

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Listening to children's voices in UK sports clubs: A Foucauldian analysis

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Abstract

Organisations funded by Sport England or UK Sport must work towards achieving standards for safeguarding and protecting children in sport as set by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) and encourage a culture of listening to children. The present research was commissioned by the NSPCC CPSU to understand the practices of UK sports clubs regarding this objective. An electronic questionnaire was distributed through the national governing bodies of sport working with the CPSU. Some 64 clubs/squads representing 6,000+ juniors (under 18 years) responded. Quantitative data were analysed using simple statistics and qualitative data were themed utilising Foucault's theory of power and following Braun and Clark's six-phase guide. Discourse, hierarchical judgement and docility were considered with reference to formal management and cultural environments. Semantic and latent themes were explored. The themes identified were: expectation awareness, reframing voice and preserving discourse. Clubs recognise the value of listening to children. However, existing power relations valorise adult knowledge fields over the experiences of juniors. Technology could provide an effective solution as it is remote, potentially anonymous and culturally accessible. As power is a productive force, problematisation of organisational culture could centralise children's voices and limit/prevent abuse.

KEYWORDS

children's voices, prevention of abuse, safeguarding in sport, sports clubs and safeguarding children

Key Practitioner Messages

- Establishing a child-centred culture in sports clubs could limit or prevent abuse.
- Sports clubs do see the value of listening to children's voices.
- Adult voices still take priority over those of children in sport.

INTRODUCTION

Despite being presented as a positive cultural pursuit with assumed moral benefits, sport can present an environment conducive to allowing abuse that is physical, emotional or sexual (Brackenridge et al., 2004; Baker, 2013; O'Gorman & Greenough, 2016). This has been recognised, and there has been a shift in the UK in the last 20 years towards an

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expectation that child safeguarding is prioritised in sports legislation and governance. Underpinning this was the ratification of the UK's National Action Plan for Child Protection in Sport supported by the establishment of the NSPCC's Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) in 2001 the purpose of which was to lead to change in the field (Papaefstathiou et al., 2013).

This made the UK the first country to have a state-funded organisation with a specific remit to safeguard children in sport (Rhind et al., 2015). Since its inception, policy guidance has developed and in line with the Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance (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 by the CPSU (CPSU, 2018; HM Government, 2018), and in accordance with the guidelines, they should 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).

Establishing a culture of listening to children and normalising the expression of children's perspectives could potentially address some of the issues associated with children believing that they do not have the right to speak about their experiences. This has particularly been seen in research that has addressed historic sexual abuse in UK sport where adults reflecting on their experiences as children, or a young person, identify that a clear issue is the ability to speak out without fear of reprisal (see, for example, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse's Truth Project Thematic Report: Child sexual abuse in sports and The Sheldon Report into Non-Recent Child Sexual Abuse in Football). Further evidence that this is problematic was seen in the interim report of the Whyte Review of British gymnastics (Whyte, 2021) commissioned as gymnasts did not feel that their voices were heard with respect to bullying, training through pain and physical assault. Normalising listening and appropriately responding to children's voices could potentially lead to early identification and/or prevention of abuse situations.

The aforementioned reports arguably expose the 'top down' approaches taken in the running of sports and creating a culture of listening to children presents distinct challenges to organisations seeking to implement change. Under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, children should be consulted on policy issues that affect them (Cremin et al., 2011; Nairn & Clarke, 2012; Everley & Everley, 2018), and it is essential that children's voices are incorporated in the generation of practice guidelines and responses to them (CPSU, 2018). However, the efficacy of policy implementation is hugely dependent upon its interpretation and application by stakeholders concerned.

Aware of this, the NSPCC CPSU commissioned this research in order to understand the response of sports clubs and squads to the call to support listening to children's voices as, for example, in guidelines for Working with Children and Young People first created in 2014 (CPSU, 2019). This study evaluates sporting contexts that enable/inhibit children's voices through an evaluation of the practices of sports clubs/squads in the UK. It is anticipated that this work will form the basis of a further study directly exploring children's experiences with children themselves which is an essential progression from this study.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Abuse of minors in sport has frequently been identified as being possible owing to the power differential that exists between the coach and athlete (Fasting et al., 2018; McMahon et al., 2018; Stafford et al., 2015). Whilst this is a clear concern, there are other features of sport that contribute to this ability of any individual to exploit children in their care. There is arguably a wider discourse that surrounds particular sports or aspects of training in some sports that potentially objectifies children and rationalises abuse (Papaefstathiou et al., 2013). In particular, an excessively intensive training regime may be considered a necessary sacrifice for success and therefore deemed as acceptable practice (McMahon et al., 2018).

In order to consider how this might be challenged, it is necessary to understand why it is that such environments are considered to be created in sport, how such contexts might be sustained irrespective of legislative practice and, in respect of the current study, how this is particularly profound in sport played by children. As these challenges can be said to exist as a result of what appears to be a distribution of power, a theoretical context that can help with interpretation here is that developed by Foucault (Foucault, 1991). Foucault perceived power not as a fixed entity to be shared or distributed, but one that is variable and constantly negotiated and redefined (Everley, 2020). As such, power can be seen as a 'strategy' that is established through interaction – according to Foucault, these interactions are based on essential forms of knowledge that are prioritised within different aspects of society.

In sport, prioritisation of what constitutes valuable knowledge is deemed to be held by significant individuals, usually adults operating in positions of privilege within the field. As such, figures such as a coach may be considered to be significantly more knowledgeable than the athlete. This is particularly profound when athletes are minors and perceptions of sports coaches' superior expertise empower them to control children even more directly than other adults may be permitted to, including their parents (Fasting et al., 2018; McMahon et al., 2018). This is not limited to the role of coach, but can extend to other adults working with juniors, as in the instance of high-profile abuse cases such as

perpetrated by the US gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar (Taylor, 2018). The proximity and depth of the relationships between a coach/other responsible adults and athlete therefore potentially render children in sport especially vulnerable to exploitation (Parent & Demers, 2011).

On a most basic level, the assumption that individuals such as coaches hold superior knowledge places them in a position of power because they know what's 'best' for their athletes. However, the prevalence of different forms of abuse in sport can lead to the questioning of such perceptions. Part of the issue here is the meaning that is derived from such contexts. Belief in sport that there is a 'right' way of doing things means that cultures of compliance are established (Mills & Denison, 2018). This, in turn, means that conformity in itself becomes an encultured way of being. Expressing individual perspectives has not historically formed part of sporting practice. What we see in sport is participant adherence to unwritten rules of compliance – there may be no declaration that athletes cannot express their opinion or identify when they are finding training particularly tough, but there may be a tendency to feel that it is not appropriate to take any such action (Mills & Denison, 2018). This is particularly important with respect to juniors in sport as exploring ways of seeking approval often tends to inform behaviours.

Therefore, power as exercised within sport can be understood as strategic and existing within the complex relationships that form practice (Downham & Cushion, 2020; O'Farrell, 2005). Athlete engagement is based on the everyday meanings that are applied to participation and perpetuate particular ways of being and thinking (Mills & Denison, 2018). Essentially, this is normative power that generates unquestioned organisation of meanings and resultant action. As such, there is a docility among athletes produced through sport as a modern discipline (Markula & Pringle, 2006). However, these outcomes make athletes malleable and manageable, and often this is desirable for those working with such athletes (Kuklick & Gearity, 2019). Therefore, creating any kind of change presents distinct challenges as it may be unrecognised but valuable to those who benefit from it.

In order to evaluate how child protection in sport guidance on giving children a voice is likely to impact practice, it is necessary to understand what this docility actually 'looks like' and how it is achieved, intentionally or otherwise. In Foucauldian terms, instruments that are used to discipline athletes through the generation of meaning are those of hierarchical observation and normalising judgement (Kuklick & Gearity, 2019).

DOCILITY, HIERARCHICAL OBSERVATION AND DISCOURSE

Essentially, in sport, participants can become docile subjects through formal practices and the potentially unconscious adoption of dominant discourses regarding normalised behaviours (Mills et al., 2020). Such conformities are surveilled both by others and the athletes themselves (Downham & Cushion, 2020; Foucault, 1991) and do not necessarily result in improved performance, but rather damage to participants (Mills et al., 2020). This generates the potential for abuse situations to arise with any athletes but this is particularly enhanced with children due to the pre-existing formalised power differentials that are exercised in sport (Everley, 2020).

One of the questions that needs to be considered here is what mechanisms are used to discipline athletes to conform. A key system that affects embodied docility is hierarchical observation (Downham & Cushion, 2020). Hierarchical observation is a practice particularly prevalent in sport. In this environment, there will generally be a head coach who has assistants, all selected because they conform to dominant ideas of how to 'be' and each of whom is in a position to observe athletes as they practice (Mills & Denison, 2018). Therefore, there is a system of monitoring in place that identifies any non-conformity challenging the status quo.

Such contexts that control an individual's engagement in sport are particularly enhanced when one considers the participation of children. Hierarchical observations evident in coaching practices, such as the use of assistants, and peer leadership mean that athletes are constantly monitored in their training. Combining this with the sense of adult/child athlete relationships and, ironically, the desire to ensure the demonstration of child protection by ensuring they are always observed, can actually mean that there are no points at which the child is free from an assessing gaze. This is not necessarily problematic but, as it is arguable that such techniques reinforce particular desirable discourses about what it is to be a 'good' participant, it does have potential to contribute to abusive situations within sport. The essential problem here is that there is a lack of 'space', both social and physical, within which children may feel able to express their subjective experience.

The hierarchical observations established within sports 'systems' are reinforced through discourses that determine the production and control of meaning (Mills et al., 2020). Discourses refer not only to literal discourse associated with verbal communication but wider social practice that frames belief and behaviour (Downham & Cushion, 2020; Mills et al., 2020). As regards the conduct of children and young people in sport, this attends to feedback, reinforcements through praise and punishment, and the promotion of individuals to status positions within the organisation of club structures. Essentially, this is the normalising judgement that controls behaviour (Mills et al., 2020).

POWER AS A STRATEGY

What is of concern here is the exercise of power. In sport, this operates both within hierarchical structures but also, as identified earlier, through more nuanced cultural expectations of behaviour. This aligns with the concept proposed by Foucault in which power is negotiated through interactions rather than existing in any absolute sense.

What is demonstrated through sporting practice is arguably normative power, which means that participants are inclined to conform to whatever expectations are established (often found in newly emergent sports-based bio-sciences (Mills et al., 2020), based on scientific training rationalisations that are reinforced through cultural practice, irrespective of individual response. This is of particular significance for children as it is not uncommon that adult models of training and measurements of performance are directly transposed for use with junior populations and as such, they can be psychologically and physiologically inappropriate.

However, as mentioned above, according to Foucault, power is not something to be permanently held by one individual over another (Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010), but a phenomenon that can be renegotiated and rebalanced (Everley, 2020). Ensuring ways by which children have the opportunity to express their perspectives could contribute to such a redistribution, thereby limiting or preventing abuse situations and offering a vision for child protection organisations such as the NSPCC CPSU.

Children and young people in sport form a group that is variously encouraged and discouraged in respect of particular behaviours, thus making them juridical subjects (Mills et al., 2020). However, understanding the mechanisms through which sports clubs may challenge this subjectification and generate new strategies in the exercise of power could, arguably, serve to protect children and young people in sport.

Therefore, within sport, power is exercised on a structural and strategic level. Policy change and expectation is crucial in providing a framework for sports clubs to enable the expression of children's voices, but understanding how policy is interpreted is equally critical in realising intent. Understanding how establishing a culture of hearing marginalised voices to reconfigure the exercise of power could effect real change. The work of Foucault offers a theoretical framework from which to analyse established cultural practice and problematise an approach that might achieve this.

Foucault suggested that modern power is more subtle than coercive practice (Mills & Denison, 2018). This therefore presents challenges for the implementation of proposed changes in sport, such as the enhancement of children's voices. Such centralisation of juniors necessarily questions many traditional practices (Eliasson, 2017). Development interrogates existing power structures both visible and intangible. Of concern here is not only legislation and expectation, but the more nuanced implications for their implementation. Sport in the UK needs to reframe the discourses in its organisations to facilitate children's voices. The present paper supports the NSPCC CPSU in addressing the need to listen to children's voices by exploring the way in which sports clubs in the UK are aware of, and implementing, requirements to produce and enable such a culture.

METHODOLOGY

This study focused on the ways in which technologies of hierarchy and discourse impact on the docility of junior participants in sport and their potential to express perspectives. An electronic survey was designed as a light-touch investigation providing the opportunity to describe broad practices within organisations. Governing bodies working with the CPSU (n = 34) invited child welfare representatives of associated clubs and squads to complete the survey, exploring current provision by sports clubs that enables the expression of child voices. Sports clubs within the UK are required to appoint welfare officers (also known as club safeguarding officers or child welfare officers) who have responsibility for managing all safeguarding procedures within their clubs (CPSU, 2016). This places them in a unique position to present an overview of the practices of organisations and the extent to which child perspectives are prioritised within them. Contributors were encouraged to present as much detail as they felt able, but they were free to omit any questions unless associated with informed consent. The number of responses to each question therefore varies throughout this paper.

Assurances of anonymity were given to all participants and although represented sports are identified, no individual response is linked to participant activity. Responder identification numbers are used to link data. Contributor information is held securely by the report author and ethical approval for this project was granted by the author's institution. Ethical approval for this work was granted by the lead researcher's institution.

As with previous child protection research, questions were designed to generate both quantitative and qualitative data (Brackenridge et al., 2004). All closed questions offered subsequent opportunities for participants to expand on responses. Questions were constructed in conjunction with the NSPCC CPSU providing 'expert reviews' during the process (Hazel et al., 2016). The survey was electronic to ensure that all participants were contacted simultaneously, but they could respond at their own convenience with no delay in communication (Couper, 2008). Distribution through the

governing bodies of sport ensured the quality of the target population in terms of being those who fulfil the specific remit of a welfare officer role to avoid respondent bias and ensure generalisability.

64 clubs/squads responded to the questionnaire. Representing a small sample size in terms of electronic surveys, the targeting of respondents and the richness of the data generated through combining quantitative data with qualitative enabled an exploration of the complexities of the perspectives being represented.

Sixty of the respondents identified their sporting activity. Activities represented can be categorised into the following: boxing, canoeing, fencing, golf, gymnastics, judo, lawn bowls, sailing and short-mat bowls. These organisations represented over 6,000 junior (under 18 years) athletes.

Of the clubs/squads that responded, three were from Northern Ireland, 11 from Wales and 45 from England. Five clubs did not specify their location. No respondent identified as being from Scotland. Respondents represented clubs working at a range of levels, with some indicating that they worked with athletes at more than one level: 23 national, 19 regional, four county and 31 local. Six responses indicated that they were 'other', identifying as 'also international', 'home counties', 'school', 'recreational'.

Richness in data (i.e. data which present the complexity of sensitive issues) was generated. Quantitative data were processed using simple statistics. As each question was optional, figures for total respondents vary throughout the survey. Qualitative data were themed: initial coding was completed and themes were generated and then revisited following Braun and Clark's six-phase guide (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Houghton & Houghton, 2018). This was an actively informed process utilising the theory of power relations in which the concepts of docility, hierarchical judgement and discourse were considered as described earlier. The small sample size enabled in-depth analysis. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data supports the exploration of declared, formalised regulation and how the impact of this is actually determined by interpretation. This was to ascertain how the expression of children's voices was being managed by the clubs and resulting from discourses associated with sports club structures. Semantic (overt) and latent (beyond what is being explicitly stated) themes were explored. The former related to descriptive data and the latter to the interpretation of rationalisations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Themes identified were: expectation awareness, reframing voice and preserving discourse. An emphasis here is that whilst there is an acknowledgement in many instances of the desirability to enable children's voices, there is still a lack of centralisation of this as an organising principle of junior sport.

Expectation awareness

As some sports organisations are unaware of requirements to provide in terms of the welfare provision of children and young people in their care (Alexander, 2011; Rhind et al., 2011) one of the first contextual factors to consider is whether the sports clubs/squad involved in this research recognise the expectations of them. When asked whether they were required by their national governing bodies or equivalent to involve children and young people in relevant decision-making, 41 (68.3%) of the clubs that responded to this question said that either they were not expected to do this or did

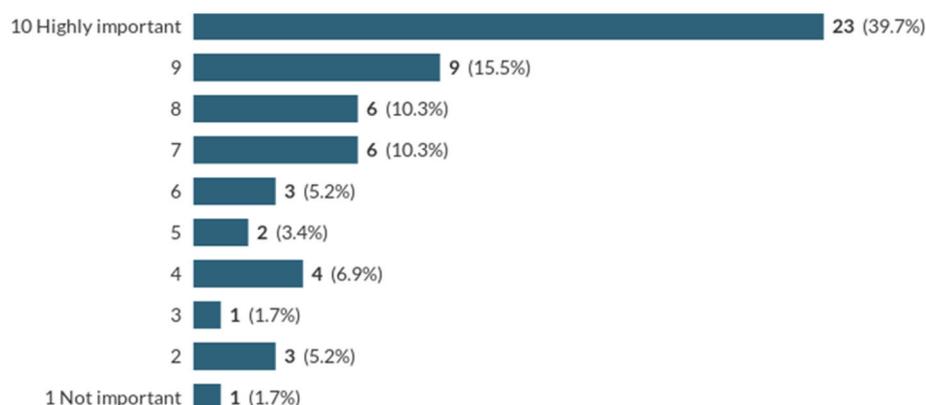


FIGURE 1 Identification of the importance of listening to children's voices

not know whether they were. This is indicative that the majority of organisations at this level do not feel under any formal compulsion to listen to children's voices. This creates concern on two levels: firstly, in terms of (a lack of) awareness of expectations; and secondly, the resultant potential that children are not being adequately listened to.

Beyond this, requirements and associated guidance is subject to the intended user directly engaging in its consumption. Therefore, it may be that those clubs/squads that did not respond in the affirmative are actually unaware of such guidance, consistent with the findings of Alexander and Stafford (2011) and Rhind et al. (2015). This lack of awareness was supported by the fact that clubs did consider listening to children's voices to be of value as shown in Figure 1.

This indicates that clubs are not accessing the support available to them to facilitate what they claim that they would value within their organisation. It is therefore important to understand what processes are actually being implemented in order to do this.

Reframing voice

Much representation of children's voices was achieved by clubs indirectly through the use of trusted adults to communicate child perspectives. Therefore, the voices of children would necessarily be mediated by others rather than being directly represented. Some 23 (75%) of those working with elite performers and 23 (63.9%) of those working with community participants (i.e. those who take part for recreational purposes) identified that they would use adult representation. Various, this is made by parents, coaches, coach co-ordinators, development officers and committee members. In these groups, clubs/squads have parent representation in situations such as on committees and at weekly meetings.

In this process, there is an assumption that parents will adequately and appropriately represent junior voice. However, there may be some question with respect to the efficacy of this as parents can themselves be subject to the presumed superior positioning of, for example, a coach representative (O'Gorman & Greenough, 2016). There is also the possibility that parents fulfilling this role will themselves conform to the dominant discourses associated with the running of the club/squad and that they will be included as a result of their willingness to conform to dominant discourses (Mills & Denison, 2018). This would indicate that there is scope to explore adults directly associated with clubs/squads who are identified as representing views at meetings and supporting junior representatives in expressing their own views either at junior-only meetings or on committees:

‘Adult members are always present at meetings to help and support the children with discussions and decision making’ (Respondent i.d. 836)

Such findings are indicative of a willingness to afford the opportunity for children to be represented but a lack of understanding that this could/should be achieved more directly. This therefore retains a sense of the implied hierarchies evident historically in sport (McMahon et al., 2018; Raakman et al., 2010). It is suggestive of a need to reframe children's perspectives and indicates a requirement for children's thoughts to come into alignment with the dominant discourses of adults within the club and suggests a judgement of value that prioritises particular perspectives. This may well be unconscious as there is little scope in such contexts to express perspectives outside of recognised frames of meaning (Mills et al., 2020).

Preserving discourse

Linked to dominant discourses associated with assumed superior knowledge, adult resistance to listening to children's voices was identified on a number of levels with perhaps the most basic being adults feeling that they ‘know better’ (Respondent i.d. 393). Assumed superiority of those in control essentially marginalises or even eclipses the voices of children.

This is often confounded by a sense of the way that things have historically been run in sport. On a most basic level, this can arise from what are perceived as simple generation gaps and resultant conflicts of interest where seniors hold power over juniors:

‘As with anything the ‘minority’ find it difficult to be heard. Their views are different because of the generation gap between themselves and most of the members. It means constantly evaluating their needs and wants and reconciling it with the majority of the club membership’ (Respondent i.d. 705)

This suggests that established members within sports clubs/squads ‘automatically’ enjoy a position of superiority as regards interactive discourses. Such culturally embedded frames of reference are difficult to expose and explore. Therefore, the status quo is supported and the marginalised status of juniors maintained.

Where children are afforded the opportunity to express their voices, and if this occurs in a 'public' arena, the associated discourse expresses judgement of marginal voices where the 'balance of authority in adult to child relationships can hamper freedom of expression' (Respondent i.d. 483) and their ideas 'Can be overridden [overridden] by strong adult views who disagree with juniors' (Respondent i.d. 877). In such comments, the implication of assumed superiority of knowledge is identified as potentially threatening to children (Fasting et al., 2018).

Indeed, when asked to identify challenges that they may face in prioritising children's voices, 21 (38.9%) of clubs who responded to this question identified senior members as not recognising the value of doing so. Here, club representatives are clearly identifying the mechanism through which children's voices are suppressed and docility encouraged as is evident in wider sports training and performance (O'Farrell, 2005; Markula & Pringle, 2006). This is indicative that there is a need to problematise the distribution of power in ways that have been explored within coach education (see, for example, Denison, 2019) and to reconsider what means of expression may be more appropriate for children.

There is also identification that where there is a lack of confidence, the club/squad can work towards overcoming this:

'Some athletes/young people thrive in this environment whilst some are more researched or find it difficult to represent their views as they would like. However, this is then our role to create and encourage an environment where they feel comfortable in expressing their views' (Respondent i.d. 397)

This is indicative that there is a desire to bring in change, particularly as they [the club] subsequently commented that:

'The club would be starting from a low base. Currently there is almost no involvement of parents in decision making, let alone children' (Respondent i.d. 501)

Here, there is a suggestion that, if problematised, clubs/squads would be ready to make changes. Moreover, what is also suggested is the complexity of the relationships that exist in sport (Downham & Cushion, 2020; O'Farrell, 2005), and in particular, in children's sport. The implication is that there is a hierarchy of club adults, parents and *then* child athletes – the 'let alone' is particularly reminiscent of this implicit prioritisation of value, reinforcing the idea of the depth of traditional practice that clubs are being asked to challenge (Eliasson, 2017).

Referring to Figure 2, when the value of including children's/young persons' voice was considered, over 60 per cent (minimum 39 respondents, 60.9% in each) of respondents positively identified against each category. Some 49 (76%) respondents identified that they felt listening to children clarifies understanding, 39 (60.9%) that it helps inform decision-making, 40 (62.5%) that it indicates the value that an organisation places on facilitating the contribution of juniors, 43 (67.1%) said that doing so supports the identification of potential concerns specifically related to safeguarding and 44 (68.75%) felt that it was evidence of good practice. However, a question here would be regarding how such measures are being implemented – if junior voice is reframed as described earlier, then there may be limited change as such control may still exist within pre-existing domains of meaning (Denison, 2019).

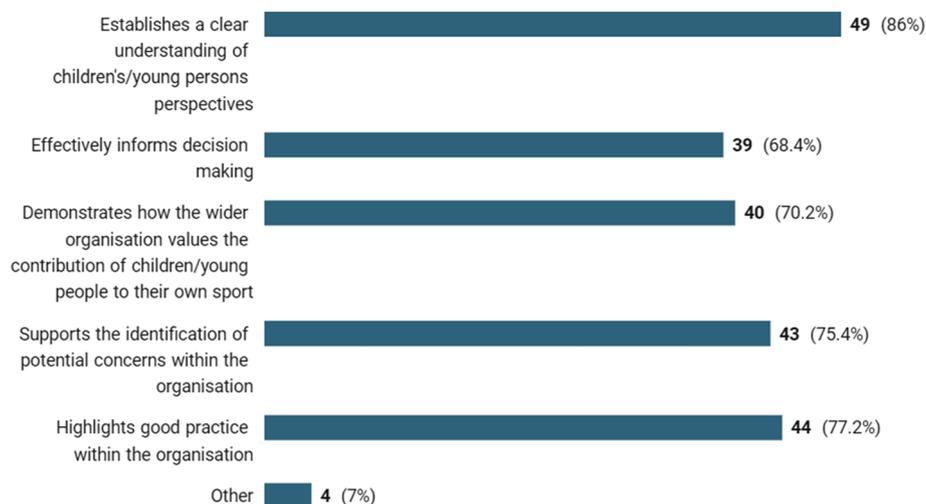


FIGURE 2 The value of listening to children's voices

Difficulties experienced by clubs when seeking to create opportunities for children to directly express themselves are indicative of some of the challenges that clubs face to facilitate voices. Nevertheless, this redefining of power relations was seen to be effective in some instances:

‘We had to change the format of our reviews to make them ‘athlete led’ because previously when Coach led, the athletes were not very vocal and contributed very little. Now they present the performance review’ (Respondent i.d. 397)

This demonstrates that where children’s voices are expressed in a meaningful way (i.e. children are both listened to and responded to), there is great value for all those who work with junior groups; relinquishing power and altering hierarchies may actually lead to a redistribution of benefit for all rather than threatening status. The overall weight of perception supported the concept that the existing discourses associated with clubs were serving to reinforce inequalities in expression. Factors identified as barriers to facilitating the expression of children’s voices are shown in Figure 3:

However, comments by respondents are indicative of the need to, and the potential to, overcome challenges that could otherwise threaten the success of engagement:

‘Young people’s voice should be seamlessly integrated into the operation of the club. This avoids overly bureaucratic inclusion that wastes ... time ... As coaches we should be able to sympathetically design and implement our coaching and the structure of the club should be such that any concerns can be raised easily and addressed quickly. Developing trust and athlete buy-in needs to be the underpinning factor’. (Respondent i.d. 329)

Ultimately, it is desirable to create an environment that is inclusive and, therefore, safer:

‘Juniors feel more integrated with the club’s activities, builds trust, (and) offers increased chance of disclosing safeguarding concerns’ (Respondent i.d. 715)

STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study was the second of two commissioned by the NSPCC CPSU, with the first focusing on the provision made by the governing bodies of sport to listen to children’s voices (Everley, 2020). Distribution of the survey was

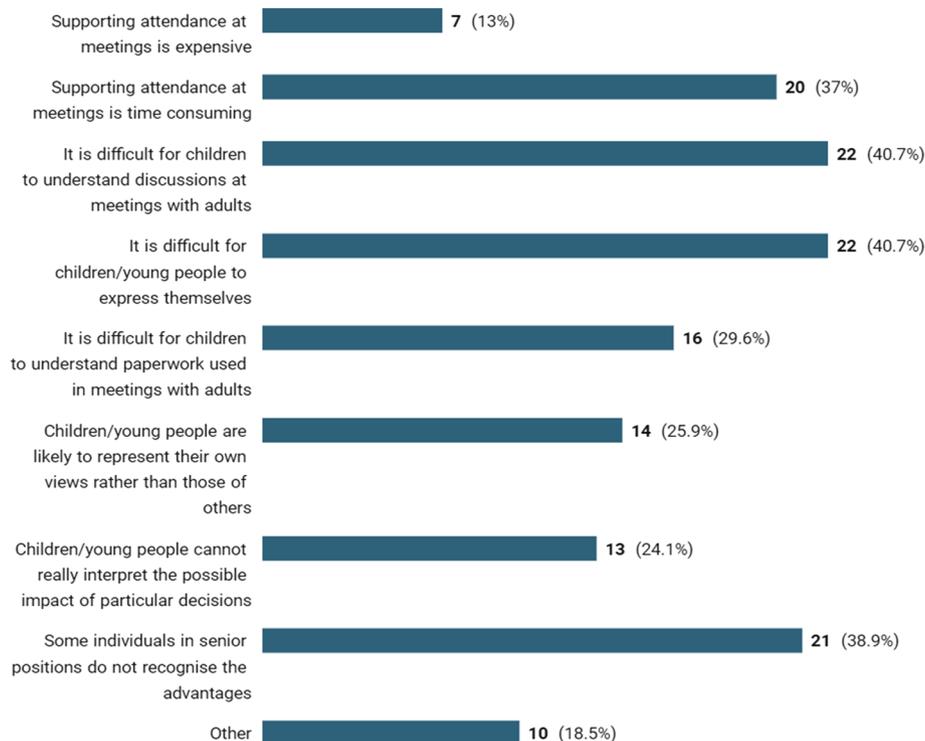


FIGURE 3 Challenges in facilitating the expression of children’s voices

controlled by the NSPCC's CPSU through the governing bodies of sport and therefore a percentage return cannot be evaluated.

The purpose was to provide a light-touch overview of the position of sports clubs/squads. The response of clubs is indicative of a willingness to progress in terms of hearing children's voices, however, this could actually present a degree of distortion as arguably those clubs most disposed to achieving this will have responded. There is also the possibility that there is an element of performativity in the responses that potentially conforms to CPSU expectations. It is also acknowledged, with respect to the respondents, particularly as I draw on Foucault, that there could be a perception of disciplinary governmentality which may have affected data generation (Thiel, 2019).

Absent from this study are the direct voices of children which are ultimately needed to begin to understand the complexity of issues here. It is anticipated that a further study will be completed to ultimately centralise children in this research.

CONCLUSIONS

Data from respondents here indicate that there is awareness of the value achieved by facilitating the expression of children's voices within the club culture, which could empower children in contributing to the running of their sport and create a culture that may mitigate against the perpetration of abuse.

However, the action of creating such an environment can be conflicted by the combination of formal and cultural structures that exist within sport. The desire to bring about change despite these factors suggests that supporting sports clubs in problematising issues associated with such obstacles and then equipping those involved with the knowledge and skills necessary to begin addressing concerns could help with this process.

Where relationships can be renegotiated, new strategies for the exercise of power could be established. As, according to Foucault, power is a productive force, new arrangements could generate new meanings (Mills & Denison, 2018) that centralise children's voices. This could ultimately lead to highlighting issues of concern early and contribute to the prevention of abuse of children and young people in sport (Everley, 2020).

Any 'solutions' here would clearly be complex but exist on the levels of creating cultural change as led by the organisation, establishing ways of facilitating the expression of children's voices and ultimately ensuring that the organisation understands how to listen to those voices. From the perspective of adults involved in running junior sport, the inclusion of reflective practice to promote self-awareness, critical capacity, empathy and understanding (Downham & Cushion, 2020) could lead to desirable change.

As children are increasingly exposed to digital technologies, are key users of evolving online and digital services (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016), and are able to connect to technology in different contexts, technology could provide an effective solution to some of the challenges associated with facilitating expression of voices. Utilising remote reporting, for example, through online communications could create an opportunity for children to express their perspective anonymously in a way that is culturally accessible to them. Although it is acknowledged that not all children can access digital technology, this may well make a contribution to opening up dialogue between clubs and their junior members. This is also cost-effective for clubs, mitigating against material concerns. As regards their associated national governing bodies reported elsewhere (Everley, 2020), clubs and squads responding to this survey are currently very open to developing ways in which they listen to juniors, and on this basis, the work of the NSPCC CPSU in this area is likely to be extremely timely.

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