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How PAR Helps Us Reveal the Local Delivery Of A National 'Brand'

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Abstract: Positive Futures is a project, which uses sport to engage with socially marginalised young people. It aims to have a positive influence on participants' lives by widening horizons and providing access to new opportunities, steering young people towards education, training and employment.

Existing research struggles to provide much 'hard' evidence that such interventions have a significant impact and what evidence is available tends to come from internal assessment or isolated evaluation and is often overly quantitative. Our Case Study Research Project adopts a long term, qualitative, evaluative framework in order to assess the impact, organisational and process elements of interventions. Our research is committed to a Participative Action Research approach, which is collaborative and characterised by a dynamic relationship between theory and practice. It engages those at the heart of the research in the design, analysis and use of findings and leads to the development of flexible, locally appropriate methods of enquiry, rather than externally defined, fixed methods of assessment. It utilises methods of enquiry located around the lived experiences of those involved with projects, which get behind the data that typically defines such neighbourhoods in the eyes of social policy analysts and commentators. Extensive low-key, but highly engaged, participant observation, has been conducted, to produce 'thick' descriptions (Geertz 1973) of organisational contexts and engagement strategies. We have also used a range of innovative, visually based methods to build up a rich sense of the backgrounds and everyday lives of the people we are working with.

Keywords: Participative action research, evaluation, young people, positive futures, organisational cultures.

1. Positive futures

Positive Futures (PF) is a national sports-based social inclusion programme, which was managed by the Home Office's Drug Strategy Directorate and has been operating since March 2000; more recently, the charity Crime Concern took over management of the project, with the Home Office retaining involvement. The central aim of PF is to:

'Have a positive influence on participants' substance misuse, physical activity and offending behaviour by widening horizons and access to lifestyle, educational and employment opportunities within a culturally familiar environment' (Home Office, 2003:6).

The PF ethos is centred on, for both young people and agencies, relationship building and improving networks. The Case Study projects are led by a range of agencies including sports clubs, local authorities and voluntary sector organisations and are located in three regional clusters; three in West Yorkshire, two on Merseyside and two in South London. They operate over areas varying in size from a small postcode area to an entire local authority. The research was commissioned to assess the impact, organisational and process elements of projects, looking not just at the distance travelled of participants, but also at the development of projects/partnerships. The benchmark for the assessment is the extent to which projects reflect the principles and objectives outlined in the PF strategy document *Cul-de-sacs and gateways* (ibid). What became clear early in the research is that the organisation of PF is essentially a locally negotiated enterprise? Whilst all projects involve partnership, the lead agency, its cultural style and its staff typically define their character. Some projects have responded positively to the *Cul de sacs* document, whilst others have not adopted the approach outlined in it, adhering instead to the agendas and ways of working of their own agencies.

The 5th European Conference on Research Methodology

2. Evaluating positive futures

Crabbe offers

'There has been a tendency in the past for people to see sport as a force for good in its own right, but there is very little if any evidence to show that this is true' (Guardian July 13, 2005).

The assumption that sport can facilitate positive behavioural characteristics in young people can be traced back to Victorian attempts to influence attitudes within British public schools to serve the needs of the Empire through the concept of 'Muscular Christianity' (Crabbe, 2000:382) with football, a staple of many PF projects, at times, viewed as 'the elixir of personal and social ills' (Walvin 1987:257).

PF draws on models developed in relation to broader crime prevention and reduction programmes (Nichols, 1997; Robins, 1990). Nevertheless existing research approaches have struggled to provide much in the way of 'hard' evidence that such prevention or treatment interventions have a significant impact on patterns of drug use or crime (Collins, 2002; Coalter, 1987). What evidence is available tends to come from internal assessment or isolated independent evaluation, is often overly quantitative, short term and does not clarify what causes measured reductions in drug use and offending behaviour. Projects are accustomed to measuring outputs such as 'number of young people referred' and 'accreditation obtained;' however, the more discrete *outcomes* that influence the outputs are less often recorded. In order to evaluate the success of the projects in achieving their core aims, the Home Office created a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework utilising a range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, including a lead agency survey, an audio-visual multimedia representation of the projects by young people, telephone interview surveys, project snapshots, a literature review and the Case Study Research.

3. The case study research

We contend that meaningful evaluation of initiatives such as those being examined here requires a methodological strategy that goes beyond simple quantitative analysis. It is only when the quantitative method, used sparingly, is utilised to support a qualitative approach that we can achieve an evaluation which communicates the social structures, processes, 'feelings' and context in which participants, including delivery organisations, find themselves, and, in turn, how they respond to such pressures. As such, the research attempts to ensure that the voices of participants and workers are at the heart of the evaluation, as without the active participation of stakeholders, evaluation is an empty procedure, which offers few benefits to fundholders and policy makers.

Our research is underpinned by a commitment to a Participative Action Research (PAR) approach. PAR is cyclical, moving between action and critical reflection, and seeks to bring together theory and practice in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of concern. It aspires to empower participants through this collaboration, by promoting the acquisition of knowledge to achieve social change, whilst attempting to circumvent traditional hierarchies associated with researcher/researched dichotomies. It is characterised by a dynamic, change oriented relationship between theory and practice, between 'academics' and 'practitioners,' since:

'Theory is essential in informing practice (praxis) [and, I would argue, vice versa]. Whatever the theory, it must be an emancipatory one.... hopefully, those in academe and those in the front line are working hand in hand' (Hall, 1988:336-7).

PAR is not just concerned with using participatory techniques within a conventional M&E setting. It is about rethinking who initiates and undertakes the research process and who learns or benefits from findings. It seeks to shift control of the planning and management of the research process in the direction of local stakeholders and away from senior managers and outside 'experts,' leading to the development of flexible, locally appropriate methods of enquiry rather than externally defined, fixed methods of assessment. In the context of an invitation from the national PF team, the projects were keen to be involved in the research, seeing it as a way of critiquing and improving their delivery. We set up initial meetings with key members of staff and began to build an outline of each project, how they were structured and how services were delivered. We also attempted to

communicate, at this early stage, what the aims of the research were, and it has been important throughout the research, to reiterate to staff that our presence is not one that is intended to inspect, but rather that we are active participants, attempting to aid the development of projects.

Despite high levels of engagement, our presence has regularly been misinterpreted. Staff and young people as evaluator, coach, assistant coach, student, PF official and researcher have referred us to. The research is itself a dynamic in the process of project delivery and despite our commitment to democratic forms of participation, we are not naive enough to fail to recognise the ways in which it can be mobilised as a management tool. Some senior staff view the reports which have been produced as potential tools for 'disciplining' organisations/workers, or have expressed disappointment that the research has not produced the kind of 'publicity material' they had hoped it might. To try to address such difficulties, we encourage projects not to individualise issues, but to work with partners, formulating and implementing plans to address them, and also help them to build on the positive work that the reports identify.

4. Research tools

We believe that the use of PAR here is the most appropriate research approach, as, because of the flexibility and complexity of PF work, we need a method and tools which are responsive, which allow us to explore sensitive, complicated areas of enquiry, an approach which can document idiosyncratic situated or local knowledge (Selby and Bradley 2003:122) The PAR approach reveals not the 'paper' version of projects which other evaluation has portrayed, but the 'lived' versions of projects, Williamson and Prosser usefully offering:

'The formal documentary life of mission statements, policies and procedures may contrast sharply with the informal private life of organisations' (2002:588).

As well as producing data which has more 'richness' than that associated with quantitative research, we believe that a sometimes intense investment by stakeholders in the research means that findings are more likely to be respected and acted upon than those provided by more distant, non negotiated research. This is one of the reasons that when we were asked to create a new M&E framework for PF, we developed it in consultation with projects, helping to create a framework which is embedded in the daily activities of projects, and one which is not in danger of becoming 'lost' when members of staff move on. 'To seek knowledge is to strike a bargain and what is purchased always has its price' (Locke 1989:5). PAR, of course, has its critics; however, I would argue that what those who experience unease with the Action Research (AR) approach see as vices, are actually virtues. Hammersley (2004:176) refers to the inherent instability of AR, labelling the attempt to embrace praxis and theoria internally contradictory (ibid. 167). However, such a standpoint is based on the belief in a false immersion/detachment binary and a privileging of theoria.

Concerns about researcher bias are also often used to criticise AR, disingenuous if one holds that:

'Any kind of science can be done as rigorous and systematic inquiry, just as any can be done as a careless or dishonest contribution to the pollution of knowledge' (Locke 1989:11).

A central plank of our research is the desire to affect change, the desire to lobby for more holistic provision for at risk young people, for a move from seeing them portrayed as being a risk to being *at* risk, believing that 'the field...cannot be considered in isolation from the social debate' (Hooley 2005:79). In fact, it is this, if you will, sometimes overtly political aim of AR that can help attract practitioners to such research and help to bind those involved to the implementation of mutually arrived at change. The mention of academic research with political aims can send some, outside and inside of academe, into apoplexy, with concomitant accusations that 'politics' lessens or negates the validity of research. This, others would argue, is a naïve standpoint, offering that, in any approach to research, we cannot convincingly claim to be able to divorce our 'political' from our 'professional' self. Perceptions of such 'bias', on a practical level, can be problematic. Whilst some workers have welcomed the research method and motivation, some of those considering themselves under scrutiny have attempted to exert control over the research. There are examples of researchers not being invited to key meetings, a threat to exclude a researcher from a project in

the wake of the publication of a report which an agency considered portrayed their work negatively and an outright refusal by some to accept that their ways of working run contra to the spirit of PF. Here, the research is perceived not as a tool for project development but as a threat, as it seeks to change the status quo at the local level (Locke 1989:4), with senior staff seeing findings as personal constructions and, therefore, value laden, rather than an assessment made using *Cul de sacs and gateways* as a yardstick. In such circumstances, we stress to practitioners the validity of the work, emphasising that the findings come not from snap shot observations, but in the wake of intimate, and long term, involvement with frontline and senior staff at their own and partner agencies, and from discussions with service users.

The methods used, low-key, but highly engaged, participant observer methods, help us to get behind the quantitative data that typically defines such projects in the eyes of social policy analysts, to understand the changes in the lives of people who have been touched by the projects. Extensive participation has been conducted in project offices and at sessions, in more informal 'social' locations inhabited by project staff, as well as in policy forums and conferences. This has enabled us to produce detailed 'thick' descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of the organisational contexts in which the work is situated, the engagement strategies employed, particular sporting practices and the social worlds that surround them.

We have sought to establish how individuals and groups talk about the place of sport within their lives and to account for the 'taken-for-granted' assumptions about how 'facts' and 'realities' come to be represented and the different ways in which communicative resources are used (Atkinson, 1990). Interviews with participants and project staff, as well as group discussions, have been conducted which were, in the main, loosely structured, in certain situations taking on the form of informal discussions rather than recognisable formal interviews or focus groups.

As the research has developed, we have engaged young people more directly in the work through the use of a range of innovative visually based methods, particularly with cameras and maps, as some young people can experience discomfort with traditional text as a means of documentation (Seabrook and Green, 2004:129). Some participants carried disposal cameras so they could take photographs of places they hang out and have fun, people they respect, places they would like to visit and places that are considered off limits locally. The approach has been embraced with great enthusiasm by some, though not all, participants who chatted with the researchers about what they intended to take pictures of and why those places and people mean so much to them.

The map work is valuable because of the impact of space on the social relations of young people. Space is deeply embedded within local knowledge, and localities are subjectively inhabited, with risk, danger and safety being part of the calculation young people use to negotiate it. We used large, colourful Ordnance Survey maps, talking through these maps with participants and workers, identifying familiar places to help young people locate them. For those who did not wish to engage in discussion, and indeed for those who did, young people were encouraged to stick coloured post its to the map, the colours representing ideas such as 'a place which is off limits' or 'a place where I play.' Discussion with young people gave insights into the reasons why, for example, they perceive certain areas as off-limits. In the case of the Bairstow project, for instance, space is tied intimately to issues of 'race' and drug territories, with young people's negotiation of local space being based on these.

These techniques have allowed us to engage in focussed conversation with young people about issues such as places of safety and danger, leisure spaces and respect for individuals, helping us to better imagine the lives of young people outside of PF, as well as to make links between PF activities and how they might impact on lives outside of the project and vice versa. The work can also demonstrate to local projects how participants, who may have an impact on their attendance at projects, perceive certain venues and activities. We have also identified participants and activities to track through the course of the research. These were selected to measure not just the distance travelled by individuals, but also the development of sessions and the projects as a whole, and reflect the research's aim to examine the impact, organisational and process elements of the intervention.

The turnover of young people attending projects has been problematic, in terms of our engagement with them. Whilst the ethos of PF is that young people should be able to engage for as long as they find the projects useful, some activities are time limited, some young people move out of project areas and others disengage with projects because their interest wanes. This means it has been difficult to measure the distance travelled by a substantial number of young people, but this difficulty is, in itself, a valuable finding about the structuring and engagement strategies of projects. The difficulty also demonstrates the gap between the national vision for long-term engagement with young people to create development pathways, and local delivery, which can be, focussed on short term outputs, reflective of the demands of other forms of funding which local agencies receive and of the cultures of those organisations.

Quantitative M&E work has not captured the complex and evolutionary nature of the projects and has not unearthed how local projects can mask their lack of engagement with the national vision for PF. The ultimate aim of the *new* M&E framework is for projects to monitor and evaluate the development of young people through qualitative means, which are embedded into the delivery of activities. Children's Services in England and Wales are measured against a number of outcomes outlined in the *Every Child Matters* policy framework. The five outcomes (be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being) will also be captured by the PF M&E approach, so the framework will not be viewed as a centrally motivated bureaucratic paper chase but rather as part of the core M&E work of local agencies, assisting projects to deliver against nationally required standards. Projects will be rated as 'low', 'medium' or 'high' risk, and feedback and advice will be provided to all projects on their performance. Those identified as 'high' risk may receive further visits from the national programme management team or Government Office, and will be assisted in addressing local issues, which have been identified.

We included an archival dimension in the research, focused on documentary sources relating to the role of sport in community development as well as surveying local archives to establish the social characteristics of project areas. This material has been used to situate the place of sports based social interventions within the social ecology of the project areas and to explore sport's relationship with particular regional histories and notions of neighbourhood.

5. Dissemination

Our approach to this area responds to the call to 'repudiate the vocabulary our opponents use' (Reason 2003:105). Although we do not view colleagues who employ different methodologies, or social policy analysts and commentators as 'opponents', rather as potential allies, we recognise the importance of language and dissemination in helping to refocus the debate, which takes place about such project neighbourhoods.

Hence, our dissemination strategy is aimed at reaching as wide an audience as possible, using evocative communication, which attempts to avoid muffling the voices of those, involved in the research. As well as attendance at conferences and seminars, publishing national and regional reports on a dedicated, and the Home Office's web site, we 'report' local findings, discussing these with projects and helping them to move towards implementation of recommendations. Rather than the delivery of a report at the end of the two year process, we work with practitioner colleagues to effect change as the research is happening, drawing on Chandler and Torbert's observation that such research is about timely action *in the present*, seeking to transform historical patterns into future possibilities (2003:135).

6. Conclusion

Dick offers that the participative, qualitative, action-oriented, and emergent nature of AR might be regarded as potential threats to rigour (1999). I have argued that each of these components can be drawn upon as a *source* of rigour, boosting the validity and efficacy of the research. Although the degree of change made by projects is not a measure of the validity of the method being used, the research *has* influenced project delivery and future evaluation of the initiative, as well as adding knowledge to a field where there is little in the way of systematic longitudinal examination of the impact of sports based social interventions. This challenges the claim that AR is contradictory,

unable to combine successfully the goals of bringing about change *and* generating knowledge (Hammersley 2004:175).

Another strength of our approach is that by giving centrality to the voices of those who implement and are the targets of projects, rather than to those who design such interventions, it has highlighted what can be massive variations between the 'paper' and 'real' versions of projects and between the national vision and the local reality. It is hoped that by working with projects in a collaborative manner, and by developing the new M&E framework with them, these gaps can be narrowed, both by assisting local projects to better understand national aims and objectives and to adapt their ways of working to attain these, and helping the national designers and drivers of the initiative to see what can be the benefits of implementing their vision with a local 'twist.'

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