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Power and discourse in the politics of evidence in sport for development

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ABSTRACT

The field of sport for development (SFD) has been criticised for the way that evidence has been produced and used to account for and demonstrate the perceived success of SFD programmes. Much of this critique has highlighted shortcomings in approaches to monitoring and evaluation (M&E), which underpins a perceived weak evidence base concerning what works, why and within which contexts (Coalter, 2007; Coalter & Taylor, 2010; Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Conceptually a lack of evidence discourse (Nicholls et al., 2010) has emerged. This paper explores and analyses the power dynamics that shape this discourse and argues that an understanding of the dominant neoliberal context within which SFD is located is critical. While offering a Foucauldian framework, the power, knowledge and discourse related to political actors in SFD processes are examined. This paper addresses two key questions: what is power and who is it for? Whose interests are served in the interpretation, generation and reporting of evidence? The paper concludes that the role of the sport development practitioner (SDP) is underprivileged and to enable the field of sport for development (SFD) to move forward, the very people who implement the programmes need to be better understood. Furthermore it is argued that a deeper understanding and interpretation of the terrain of the sport development practitioner (SDP) within UK and international shores are a necessity if a more open and transparent knowledge transfer process, surrounding evidence, is to be entered into.

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1. Introduction

The sport for development (SFD) field has witnessed considerable growth over the last decade with huge growth in the number of programmes that use sport as a tool to address social issues. Sport development is a contested term that is often used variably to indicate the application of both policy and practice in encouraging, increasing and possibly sustaining participation in sport (e.g. see Bramham & Hylton, 2008; Girginov, 2010). Conceptualisations of sport development (SD) vary, often according to power and interest differentials and it is quite clear that there is a fundamental dichotomy in understanding how SD is conceived of and implemented within programmes. This polarising division is succinctly captured by the terms development of sport or development through sport (Houlihan & White, 2002). The former, also known as sport for sport's sake (Collins, 2010; Devine, 2013) and/or sport plus (Coalter, 2007), tends to leverage sport participation, for the

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benefit of those participating. Development through sport or plus sport (Coalter, 2007) conversely tends to use sport as a vehicle to address a range of wider social issues emanating from the social problems industry (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Pitter & Andrews, 1997) such as improving health (Edwards & Casper, 2012), reducing crime and tackling obesity (Houlihan & White, 2002).

These two categories of sport development compete in political, social, economic and cultural ways. Politically, each category infers particular policy contexts that condition and construct what might be regarded as politically useable resources (Allison, 1986; Collins, 2008; Darnell, 2012). Socially, each category suggests a particular approach to collective action problems and the meaning of sport for both the individual and society (Adams, 2012; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). Economically, each category sets forth the scale of impact that is possible and implores more of the available scarce resources necessary to make the anticipated impact (Grix & Carmichael, 2012). Culturally, each category addresses separate norms and values that again relate to the meaning of sport, but also address wider issues of socialisation and community development (Coakley, 2011; Lindsey & Adams, 2013). These distinctions and divisions are of relevance to sport management scholars insofar that on the one hand sport development is arguably a sub-branch of the discipline and yet on the other hand it provides a point of tension, an almost dialectic, to the emphasis on managing under dominant contexts in the provision of mass sport opportunities (Adams, 2012). Certainly those familiar with Rittel and Webber's seminal paper *Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning* (1973) will acknowledge the persistence of 'wicked problems' in and through the delivery of sport programmes. Their argument when applied to the sport domain—that many problems with which sport is charged with 'fixing' are poorly defined, lack clarity and are resistant to clear and agreed solutions (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Nols, 2012)—has a clear resonance for sport managers. These distinctions in the utility of sport have led a range of actors to explore how and where sport can be treated instrumentally for particular purposes or with specific outcomes in mind. It is from this latter field of 'development through sport' that sport for development (SFD) has emerged as an umbrella term that captures some of the many roles that sport can play in addressing social issues in different societies. Ontologically SFD is rooted in the idea that participatory forms of sport can be a good thing in making a purposeful, strategic and positive contribution to society. Crucially however, similar to Green (2009), we recognise that it is not sport per se that is responsible for specific outcomes, but rather the manner and context of its implementation.

With an increasing global focus on SFD, the field has regularly been required to demonstrate accountability for investment made by funders via robust and systematic approaches to evidence that centre upon proving the place of sport within development (Kay, 2012). While accepting differences in global contexts, it is clear that similarities persist; none more so than in the dominance of neoliberalism (Hall, Massey, & Rustin, 2013). Globally, idioms of modernisation that share a reciprocal relationship with neoliberal disciplines have dominated the contexts and frameworks within which SFD operates (Coakley, 2011; Green, 2007; Sam, 2009). It is within this broad context of neoliberalism and modernisation, with an emphasis on evidence as the golden goose of validity, that the field of SFD has been roundly criticised. In part this is due to the imposition of performance indicators (PI), which have, in a modernised sport system, depowered delivery agents while reaffirming the dominance of external stakeholders (Coalter & Taylor, 2010; Taylor, 2009). Despite some significant contributions to the field recently concerning the positive attributes associated with SFD (e.g. Crabbe, 2007; Frisby, Crawford, & Dorer, 1997; Schulenkorf, 2012; Sugden, 1991), there still remains scepticism and critique surrounding some of the issues and shortcomings of certain approaches to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) (Coalter, 2007, 2010b; Edwards, 2015; Kay, 2012; Smith & Leach, 2010). This has amplified and exacerbated what Nicholls et al. (2010) call a lack of evidence discourse. Such failings have been attributed to a poor understanding and application of how and why programmes work and a lack of robust, research based evidence concerning the outcomes of sport participation (Adams & Harris, 2014; Coalter, 2007). This amounts to sport being a necessary but not sufficient condition for the achievement of social outcomes (Coalter, 2010a), making sport a contingent variable rather than a lone remedy.

We address two central questions in this article to examine the above issues: (1) how is the lack of evidence discourse constructed and what is its impact and (2) whose interests are served in the interpretation, generation and reporting of evidence? To provide answers we first examine the themes and contexts that make up and shape the lack of evidence discourse within neoliberal derived modernisation contexts; and second use a Foucauldian understanding of power, knowledge and discourse to examine aspects of the power dynamics that shape attitudes and approaches to evidence among different political actors. First, however a quick caveat is needed. In seeking to avoid charges of being overly reductivist or conflationary, we fully recognise that M&E work may come with its own baggage, depending upon time and space. M&E practice occurring in developmental arenas, for example, carries the potential burden of neo-colonial and ideological values. Similarly, when addressing programme delivery, it is likely that significant cultural gaps may exist between those doing the M&E work and those delivering projects on the ground. These issues are not new and resonate with concerns for the value and importance of indigenous knowledge in empowering and enabling local communities for development which was crystallised in the 1999 Kampala Declaration. Notwithstanding these differences, addressed in much of the development literature elsewhere (e.g. Wallace, Bornstein, & Chapman, 2007), contextual synthesis has been an issue in the M&E literature (e.g. Jeanes & Lindsey, 2014; Kay, 2009, 2012).

2. The (lack of) evidence discourse

The evidence based policy discourse is significant in reflecting the dominance of neo-liberal policy agendas in many countries from the 1980s onwards. At the broadest of levels, neo-liberal policies, pursued by national governments and

supranational bodies, have sought to limit (roll-back) the role of the state, allocating greater responsibility for public and collective action to private and voluntary sector organisations (Hayhurst, 2009; Stoker, 1998). The upshot for the field of SFD has been an acceptance of performance management and accountability within technological and political frameworks (Diefenbach, 2009) that compound asymmetries of power that persist in the governance of sport (Grix & Phillpots, 2010). Certainly the importance of considering the nature of evidence in the context of SFD is that institutional landscapes featuring public policy actors have become increasingly blurred and fragmented across the many organisations represented by stakeholders. What is clear, however, is the applicability to SFD of the broader recognition of the complexity and fragmentation that exists across different areas of public policy (Skelcher, 2000). Indeed while complexity, as an essential feature of NPM, has arguably led to the shift from government to new modes of governance (Pierre & Stoker, 2000), some have also argued that paradoxically, power has been centralised in the march towards decentralisation (Courpasson, 2000; Diefenbach, 2009; Grix & Phillpots, 2010). In short the SFD field has come under enormous institutional pressure to expand its activities to include a range of partners in a number of loose arrangements that cross institutional boundaries. The upshot is that sport programmes are often justified post hoc in the name of social change. In line with the aim of this paper, this section interrogates the emergent lack of evidence discourse through an examination of the key underpinning arguments.

2.1. Conceptualising evidence

It is clear that what may be considered as evidence in the social sciences is subject to interpretation, context and methodology. Evidence may cross many interpretational and analytic boundaries such as evidence of impact, outcome or evidence of understanding. These dimensions of evidence carry clear messages that on one level reflect the upsurge in demand, for evidence of impact and outcome, from funding agencies (Kay, 2009; Nicholls, Giles, & Sethna, 2010) and on a different level calls for evidence of programme understanding (Coalter, 2010a). Raphael (2000, p. 357) states that “evidence is about reality, what is true and what is not true”. Such a definition based on the scientific establishment of truth and facts is popular with governments and organisations keen to identify evidence that confirms the truth and the ‘what works’ of an intervention (Sullivan, 2011). In the UK the ‘what works’ question has been a central concern for policy makers and funders (Nutley, Powell & Davies, 2012) resulting in a movement towards evidence based policy whereby policy outcomes are underpinned by social research (Sullivan, 2011). For evaluation practice across the globe the consequences have been a drive to demonstrate truth and accountability within a performance management framework (Diefenbach, 2009; Hall et al., 2013; Hayhurst, 2009). Of concern is that this process of evidencing anything that has been commissioned is so important that it often occurs whether or not something has worked. However, many concerned with evidence of and for SFD have called for a deeper understanding of programme learning outcomes (Coalter, 2012; Edwards, 2015; Kay, 2012) which demonstrate positive and negative aspects of SFD programmes. It would appear that some funders commission SFD projects merely to demonstrate evidence of action without really showing much interest in the outcomes and impacts of the programmes they sponsor (Levermore, 2011). Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) argue that focussing on the needs, problems and deficiencies of communities can lead to the formation of hierarchies of dependence and the emergence of a problem-solving mission of funders, where they can be viewed as heroic. Despite the diversity in making sense of evidence, it is clear that an evidence of proof approach has prevailed in SFD (Lindsey & Culbertson, 2013), which in reflecting the sport evangelist position asserts the need to demonstrate sports magical powers for social change (Kay, 2012). Lindsey and Culbertson (2013) have been critical of those who have called for evidence to legitimise the field, and certainly it is a naïve and weak premise to believe that a stronger and positive evidence base for sport will enable practitioners, policy makers and academics to sell it better because sport will regularly produce positive and negative outcomes. Consequently, approaches to understanding the nature of evidence need to be more nuanced and less rhetorically structured (Levermore & Beacom, 2012) if its production is to be less problematic.

2.2. Ill-defined outcomes of SFD programmes

A key area of critique concerns the presumed benefits and unrealistic social outcomes that are often associated with many SFD programmes. For example, as a result of over-ambitious aspirations and a lack of attention to how change is realised, performance indicators (PIs) are often badly designed, lack validity and reliability (Taylor, 2009), and saddle programme implementers with a need to demonstrate successful programme outcomes on the basis of slim evidence. For Kay it is a case of “claimed benefits overreaching the research base as the evidence of sports social impacts is unsatisfactory” (Kay, 2009, p. 1178). Many commentators (Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2007; Levermore, 2011) have argued that the formulation of such unrealistic outcomes are the result of the SFD movement being dominated by sport evangelists (Kidd, 2011) who take as their starting point on evaluation “the conviction that sport for development inevitably leads to positive outcomes” (Levermore, 2011, p. 341). SFD in this respect is in a *Catch 22* situation. While the importance and value of sport have to be ‘sold’, in doing so, based on the notion that sport is self-evidently a good thing (Rowe, 2005 see also Coalter, 2007), the seeds of some of these misgivings are sown. Increasingly therefore, evidence produced by practitioners is met with scepticism and suspicion over its reliability and validity (Coalter, 2007, 2010a; Levermore, 2011; Sugden, 2010). This is not to say, however that these authors view sport as not having the capacity to

elicit change, rather than evidence is inconclusive at best (Edwards, 2015) and that the lack of empirical data does not necessarily disprove the potential value of sport (Kay, 2009). Clearly in-line with Pawson and Tilley's concerns over evaluation, the point, as echoed by Coalter is that sport "may have an impact on some" (original italics Coalter, 2010a, p. 299). Clearly SFD programmes take place and are situated within a complexity of social processes and interactions that intersect multiple factors in numerous ways. Certainly sport does not work on its own to produce positive social contributions, and it is a well-worn argument that sport is an 'empty form' (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). Consequently it is uncontroversial to assert that sport practice is culturally reflexive and needs to be combined with other interventions, approaches and resources in order to achieve certain implementation outcomes (Coalter, 2013).

2.3. Proof vs. learning in programme development

The lack of attention afforded to processes underpinning SFD programmes is often at the heart of the struggle to evidence and explain the realisation of specific outcomes. This is particularly apposite in the case of programme development through to M&E. The central tenet of the literature concerning evaluation is that programmes should pay more attention to the construction of theory that underpins programmes (Chen, 1990; Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Weiss, 1997). In short, the call is for social programmes to develop "plausible and sensible models of how programmes are supposed to work" (Bickman, 1987 cited in Green & McAllister, 2002, p. 25). As a consequence programme development, as well as evaluation, becomes crucial because it is a well-developed theory of change or programme theory (Vogel, 2012) that will describe the processes and activities that will lead to certain outcomes. However, it appears to be the norm that a number of outcomes are envisaged or idealistically drawn up without significant attention to the processes, mechanisms or underlying theory that may lead to their realisation. Subsequently, 'ill-defined outcomes' give rise to similar evangelical performance indicators which, based on the presumed intrinsic values of sport, become the indicator or mechanism of change; the consequence of which is to identify evaluation questions that are limited in both scope and value, giving rise to questions such as 'did the sport intervention have an impact?' rather than asking 'why and how did sport have an impact?' Coalter (2007, 2010) has been critical in arguing that many blanket approaches to evaluation are not nuanced enough to account for the social and cultural conditions under which sport operates. Subsequently Coalter has advocated the critical realistic approach of Pawson and Tilley (1997), which seeks to highlight what works, for whom and in what circumstances. Coalter argues that "programmes should start with the desired strategic outcomes then work backwards and look to identify what are the elements in the programme that will change particular values and attitudes" (2012, p. 17). Although the drive towards theory-driven approaches (Coalter, 2012) is starting to become more recognised, SFD still exhibits a tension between simplistic questions that ask 'does sport work?' to more nuanced and complex questions that ask 'what is it about sport, its delivery and the context of its delivery that makes it work or not?'

2.4. Plurality of monitoring and evaluation approaches

There has been an increase in evaluation practice (Vogel, 2012) within many SFD programmes, where various approaches ranging from participatory (Levermore, 2011), to theory of change (Coalter, 2010), to process-orientated approaches that use logic models (Coalter, 2012) have been applied. Much of this practice involves experts or academics facilitating or leading the process. It is clear that these approaches (particularly theory of change, participatory and outcome-based) are becoming more popular, as they chime with the prevailing technologies of neoliberalism and the architecture of modernisation. However, there are major issues and limitations concerning the extent to which these approaches are, and can be, fully implemented through programmes, regardless of whether they are acceptable elements of the M&E process. For example, to focus on the use of logic models, logical frameworks or log frame approaches (Levermore, 2011), which emphasise linearity and causality of programme inputs, outputs and outcomes, these may well be quite restrictive (Kay, 2012) and blinkered when evaluating programmes holistically (Lindsey & Grattan, 2012). In addition, Mosse (2001), representing a more cautious approach, argues that M&E can act as a smokescreen by imposing organisational constraints that may limit the incorporation of locally-produced knowledge as the focus of M&E on external agendas.

While this plurality of approaches represents diversity and choice in M&E practice it may also confuse, compete, crowd out and even mislead what is an emergent and growing field. This can have an impact in choosing which M&E approach is best for a programme and then fully understanding its methodology and processes, as well as considering how it might sit with other approaches. These are key issues when considering and assessing suitability and stakeholder validity. Additionally, despite an increase in evaluation practice, Levermore (2011) and Jeanes and Lindsey (2014) highlight the high number of evaluations that are commissioned by funders on behalf of external interest groups. This commissioning of M&E practice at times requires initial academic expertise and may question the knowledge, reliability, community ownership and inclusion of practitioners on the ground (Fetterman, 2005). Certainly the work of the Coady Institute in promoting asset-based community development is to problematise this model and question exogenous as opposed to endogenous community development (Mathie & Cunningham, 2005).

2.5. *The role of the sport development practitioner and operational constraints*

In any SFD programme the street level practitioner is a crucial actor in M&E (Nicholls et al., 2010). Put simply, in order to foster the critical learning culture (Edwards, 2015) required to understand initiatives and inform practice, the views of practitioners along with those of the communities and stakeholders they work with should be valued (Nicholls et al., 2010). Many commentators (Coalter, 2010; Edwards, 2015; Kidd, 2011; Lyras & Welty-Peachey, 2011) assert that there needs to be more empirical evidence surrounding the claims made by SFD and a potential way forward involves closer collaborative inquiry between communities and researchers.

It should be clear that practitioners are often embedded within programmes. A key question concerning this position refers to the extent to which a practitioner may be involved in the construction of evidence and which category within the collaborative process they fall into. Does a practitioner fall into a disempowered category, where evidence within academic institutions is favoured (Kay, 2009; Nicholls et al., 2010)? Or are they positioned within the organisational and more influential areas of evidence creation where they do have a say? For example, in reference to the latter, Kidd (2011) and Coalter (2010) frame practitioners as co-collaborators with researchers as evangelists who over-conflate the power of sport, for organisational and funding purposes. Conversely however, Nicholls et al. (2010) have argued that practitioners' creative involvement is limited and in some cases ignored. There is of course no black and white answer to this contentious debate, given the contextual nuances within the SFD field.

Nevertheless, just because practitioners may be involved in collaborative processes with academics and research processes afforded to them by funders/donors this does not necessarily mean that they are fully in control and can assert their views. Indeed, it may look like practitioners are in control of their M&E processes, yet through the external forces and power relations, ticking boxes, misrepresenting findings (Smith & Leach, 2010) and reinforcing the status quo through fear of failure are not uncommon.

Furthermore, the question still remains about the extent to which sport development practitioners embrace and deliver the varying approaches to M&E (Coalter, 2013)? The answers to these questions are complex and are returned to in due course, however it is clear that a range of structural problems determine much of the inadequate training needed to conduct sufficient or appropriate M&E (Hylton & Hartley, 2011). For example, there is often: confusion about what is or constitutes best practice in M&E; time pressure and limited resources for training; limited support from experts; inadequate staff resourcing coupled with the frequently short life cycle of programmes (Levermore, 2011). This may also explain why, in some circles, academic expertise may be privileged given the lack of competency in evaluation methodology. Coalter, for example, has been commissioned by funding agencies such as Comic Relief to provide M&E services (Coalter, 2013) and also the likes of Schulenkorf (2012) have partnered with SFD organisations. Within the UK, Tim Crabbe's 'substance/views' online M&E platform is now used by many of the put in 'football in the community' schemes that are attached to professional football clubs. Kickz, a SFD initiative which harnesses the appeal of football with a club's identity to engage disaffected youth, requires practitioners to report their M&E findings via this platform.

Finally, it is reasonable to argue that the terrains and spaces of 'critical' M&E knowledge may well have become sequestered and embedded within academic circles and practice. Much of the critical knowledge concerning these aspects of SFD, for example, is mainly confined to academic conferences and books and subscription journals, which is guarded by language and knowledge of that language, act as gate keeping devices (Hylton & Hartley, 2011). Conversely, implementation knowledge may well reach policy communities and/or networks through open access journals such as the 'Sport for Development' online platform and the www.sportanddev.org website. Indeed M&E reports also make their way into public domains, yet, as Houlihan (2011) asserts, in most cases this dissemination and open access is ignored or not known about because it does not reach the contextual surroundings that inform practitioners (Jeanes & Lindsey, 2014). Overall, such knowledge is rarely filtered up or down or accessed in an industry-friendly way at the practitioner level, where its utility and validity would be most useful. It is clear that in concurring with Edwards (2015) and Kay's (2009) assertions a closer link between practitioner and academic knowledge remains a key priority for SFD.

2.6. *The irony of evidence-based policy*

The final contextual factor concerns the role of policy makers and funders and their influence on SFD in terms of the approaches to M&E that they expect. Coalter (2010) has identified that funders and/or donors often insist on addressing goals that may be out of kilter to specific contexts or local issues/needs. To be sure the drive and desire to gain funding can influence organisations such as charities, national sport organisations and other public sector organisations to make inflated promises in order to obtain funding. Two examples from the UK highlight this point. First, the devolved UK sport agency for England, Sport England, in its most recent funding allocation made to sport national governing bodies (NGBs), resulted in many of these NGBs making promises, concerning participation, community development work and aspects of social justice that they could not keep (Centre for Social Justice Report, 2011). Second, Smith and Leach (2010) have pointed to how School Sport Partnerships (a high school-based network created and funded by the UK government 2002–2010) gathered and used evidence in order to hit targets, tick boxes, and jump through hoops in order to meet government objectives irrespective of the impact on practitioners and/or the quality of that provision. Hayhurst (2009) makes a similar argument concerning the adoption of 'new managerialism' which has underpinned SFD's adherence to the millennium development goals which in aspiring to address issues of health, social capital and poverty reduction, reinforced the dominance of evidence as the

determinant of policy and practice. A point reinforced by [Jeanes and Lindsey's \(2014\)](#) commentary, who in their role of evaluating SFD projects in Zambia, highlighted the pressure on NGO staff to evidence anything other than a positive image of their particular project.

Certainly governments and arm's length bodies who impose unrealistic policy derived targets and goals on organisations and practitioners should be held to account. There should be no surprise that many find it extremely hard to provide the necessary evidence of meeting targets when the relevant preconditions for achieving those targets such as contexts and resources are not properly assessed ([Collins, 2010](#)). It may seem ironic that within the UK some of these problems have emerged, given that the former Labour government (1997–2010) was committed to a 'development through sport' approach in tackling social policy issues and its apparent use an evidence-based policy ([Green, 2009](#); [Houlihan, 2011](#); [Kay, 2009](#); [Solesbury, 2001](#); [Sullivan, 2011](#)). However, in practice the broader neoliberal consensus and more particularly the practice of NPM has ensured that what is measured or evaluated is that that can be measured, quantified and consumerised to enable those demanding evaluation to be satisfied. Nevertheless, whether the outcomes of such frameworks are ignored or not, as [Wilenski \(1988\)](#) argues, the narrowness of parameters can lead to further negative effects, particularly for those aspects that are not quantifiable, and it is worth remembering at this juncture that PIs are largely unable to capture quality ([Taylor, 2009](#)). Certainly the irony, in this respect, concerns the many intangible assets and traditional values that are ignored to the extent that 'They are devalued and discredited, portrayed as being unimportant, only of instrumental use, ignored, or treated as constraints and obstacles that organisations have to overcome' ([Diefenbach, 2009, p.900](#)). Consequently, practitioners may find themselves in the unenviable position of struggling to evidence policy goals that may well be unrealistic and over-ambitious.

It should be noted that we have deliberately polarised elements of the discussion to highlight the relative power positions of academics, practitioners, funders and stakeholders. In reality, and as we have tried to show, relationships between the many actors are likely to be significantly more nuanced than can be presented here. The key point being that relationships of power exist and are exacerbated by the structure and organisation of practices designed to produce evidence of (usually) success.

The next section uses a Foucauldian analysis to examine the power and knowledge dynamics of the vested interest groups involved in the shaping of this evidence discourse.

3. Power dynamics, vested interest groups and the construction of the 'lack of evidence' discourse

The interrogation of the lack of evidence discourse also reveals it to be a centralising construct that locates evidence as part of strategic management accountability where individual actors become subject to a 'centralised control over strategy and policy' ([Hogget, 1996, p.9](#)). A subsequent problem of this process concerns the extent to which the emergence of such a centrally-located discourse constrains or stimulates progress in the field. In short the question is whether some approaches to evidence are privileged over others and the extent to which they really capture what is taking place within real life settings?

3.1. A Foucauldian lens

To make sense of how certain forms of knowledge are considered legitimate, when others are not ([Nicholls et al., 2010](#)), the ideas of [Foucault \(1972\)](#) are used as thinking tools in order to consider how power in the process of M&E enables and/or constrains the privileging and legitimising of particular knowledge. Particularly influenced by Nietzsche, Foucault argued that people did not 'have' power implicitly but that power is an action which individuals can engage in ([Barth, 1998](#); [Foucault, 1973, 1982](#); [Ransom, 1997](#)). He contended that power cannot be possessed, but it can be exercised and when exercised, typically, its impact will provoke a resistance. Certainly [Nicholls et al. \(2010\)](#) highlight the devaluing of voices and the production of resistance, arguing that 'central to Foucauldian theory is an examination of the influence of power on knowledge production and the ways in which relations of power shape the production, marginalisation or valorisation of different forms of knowledge' (2010, p. 4). Discourses then, such as the lack of evidence discourse, legitimise certain regimes of truth, meaning and knowledge. [Dennison and Scott-Thomas \(2011, p. 29\)](#) argue that discourse is 'a consistent set of ideas that people use to navigate social life and make sense of their experiences [and includes] the unwritten rules that guide social practices, produce and regulate the production of statements and shape what can be perceived and understood'. Acceptable forms of evidence, and approaches to generating that evidence, may therefore be shaped by discursive formations that are underpinned by those who regulate what is acceptable in evaluation practice. Foucault however, opposed to structuralist accounts, argued that it is illogical to assume that power will somehow be possessed by certain people and not held, in any way, by others. Instead, Foucault argued that power is something which can be deployed by particular people in specific situations, which itself will produce other reactions and resistances and is not tied to specific groups or identities ([Danaher, Schirato, & Webb, 2000](#); [Ransom, 1997](#)). Thus in a Foucauldian sense, power is everywhere, and is derived from people's empowerment or disempowerment by, and through, the groups to which they belong. It follows therefore that the lack of evidence discourse itself, entails a series of discourses that reflect and embody the varying interest groups and power dynamics involved in M&E. To be sure, discourses do not act in isolation, but interact and intersect with each other creating further constructions that enable power to be used in different ways ([Mwaanga, 2011](#)).

3.2. Which discourse is most dominant?

There are many vested interest groups, such as funding organisations, government departments, academics, and practitioners that each has a significant role in shaping the discursive formations of evidence. There is a clear power hierarchy, with governments in particular likely to have ideological, conceptual and/or structural parameters within which they will seek to exert power and hence frame what they might consider suitable and appropriate approaches to evidence. Similarly, funding agencies like national and international sport organisations, charities and NGBs are likely to interpret what might be considered evidence on the basis of who it is for, its purpose and how that evidence can be known. Academics are also privileged; first via their power to define, articulate and control discourse elements through academic output; and second, through the commissioning of reviews and evaluations which produce large amounts of empirical evidence. A further irony is that much of this evidence is subsequently ignored, when dominated by qualitative data, by governments (Houlihan, 2011). Within this hierarchy of power there is also an emerging actor group of private consultants who are able to challenge the academic model of knowledge production and retention. Interestingly it also appears that the consultants may be those who have themselves emerged through and from SFD (Levermore, 2011); the spread of Edusport, a Zambian SFD organisation, to incorporate Go Sisters and have international influence in the UK is testament to this process (Mwaanga, 2011). However, it should be borne in mind that while it may appear that a hierarchy of power exists this may not necessarily be the case, for as Foucault (1972) argues it is difficult to identify who might be responsible for promoting or controlling particular discourses because they work anonymously through various human interactions.

Like Nicholls et al. (2010), we argue that sport development practitioners have a limited voice in the discursive formation of evidence and to date have been unable to challenge dominant approaches to evidence. In part, this is because the voices of those who deliver programmes at the operational level are neither fully understood nor explored. Based on a Foucauldian view, it is surely the case that SFD practitioners lack power as they do not shape nor valorise knowledge, and reflexively this inability to impart influence confirms their position as marginal power brokers in the field of SFD. Many of the approaches to evaluation, coming from the evidence discourse, privileges the funders, policy makers and a scientification of what can (and should be) considered evidence (Nicholls et al., 2010). There are many prescriptive evidence approaches that practitioners are expected to follow without sufficient resource or time afforded to develop their competencies to fulfil such a role. In the UK, for example, every County Sport Partnership (CSP), currently has rigid performance targets that, is subject to the formulaic gathering of evidence that services the needs of public accountability authorities (Taylor, 2009).

3.3. Situating and creating alternative discourses

Within this Foucauldian framework, Dennison and Scott-Thomas (2011) argue that discourses can be seen as truths that influence individuals' social practices, shaping what they perceive and understand. Under the guise of evidence, the discourses of evidence and common language surrounding the approaches to M&E may be accepted as truth and as the correct way to do things. However, this does not necessarily mean that SDP's should adopt them. As Denison and Scott-Thomas (2011, p. 29) suggest, truth is open to interpretation and any discourse can be contested. Indeed, Foucault's mistrust of rationality led him to consider that discourses are never real, but are socially constructed ways within which we can know about ourselves, our bodies and human practices (Barth, 1998). On a critical level, practitioners within the SFD field could be encouraged to adopt and view Foucault's examination of truth as a way to question the very discourses that influence the way they perceive and carry out M&E. Perhaps, the constraining approaches and scientific approaches to evaluation in SFD which tend to be accepted as truth can be resisted. In the same way that Foucault wanted to raise critical awareness of the self (Dennison & Scott-Thomas, 2011) it is possible to ask whether SDPs have the capacity to generate their own discourses of evidence or indeed whether these discourses of evidence may already exist? For Foucault power is viewed as a resource and is subsequently available to individuals in their everyday life, and is hence not the static preserve of particular privileged groups or individuals, hegemonically and ideologically maintained through power relations. In this regard while academia and possibly private consultants (Jeanes & Lindsey, 2014) may have a privileged voice in the formation of evidence, it simultaneously represents a less dominant alternative discourse that has little power to influence policy-makers (for a useful elaboration of Foucault's approach to power see Ransom, 1997). Thus large amounts of empirical evidence, produced by academics, are often ignored, particularly when dominated by qualitative data, by policy-makers, governments and other public accountability organisations (Houlihan, 2011). This situation rings true across many different aspects of social policy delivery, and hence an ability to wield and/or use power does not always remain constant for particular interest groups and the discourses they represent.

According to Foucault; 'Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere' (Foucault, 1978, p. 93). To what extent counter discourses can emerge is clearly contextually contingent and requires further investigation. However, work by Piggitt, Jackson, and Lewis (2009) with senior policy makers in New Zealand indicated that while people are constrained by discourses they are also active in crafting different ways of knowing via their harnessing of knowledge. Nicholls et al. (2010) empirical work is supportive of this view, with many of the practitioners they engaged with expressing their own views concerning the right and proper evidence base for evaluating their programmes (despite them being constrained and subjugated). It is clear then that discourses may be dominant, emergent, resistant and even transgressive. Indeed if, as Foucault advocates that power is everywhere then discourse formation is possible in virtually any setting and it is the relative power that a discourse is able to acquire and sustain that then becomes the key factor.

Consequently, it is important that in this respect policymakers should acknowledge discourses of perceived truth at the practitioner level. As street level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980) implementing policy at the sharp end, SDPs are experiencing and interpreting social change on their own terms, creating what might be referred to as an SDP discourse of truth that promotes the power of sport as facilitating social change. In the case of a football charity based in the UK, in addition to the external academic evaluation commissioned by Comic Relief (Coalter & Taylor, 2010), researchers noted that practitioners were also constructing and developing their own evidence of programme impact and learning (Lindsey & Harris, 2013). This suggests that SDPs are not disengaged from evidence production, but rather may value the idea of producing evidence as part of a process of programme learning. It is therefore important to recognise the existence of potential counter-discourses among SDPs on the ground, because this can influence power and knowledge within those contexts and have implications for the way evidence is captured. The use of a Foucauldian lens requires more empirical investigation to explore the dynamics and shaping processes within these counter-discourses which align neatly with the ontological foundations of SFD.

3.4. *The docile practitioner?*

The acceptance of multiplicity and perseverance of power sources, which are complicit in the genesis of counter discourses, also prefigures a brief examination of Foucault's conceptualisation of the docile body to help explain why particular power and knowledge dynamics assert dominance over others leading to particular discourses of truth and norms. Through their case study of coaching, Dennison and Scott-Thomas (2011) suggest that pervasive use of systems of surveillance produce normalised individuals who have internalised mechanisms of constraint who subject themselves to self-surveillance. It is not an unreasonable statement to suggest that SDPs may adopt the very same approach to ways in which they engage with M&E, raising some interesting issues concerning what Lukes (2005) has referred to as 'willing compliance' in terms of how an SDP will and whether this subsequently empowers them. For the sport development practitioner, the disciplined and rigorous processes of evidence they are subjected to, by funding agencies and the approaches to M&E they enforce, may clearly influence their own approaches to evidence in the future because it is something they see as the norm and acceptable to those who hold power. This then becomes the dominant discourse for them influencing their own practice and how they influence others to carry out M&E. It might well be enlightening to examine the processes employed by a SDP in operationalising M&E within a programme if there were no predefined targets, outcome measurements or prescribed M&E procedures to follow. To what extent practitioners are docile bodies, and represent dominant or alternative discourses are open to debate. This is an area that is in significant need of more interpretivist approaches to research with practitioners regarding their relationship and view of evidence. At present, with the exception of some publications and attention given towards sport development practitioners (e.g., Boyce & Smith, 2011; Boyce, Smith, Mead, & Morris, 2008; Houlihan, 2011; Piggin et al., 2009) the world of the sport development practitioner is an unknown terrain. With the exception of Nicholls et al. (2010) deeper insight into this terrain within the context of evidence is even less understood particularly from a UK perspective to understand, the construction, contestation, and acceptance of certain discourses. While sport development practitioners are commonly involved and interviewed within research, quite often this is done to merely examine and critique the implementation of programmes or other significant areas of sport development such as partnerships, social capital or issues concerning sustainability. Ultimately, one might suggest that practitioners are used as gatekeepers or pawns to establish deeper insight into the goings on within the field of sport (and) development whereby research is carried out on, rather than with, them. Research adopting a Foucauldian lens would shed an interesting light upon whether practitioners constitute docile bodies or alternatively shape and value alternative discourses towards evidence.

For instance, what evidence do they produce in their work and why? Do they embrace the need for evidence or do they resist it? What is their interpretation and understanding of evidence and do they feel disconnected from the discursive constructions of what constitutes acceptable forms of evidence? What would follow is a deeper understanding of the discursive formations underpinning and influencing the evidence discourse. If the field is to move forward, a greater understanding is required as these are the people who see the day to day running of their programmes, initiatives, contexts and environments.

4. Conclusion

This article has analysed the mechanisms by which power and knowledge concerning M&E within SFD, are shaped by the lack of evidence discourse. Indeed in outlining the lack of evidence discourse it is clear that power to shape the conditions within which individuals can discursively create their own knowledge is wielded and constrained by a range of vested interests. In addressing the key questions set out at the start of this article it is apparent that the lack of evidence discourse is a dominant narrative that is beginning to give rise to counter-discourses that are constructed by resistance. Whether any counter course will be empowering is a question for further empirical research. Establishing a Foucauldian framework within which to frame the argument also highlights the importance of the neoliberal context to understanding how evidence may be produced and interpreted. It is clear that neoliberal inspired modernisation discourses have ensured that market orientated disciplines, such as NPM, have dominated the contexts and frameworks that SFD operates within.

Unpacking the lack of evidence discourse provides a more nuanced view of M&E as a process embedded in particular social, cultural and political contexts that is riven with power differentials from vested interest groups to funders and other privileged groups such as academics (Kay, 2009; Nicholls et al., 2010). Furthermore the one-size fits all dimension of neoliberalism in privileging and legitimising quantitative measure of evidence does not, and cannot, account for the nature

of SFD interventions. These interventions are complex and difficult to measure, not because they have been designed as such, but because they are overwhelmingly focussed on the human condition. The deeper Foucauldian interpretation of the evidence discourse employed here arguably facilitates a view of the SDP as alienated and subjugated. A consequence has been the depiction of the SDP as a docile body accepting and carrying out evidence in line with the dominant discourse. However, the dominance of vested interest groups does not represent a structural and hierarchal manifestation of power; rather counter discourses promoted by alternative evidence may be a manifestation of SDP reaction to being subjugated by dominant discourses and actors. It is clear therefore that counter-discourses can emerge, however it is the relative power that a counter-discourse can acquire which becomes the key factor. Whether the field can move forward will depend on stakeholders and actors being able to establish an empowered context that adopts approaches to M&E that meet the needs of all vested interest groups and one that resists or provides an alternative to the neoliberal orientated dominant approaches (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011), to sport development in all its guises, that are currently preferred. This would mean greatly empowering practitioners so that their voices and the discourses they generate are heard alongside those of funders, policy makers and accountability organisations (Taylor, 2009).

A necessary starting point for addressing the issues identified in this paper would be a deeper examination of the evidence dynamics at a practical level. Empirical research that involves and engages with practitioners may enable a spotlight to be shone on practices and landscapes of the street level bureaucrat in the SFD field. Finally, responsibility and accountability must also be taken by funders and governments given the way that SFD is used and promoted. Without a doubt the emergence of the lack of evidence discourse is due, in part, to a common acceptance of a dominant view that elevates sport to that of a panacea by those who are able to use power effectively (Kay, 2009), and in part to there being an array of different approaches to M&E that alienate and disenfranchise sport development practitioners. Certainly SDPs seem to be viewed as incompetent or unable to carry out effective M&E and are often removed from the process of conducting such work. These processes reinforce and buttress the power dynamics that swirl around M&E and highlight how vitally important human elements in delivering sport opportunities can become so alienated from such a crucial component of SFD.

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