**Figure 1: Areas of responsibility for responding NGBs**

Quantitative data were processed using simple statistics. For the qualitative data, coding was completed, themes were generated then revisited following Braun and Clark's six phase guide (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Houghton and Houghton, 2018). Semantic (overt) and latent (beyond what is being explicitly stated) themes were explored. In relation to Foucault's conceptualisation of power discourses, the former related to descriptive data and the latter to interpretation of rationalisations. Analysis considers how statements by NGB representatives are structured in terms of:

* The material constraints under which governing bodies are working
* Explicit and implicit power relations
* Declarations of intent to redistribute power
* The cultural interpretations of relationships with child athletes.

The following section presents these findings beginning with descriptive accounts of what opportunities to listen to children's voices are currently used and supported.

**Findings**

This section presents findings beginning with the absence of representation of the children's voices, then moves on to consider the nature of provision and projected value of developing this.

***Provision of opportunity***

For some organisations, there was very limited provision for the expression of children's voices. Table 1 illustrates the themes along which these narratives were constructed:

Table 1. Limitations in the direct representation of children’s voices

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Theme | Description | Illustration |
| Absence of formal provision | Absence of statutory opportunities provided for children to directly express their voices as part of standard practice | *‘there is no communication specifically for young people only’(Respondent i.d.986)**‘Nothing formal in place’ (Respondent i.d.080* |
| Recognition of cultural limitations | The organisation expresses an intent to create for provision for the expression of children’s voices but acknowledges an existing culture of resistance | *‘People can give so many reasons why it will not work and start from this negative point of view. Very few are truly open to the idea of involving young people’s voice’ (Respondent i.d. 293)* |
| Derivative representation | Adult representation incorporated where children’s voices are not directly accessible | *‘We try wherever possible to consult with young people on issues that affect them…but in the absence of this opportunity we consult with Junior Organisor about junior provision which would be another adult…these are currently at national level only, but they work, engage and provide opinion to local level issues and have worked with, or linked to, counties on occasions’ (Respondent i.d.640)* |

In such situations, the hierarchical nature of sports organisations in terms of power distribution is unchallenged and may indicate a tendency to resist the implementation of child protection policies by ensuring that their voice is heard (Brackenridge, 2003). This situation may arise as a result of children being considered most coachable where there is ‘passive compliance’ of the individual (Barker-Ruchti and Tinning, 2010).

Children can only articulate perspectives if given the opportunity to do so through resourcing (in this case of opportunity) and where this remains disproportionately distributed, inequality results (Barker-Ruchti and Tinning, 2010). The ‘disciplinary power’ identified by Foucault as including regulation of opportunity (Helstein, 2007) prevents children from contributing directly to discourse that shapes their experience.

Nevertheless, it was clear that in some instances where children's voices could not be shared directly, adult representation on their behalf was encouraged. However, adults may not necessarily have child interests alone as their focus. Whether it be due to potential power differentials between parties (McMahon *et al.,* 2018; Parent and Demers, 2011; Fasting *et al.,* 2018) or the vicarious success that might be experienced by interested individuals (McMahon *et al.*, 2018) there is no guarantee of the appropriateness or efficacy of this. Here the child is subject to the discourses provided by adults which, in Foucauldian terms, renders them potentially objectified as being subjects of discourse rather than participants (Helstein, 2007).

Some NGBs did, however, make formal provision for the expression of children's voices through structures or expressed the intent to do so. Table 2 illustrates examples of each:

Table 2. The nature of direct representation of children’s voices

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| Theme | Description | Illustration |
| Formal provision | Statutory opportunities provided for children to directly express their voices as part of standard practice | *’young advisors model at a regional, national and local level’ (Respondent i.d.540)**‘an Ambassadors programme…junior captains at clubs who sit on junior committees and main committees…to provide the views of children and young people’ (Respondent i.d.889)* |
| State of review with intent to change | The organisation expresses an intent to create provision for the expression of children’s voices | *‘We tried a Youth Forum but it didn’t’ take off, currently reviewing how we get the voice of young people into the sport’* *(Respondent i.d.100)* |
| Perceived resistance of children | Previous attempts to include children renders a perception of disinclination | *‘Very few very few (children) have shown any inclination to participate’* *(Respondent i.d.541)* |
| Perceived confidence levels of children | The organisation believes that children do not feel equipped to cope with making contributions to discourse | *‘Some lack the confidence to get involved in decision making, or don’t feel they have the knowledge etc to get involved’* *(Respondent i.d.540)* |
| Goodwill reliance | Where organisations are reliant on volunteers to operate | *‘Our organisation is run by volunteers and time is the greatest barrier for arranging these (opportunities to express voice)’ (Respondent i.d.749)* |

Therefore, some provision is made for children to either represent, or be representative of, other children. This then provides child perspectives in discussions. Where this has not been successful, NGBs are clearly prepared to explore different approaches. Nevertheless, as the third theme would indicate, there may be some challenges in simply providing opportunity, and it is the willingness or ability to respond to this that makes the difference.

Ensuring culturally meaningful ways to express opinions is crucial in securing engagement.This raises the question of what can be done to encourage confidence among children in expressing their voices. Referring back to concerns of power imbalances in sports organisations (McMahon *et al.*,2018; Parent and Demers,2011; Fasting *et al.*,2018) vulnerability itself stems from socially-constructed inequalities (Sartore-Baldwin *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, reconfiguring relationships within sports culture could establish change and enable children to contribute.

This highlights the need to invest in ensuring engagement is seen as relevant and accessible to ensure cultural shifts in expectations. However, such progress will inevitably place demands on resources. There is a reliance on volunteers for NGBs in this study (Swierzy *et al.*, 2018; Wicker, 2017) and some identified the limitations this places on making additional demands on staff. Table 3 outlines the material constraints identified by NGBs that may limit potential for change:

Table 3. Material constraints

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Theme | Description | Illustration |
| Geographical range | Where organisations have identified continuing or intermittent geographical spread of participants that limits direct contact | *‘Working with small numbers of athletes, usually on caps abroad, we can feed back info but can’t get them to attend meetings as they are abroad most of the year and all in different places’ (Respondent i.d.229)**‘Geography, being a GB organisation, we can struggle to bring young people together’* *(Respondent i.d.175)* |
| Restricted scope | Where an organisation is endeavouring to facilitate the expression of children’s voices but this is limited in scope by the availability of resources | *‘Funding is an issue as our ambassadors programme costs a considerable amount to run as we cover all volunteer expenses and training is expensive so we are limited in size of group and consultation by cost’ (Respondent i.d. 640)* |
| Funding restraints | Where working to listen to children’s voices is limited by funding limitations or prioritisation | *‘We did used to have a ‘Youth Voice’ which incorporated children into decisions but unfortunately logistically and financially it was difficult’* *(Respondent i.d. 167)* |

Clearly there are concerns with time and material resources which compete in priorities.Any organisation potentially has demands on finite resources that limit investment in child protection policy implementation (Brackenridge *et al.*, 2004). Such factors appeared to feature for all sizes of organisation with larger organisations having faced greater barriers than smaller in previous attempts to work with juniors.

The logistics of including juniors has also proven challenging for those working specifically with talented and elite groups: combinations of issues of resources and geography were also prominent. However, some NGBs have still invested in listening to juniors making this manageable by limiting the numbers involved.

In light of creating good practice, obstacles may demand more creative approaches to the inclusion of children's perspectives. Dialogue could be organised effectively through remote means via culturally-accessible technologies as explored in other related contexts (Black and Schwab-Reese, 2018; Harris *et al.*, 2017; Wekerle *et al.*, 2018). This will inevitably be dependent on organisational culture and, where appropriate, the potential this has for change. The following section considers the nature of this and how new power relations might be negotiated.

***Organisational Culture and Attitudinal Change***

Beyond direct provision, further issues centred on organisational culture wherein many adults involved in the running of sport are unfamiliar with practices to ensure that children are listened to and it can be a challenge to appreciate their potential contribution. Table 4 outlines the cultural barrier that NGBs faced in seeking to effect change:

Table 4. Organisational culture and barriers to change

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Theme | Description | Illustration |
| Redefining norms in role identity | Organisations recognise the individual identities in roles that adhere to hierarchical structures as normative and acknowledge the need for these to be redefined in order to facilitate progress | *‘Changing attitudes of adults that young people have a valid voice and taking that voice as knowledgeable and insightful’* *(Respondent i.d. 889)**‘Some older club coaches are hard to bring up to date with modern coaching practices which involves listening to children…although I have to admit that as we revalidate every year as coaches, officials etc etc this practice is dying out, we are embracing the modern approach and train everyone in new techniques and standards**(Respondent i.d.590)*‘*we are trying to change this (negative attitude) but it will take some time’ (Respondent i.d. 293)* |
| Implied hierarch in solution approach | Where organisations believe that solutions require imposition as opposed to collaboration | *‘Difficult to force clubs to incorporate C&YPs (children and young people’s) voices into decision making’ (Respondent i.d. 395)*  |

Thus there is evidence that regulatory practices associated with the professionalisation of coaching (Kerr and Stirling, 2015) are contributing to positive developments for child protection. Discourses used in training can potentially redefine what is constituted as truth with the potential to generate new identities associated with particular roles within organisations. If ideologies in sport can be internalised (Barker-Ruchti and Tinning, 2010; Rail and Harvey, 1995) then evolving discourse can support the evolution and redefinition of roles.

However, the language used in reference to getting clubs to change practice here is potentially indicative that there may be a lack of empathy. One respondent identified the need to ‘force’ clubs to consult with children – this potentially indicates a lack of willingness for clubs to do so, but is consistent with a hierarchical relationship between the NGB and their associated clubs (Maitland *et al.*, 2015). It also suggests that the organisation considers it to be the role of clubs rather than itself to facilitate the expression of children's voices indicating improved understanding of relationships between different levels of organisation would be helpful (Fahlen and Stenling, 2018).

The purpose of this can be seen in the value that some organisations have experienced when relationships between NGBs and clubs are close and children are listened to. This is in addition to the benefit that NGBs feel that they could derive from doing so. The following section discusses the nature of this as it appeared from organisation in this study.

***Existing Good Practice and Exemplified Solutions***

Many NGBs identified that they are currently engaging in ‘good practice’. Responses were categorized as:

* Existing in formal structure
* Tailoring contributions from children to their interest and strengths
* Use of Primary Research – through surveys
* Sharing ideas remotely and informing ways of doing this.

Table 5 illustrates how this was manifest in the practice of clubs:

Table 5. Examples of ‘Good Practice’

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Theme | Description | Illustration |
| Formal initiatives | Organisations have specific programmes designed to facilitate the expression of children’s voices | *‘The Listening Club initiative is developing well with clubs interested in having groups of young people and asking them specific questions about their environment and experience of the sport’ (Respondent i.d.293)**‘the…athlete development frameworks for talented and academy athletes enhances the voice of the athletes in tis skills school and academy practices’**(Respondent i.d.962)**‘Young (sport) ambassador Scheme’* *(Respondent i.d.329)* |
| Project specific contributions | An organisation invites the expression of children’s voices on a basis responsive to emerging need | *‘The way we work through our young advisor model has a wide range of young people with mixed abilities and interests engaged in the process. It works on a task and finish principle – so young people engage with something that interests them and not signed up to a committee or panel for a set length of time’ (Respondent i.d.540)* |
| Voice through responsibility | Children are allocated specific roles that empower them to express their voices | *‘One club has ‘club captains’ who are 16/17 year olds who C &P (children and young people) go to for help, are a friendly face etc and tasked with getting young people’s views…New members to the club see children running certain sections of the club and is has been useful…other clubs have got C & YP to write their Codes of Conduct etc. we have ‘Ambassadors’ who are chosen because they are talented-but also the right children to talk to other and represent C & YP’**(Respondent i.d.395)* |
| Written voice as reflection | Organisations utilise methods to allow expression of written (potentially electronic) anonymised voices | *‘We have developed a coaching questionnaire specifically around working with and listening to our children and young people, it is very reflective on us as coaches, staff and volunteers in how we approach our younger members’ (Respondent i.d. 590)**‘We have undertaken a large study into school aged (athletes) and surveyed (participants) ,parents and teachers/coaches. This informs the School (sport) Strategy we are currently developing and should address the needs of our younger participants’ (Respondent i.d. 175)**‘(we) have a young person section being built into website so they can offer ideas and suggestions’* *(Respondent i.d. 303)*  |

Reference to formal organisational practice to enable the expression of the children's voices included academy/elite athlete pathways and clubs being encouraged to take part in particular initiatives regarding engaging with children. Of particular note, in light of children being identified as lacking interest, this issue could be addressed through the approach of having single project-based opportunities to contribute to discussions. This is more likely to be needs-related as defined by children themselves.

Other NGBs reported on the work of their clubs in encouraging interaction between children and the extent to which this can lead to a sense of ownership and illustrate the potential of juniors to make a positive contribution by taking on particular responsibilities; here allocated roles empower children to act as mediators for others within existing hierarchies.

Further examples were given where NGBs engage in remote research such as questionnaire surveys to hear and interpret junior voices, thus enabling each child to speak directly and anonymously acting as a point of reflection for adults within clubs. This is indicative of a preparedness for cultural change as a reflective process associated with responses to children's voices. Where this is the case, the strategic development of the sport is supported. It also further confirms the potential that remote communications might have in facilitating the expression of children's voices. However, it would also need to be acknowledged that such approaches still prioritise the adult perceptions of the questionnaire designer which can be problematic in seeking children’s voices (Everley and Macfadyen, 2015; Everley, 2018). However, this can clearly also be embedded online as a remote open forum.

While the use of social media has been identified as highly complex for older children, it may be a form of expression that is culturally embedded in their lived experiences (Black and Schwab-Reese, 2018). Interacting with web-based materials could consequently form the basis of expression of children's voices.

Therefore, although many NGBs identified challenges that they have faced when seeking to facilitate children and young people's voices, in other instances, this has been achieved very effectively and bodes well to encourage NGBs to develop appropriate approaches here. This obviously links to the need to identify why NGBs might consider doing so to be of value and the following section explores this.

**The Projected Value of Developing Children's Voices**

The level of importance that NGBs place on giving children a voice in affecting decisions that concern them is of key significance if developments are to be made. When asked about this, NGBs responded as shown in figure 2:



*Figure 2: The importance of facilitating the expression of children and young people’s voices*

On a scale where ten is ‘Highly important’ most NGBs consider the level of importance placed on giving children a voice as being at seven or above. There are only five (15.2%) who rate it between three and six, with no NGB rating this lower than a three.

In terms of where this value is seen, Table 6 presents responses to factors that are considered most advantageous in listening to children's and young people's voices; NGBs could identify as many as they considered relevant for them:

**Table 6: The advantages of including children/young person’s voices in the operations of an organisation**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Perceived Advantage | No.of Respondents (percentage) |
| Establish a clear understanding of children’s perspectives | 32 (94%) |
| Supports the identification of potential concerns within the organization  | 26 (76%) |
| Effectively inform decision making  | 28 (82%) |
| Demonstrates how the wider organization values the contribution of children and young people  | 29 (85%) |
| Highlights good practice within the organization | 23 (68%) |

Here, there is a general balance between factors; an acknowledgement of the value to both children and young people and to organisations. Identifying concerns can lead to early intervention; intervention that is so important in preventing escalation of child abuse situations (Healy and Rodriguez, 2019). Establishing and embedding a culture of allowing children to express their voices proactively can clearly support this.

The most frequently identified factors referred to the clarity of understanding junior perspectives. This is indicative of discourses that might empower children; the adoption of the narratives that belong to children can lead to meaning making that can impact on cultural practices (Casey et al., 2016). The highlighting of good practice is potentially a positive foundation on which to build culture and could act as a point of encouragement to organisations that can work within structural frameworks in order to enable children's voices to be heard.

Therefore, there appears to be an intention to ensure accuracy of interpretation to effectively inform decision making and action. This also highlighted the complexity of understanding that can be derived, as one NGB identified:

*‘In addition we see it as an honest and genuine view of the game based on feeling and emotions of people that are going through the journey of (sport name) and experiencing the good, the bad and the excellent first hand, which is very powerful. Their view is reality and we need to take notice of that even if at some points it is challenge and hard to hear.’ (Respondent i.d. 640)*

Ultimately, listening to children's voices was also identified as being able to: ‘provide a safer environment’ (Respondent i.d.700).

Therefore, where a power shift is achieved, the environment for children becomes more secure and practitioners benefit from the reflection that this provides them with.

***Conclusion***

*As NGBs work towards meeting standards for the safeguarding and protection of children in sport through the inclusion of children's voices (NSPCC CPSU, 2018), this research suggests that there is a readiness to change not only in response to policy but also in relational culture. If power does not have to function uni-directionally (Foucault, 1980) and relationships can be changed through cultural practices, it is possible to challenge inequalities that have existed in sport (Apple, 2013). If, in a general sense, power is exercised through discourse, engaging children in debate is central to ensuring that hierarchies used to shroud abuse in secrecy are challenged (Brackenridge, 2003; Helstein, 2007). This would progress toward a culture of expression and potentially prevent some abuses that occur in sport.*

*This paper presented a Foucauldian analysis of the place of children's voices in sport arguing that we are currently in a situation of ‘crisis discourse’ regarding the safeguarding of children. This could be resolved through the redistribution of power to create a culture of listening to young people. The NSPCC has started this process by providing guidance for clubs available on its website and Child Protection in Sport (*[*https://thecpsu.org.uk/resource-library/best-practice/involving-children-and-young-people/*](https://thecpsu.org.uk/resource-library/best-practice/involving-children-and-young-people/)*); however, as indicated in this research, the need for cultural change means that a clear shift in discourse associated with child rights is required across sectors. In the current child protection climate there is an increasing awareness of the need to listen to children in sport in order to protect them from abuse and therefore this is a timely opportunity to make an impact (Sanderson and Weathers, 2019).*

*Programmes that aim to give children a voice and increase the visibility of children (such as the NSPCC's ‘Talk PANTS’ campaign) and political lobbying to listen to the vulnerable all impact on the welfare of children. Within sport, ensuring expression of children's voices as a normative culture rather than as a response to a crisis in welfare may actually prevent abuse.*

*In terms of how this might be achieved in a practical sense, it is evident that challenges associated with this concern: time and resources in an absolute sense, when compared to perceived benefits; the inhibitions of children and young people; monitoring, identification and authentication of value; and institutional culture.*

*This is indicative that solutions to ensure direct representation of voice would benefit from being: remote; based in technologies used by children; culturally accessible to children; age and maturity appropriate and with the potential for contributors to remain anonymous.*

*As stated, this paper reports on one element of a survey of NGBs of sport in the UK. The following phases of the research address relationships between NGBs and their associated clubs and directly engaging with child athletes. This could serve to identify not only ways in which voice might be given ‘in person’ but how this can be achieved e.g. though training adults to support expression of children's voices as identified in some of the examples here. What is required is a level of activism that changes both legislation and mindsets. What is entirely clear is that the NGBs responding to this survey are very open to developing the ways in which they listen to juniors and on this basis, the work of the NSPCC CPSU in supporting progress to meet their own and government requirements, these findings are potentially extremely timely.*

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