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Two decades of youth sport policy research: an augmented scoping review and synthesis

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ABSTRACT

Research question: This article addresses the need to develop a comprehensive understanding of research on the formation and content of youth sport policies by presenting a review of studies across the period from 2000 to 2020. The review examined the scale and scope of these studies, collective research findings, and theoretical and methodological approaches utilised.

Research methods: Compatible approaches to research synthesis were utilised. Scoping review methods supported searching within 31 relevant journals. Scoping review techniques augmented by those of ‘meta-study’ were used to analyse the 71 articles that were identified through the review. The definition of youth sport policy research through inclusion/exclusion of articles was determined

Results and Findings: Youth sport policy research was dominated by studies in Europe and North America. There was also a predominance of qualitative methods, with studies being collectively limited in their utilisation of theory. Forty-four percent of studies examined policies focused on schools, with similar proportions (between 17% and 20%) addressing policies for welfare and safeguarding, community-based participation, and high-performance sport. Youth sport policy goals were often found to overlap and be influenced by other policy agendas, with health being a prominent policy concern.

Implications: Besides the need for a wider geographical spread, improved theoretical underpinning and expanding quantitative methods should be priorities for future youth sport policy research. Extending normative analysis and study of democracy and inclusion in youth sport policy-making should also be pursued, especially as young people appear commonly excluded from these processes.


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Introduction

Widespread interest in youth sport amongst a range of governmental and sport bodies has resulted in the publication of, what Green and Smith (2016, p. 3) describe as, an ‘avalanche’ of youth sport policies across different national and international contexts. These authors (introducing their Routledge Handbook of Youth Sport) indicate a range of drivers for this increasing policy interest, including concerns about the physical, mental, and social health of young people, changing patterns of young people’s participation in sport and physical activity, alongside ongoing beliefs about various positive outcomes that may come from involvement in youth sport. The orientation of such policies towards a particular age group makes them distinctive from other sport policies in that there are particular issues such as safeguarding that are particularly important and also as young people’s involvement in sport can span from informal to organised participation to competitive and high-performance sport. All of these features, together with the plurality of sporting and non-sporting stakeholders involved, make youth sport policy a particularly ‘crowded policy space’ (Houlihan, 2000).

The importance but also distinctiveness and scope of youth sport policies emphasises both the need and challenge of developing collective research understandings across this policy area. As yet, academic contributions bringing together understandings regarding youth sport policies are scarce, and those that exist tend to be specifically focused. Chapters under the banner of ‘*Politics and Policy in Youth Sport*’ in the aforementioned Handbook of Youth Sport, for example, are orientated towards specific studies (Coalter, 2016; De Bosscher et al., 2016; Ives et al., 2016) or existing articles (Sam, 2016) rather than encompassing wider bodies of work on youth sport policies. Alternatively, Kristiansen *et al.* (2018) edited collection on *Elite Youth Sport Policy and Management* offers different national case studies and international comparisons, but in a particular area of youth sport policy and without systematically reviewing research more widely. Identifying the scope of existing academic research on youth sport policy, and considering the extent of common and distinctive issues both internationally and across the spectrum of youth sport policy issues, is important to take stock of research in this important field and also to determine priorities for future research.

This article presents a review of academically-published research on youth sport policies published over the first two decades of the twenty-first century, from 2000 to 2020. The review had three specific aims:

- (1) To appraise the scale, scope, and gaps in peer-reviewed research on youth sport policies
- (2) To synthesise findings of peer-reviewed research on youth sport policies
- (3) To identify and consider the merits of theoretical and methodological approaches utilised in peer-reviewed research on youth sport policies

Review methodology

From the outset, the anticipated breadth of topics and research undertaken on youth sport policies led to the review drawing upon compatible approaches to research synthesis, rather than solely following a singular synthesis method. Searching for literature

drew on, but also augmented, scoping review methodologies suggested by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and Levac et al. (2010) which ensured that the approach adopted was systematic whilst also addressing particular aims of the review. Moreover, drawing on scoping review methodology enabled iterative development of methods of identifying and selecting studies across the review in response to emergent issues, an important consideration when no previous review of youth sport policy research has been published (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and Levac et al. (2010) recognise the initial importance of using research questions to inform the scope of the review, whilst not inhibiting breadth in the identification of potentially relevant studies. The aims of this review thus aligned with scoping reviews being inclusive of studies using different methodological approaches, but faced the limitation identified by Levac et al. (2010) that scoping review methodologies do not specify an approach to appraising the quality of studies to be reviewed. To address this, and seek studies recognised as being academically rigorous through peer-review, searching was limited to journals accredited by Clarivate on either their core Citation Index or Emerging Sources Index. Thirty-one journals on these lists were identified through their aims and objectives as being most likely to publish articles on youth sport policy due to their orientation towards sport policy, sport management, sport sociology, and sport and education.

Identification of potential articles within each journal did bring some variation in the procedure. As indicated in Appendix 1, search facilities on each journal's website were used where a comprehensive search facility was available, with the search in five journals also complemented by manual searching through full contents lists due to their limited website search functionality. A combination of terms was used in every search to look for *policy* or *policies* together with any of *youth* or *young* or *adolescent* or *child* or *education* or *school* or *junior* anywhere within the whole text of any article. Refining the scope of searching to identify only research articles (rather than book reviews or editorials) published in English in print issues through the period 2000 to 2020 led to the identification of 6233 articles for potential inclusion in the review.

Searching for articles supported refinement of the scope of the review (Levac et al., 2010) towards a definition of youth sport policy research as studies which:

specifically sought to contribute to understanding of the formation or content of policies that are directly orientated towards the engagement of young people (under the age of 18) in sport and physical activity.

The construction of this definition intentionally bounded the review in particular ways. First, the definition excluded a large proportion of identified articles which did not offer specific analysis of youth sport policies but only briefly mentioned policy documents or recommendations. A second implication of the definition was to focus the review towards research that analysed the creation or content of youth sport policies, rather than studies solely on the implementation or consequences of policies. A third key implication was to focus on policies 'directly orientated to young people's engagement in sport and physical activity'. This led to the inclusion of studies on general sport policies which included a focus on young people and also those on sport and physical activity in schools, whilst policies solely orientated towards either physical education or training of sport coaches (or teachers) working with young people were excluded from the review.

An initial stage of screening of all articles identified through searches was undertaken by the first author of this article. The complexities of the adopted definition of youth sport policy research meant that this initial screening examined article titles, abstracts, and whole text (if required). To ensure that articles were not missed, a liberal approach was taken with a total of 244 articles (differentiated by journal in Appendix 1) being initially included for subsequent consideration by multiple co-authors. In cases of co-authors making different recommendations on inclusion/exclusion, discussion was undertaken to seek consensus with a further co-author examining the article if any divergence on inclusion or exclusion remained. Through this process, a total of 71 articles were ultimately recognised as being focused on the formation and content of youth sport policy.

Achieving the synthesis aims of the review required augmenting analysis procedures for scoping reviews through additional use of the greater explanatory potential of ‘meta-study’.

Scoping reviews are recommended to utilise standardised forms by which similar information can be extracted from different sources and then collectively analysed. A spreadsheet form was initially used to extract core information for each article encompassing, such as, its geographical scope, organisational responsibility for researched policies, and research methods used (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010). More substantial analysis for each article then utilised a longer form encompassing details on the focus of the article, use of theory, data collection methods and analysis, findings on policy-making processes and orientation and content of policies. For consistency (Levac et al., 2010), initial comparison of analysis undertaken by all authors on a small subset of articles was undertaken, after which particular co-authors led on the analysis of an allocated proportion of remaining articles. Subsequent collation of analysis drew on the approach suggested for meta-study by Ronkainen et al. (2022) in which comparison of findings presented in articles was undertaken initially, followed by consideration of the underpinning use of theory and particular methods. All authors collectively contributed to and discussed this collation and comparison, which also enabled cross-checking of information extracted from articles.

Findings

Focus and scope of youth sport policy research

Perhaps responding to growth in policies oriented towards youth sport, academic studies identified in this field expanded considerably across successive five-year periods between 2000 and 2020. [Table 1](#) also presents a (non-exclusive) categorisation of studies by policy area with the greatest number of 32 studies focusing on policies associated with sport and physical activity in schools with broadly even coverage of policies towards child welfare and safeguarding, community-based participation, and high-performance sport and events respectively. Of the thirteen articles considering youth sport policies as part of studies of broader sport policies and governance, seven studies did so without cross-over with other identified topic areas.

Across other characteristics, clustered sets of articles were recognisable. Fifty-six of the 71 identified articles addressed youth sport policies in a single country, with over three-quarters of these focusing on either a European or North American country. Youth sport

Table 1. Scale and scope of researched youth sport policies.

Focus of Policies		Policy Ownership	Research Scale	Country / Region	Publication Years
Broader sport policy/ governance	13	<u>Governmental Institutions</u>	Global	3 <u>European countries</u>	2000-2005 7
Community-based participation	14	United Nations Institutions	2 International, non- comparative	3 United Kingdom (inc home nations)	22 2006-2010 12
High performance sport & events	12	Continental Institutions (i.e. EU)	2 Comparative International	7 Norway	7 2011-2015 23
School sport & physical activity	32	National Governments	41 Single country	56 Others	14 2016-2020 29
Welfare & Safeguarding	14	Sub-National governments	16 Non-specific	2 <u>North America</u>	
		<u>Sporting Federations /Institutions/Governing bodies</u>		<u>United States of America</u>	13
		International federations		Canada (inc Quebec)	7
		National Sport Council / National Olympic Committee		<u>Australasia</u>	
		National Sports Organisations (NSOs) / National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs)	4	Australia	5
		Other forms of national bodies for sport	3	New Zealand	4
		Sub-national NSOs/NGBs	2	Asia (total)	3
				Africa (total)	1

policies were most commonly researched in the United Kingdom (22 articles), with USA the next most prominently researched in 13 articles. Only seven studies compared youth sport policies across different countries, leaving significant scope for further comparative studies in the future. The commonality of country-specific studies was also reflected in the range of organisations that had ownership of and responsibility for the youth sport policies studied in the identified articles. National governments were the most common ‘owner’ of youth sport policies studied in 41 articles, with 16 articles also featuring research on youth sport policies under the purview of sub-national or devolved governments. Youth sport policies instigated by national or sub-national sporting institutions and organisations (e.g. national sports councils, sport governing bodies) were researched in 20 studies. Otherwise, as [Table 1](#) illustrates, there were far fewer studies of global or continental youth sport policies, although it is unclear whether the lack of such studies reflects particular research choices or constraints or, more broadly, an absence of youth sport policies at these levels. Nevertheless, the geographical and organisational clustering of research leaves significant scope for further research on youth sport policies in areas and types of organisations that are currently under-researched.

Collective research findings on orientation and content of youth sport policies

Interrogation of studies’ findings in this subsection is structured according to their orientation towards the different foci of youth sport policies identified in [Table 1](#), although relevant overlaps are recognised. Subsequently, the subsection also considers findings on mechanisms and instruments identified to achieve the variety of youth sport policy objectives.

Studies that examined overarching government sport policies identified that they commonly had a strong focus on young people as a particular target group relevant to the desired achievement of a range of wider social objectives. Policies across a range of country contexts were found to position sport in support of young people’s growth and development (Girginov, 2001; Green & Collins, 2008; Schut & Collinet, 2016), as a tool to mould character and raise good citizens (Støckel et al., 2010) as well as providing life skills with desirable carryover into adulthood (Shehu & Mokgwathi, 2007). Research on overall sport policies also identified prominent policy concerns with health, fitness, wellbeing, and rising levels of obesity amongst young people (e.g. Girginov, 2001; Green & Collins, 2008; Schut & Collinet, 2016). Alignment of specific community-based youth sport participation policies with health policy goals was also outlined in several articles across different country contexts (e.g. Collins et al., 2012 in England; Fusco, 2007 in Canada; Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011; Støckel et al., 2010 in Denmark, Norway, Sweden) as was also the case in articles focused on policies towards school sport and physical activity (e.g. Hernández & Pardo, 2020 in Spain; Horrell et al., 2012 in Scotland; Horton et al., 2014 in Queensland Australia; Lindsey, 2020 in England; Zhang & Yang, 2017 in Shanghai).

The policy focus on health was recognised to be connected with concerns regarding sedentariness and declining levels of participation in community-based sport and physical activity amongst young people in research in Canada (Fusco, 2007; Riehl et al., 2019), England (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011), Scandinavian countries (Skille, 2004; Skirstad et al., 2012; Støckel et al., 2010), and the USA (Chalip & Hutchinson, 2017). Studies

also identified that policy concerns regarding accelerating levels of drop out from organized sport during adolescence were connected to features of highly structured, competitive, and adult controlled sport programming (Chalip & Hutchinson, 2017; De Knop & De Martelaer, 2001; Riehl et al., 2019; Skille, 2004; Skirstad et al., 2012; Støckel et al., 2010). A cluster of articles on community-based sport policy in the UK and Scandinavian countries thus recognised a trend to consider unorganized and informal lifestyle sports for young people as viable means to address cross-cutting policy objectives and as alternatives to institutionalised, competitive, traditional sports (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011; McCormack & Clayton, 2017; Skille, 2004; Støckel et al., 2010).

Both similar trends and alternative critiques were identified in research on school sport and physical activity policies. Horton et al. (2014) specifically examined a shift in school sport policies in Queensland, Australia that sought to expand non-competitive opportunities to widen inclusion and participation. However, relatively few studies on school sport and physical activity policies were orientated towards either inclusion or extra-curricular activity, with exceptions being Flintoff (2008) on gender in English school sport policy initiatives, and studies of policies towards school sport fees and competitive balance in the USA (Heinze & Zdroik, 2018; Johnson et al., 2017). More commonly, various school sport and physical activity studies recognised tensions between curricular physical education and other policy agendas. Evans (2013), Horrell et al. (2012), and Wellard and Secker (2017), for example, argued that an increasing policy focus on health represented a narrowing of the physical education curriculum and wider educational objectives.

More generally, a weakened or weakening prioritisation of physical education in school-orientated policies was recognised across a variety of different country contexts (e.g. Chepyator-Thomson, 2014, in African countries; Fry & McNeill, 2011, in Singapore; Houlihan, 2000; Phillpots, 2013, in England; Penney, 2008, in Australia; Penney, 2017; Petrie & Lisahunter, 2011; Pope, 2011, in New Zealand). Research in these countries (see also Green & Collins, 2008; Houlihan & Green, 2006; Lindsey, 2020; Phillpots & Grix, 2014; Pope, 2014) and also in the United States of America (Jette et al., 2016) commonly identified government-funded school sport and physical activity policy initiatives were focused towards health goals or particular sport development objectives. Research on overlapping school and elite sport policies also critiqued how the latter impinged on educational priorities (Brown, 2015; Kårhus, 2016). Particular changes in educational systems to advance elite sport objectives were recognised through the instigation of specialist sport schools in England (Houlihan, 2000), sporting academies within schools in Singapore (Fry & McNeill, 2011) and changed regulations that allowed some schools to select by sporting ability in Sweden (Lund, 2014).

Specific research on high-performance youth sport policies was largely orientated to government and/or international governing bodies' sport policies imposed on national sport organisations. Research on government high-performance sport policies concerned funding and initiatives towards youth talent identification, development, and management in order to ensure elite sport success in the respective countries (e.g. Bjørndal et al., 2017, in Norway; Houlihan & Chapman, 2017, in England; Velenczei & Gál, 2011, in Hungary). In this respect, studies examined who and what is prioritised in these policies and found that government funded programmes mainly emphasised the quality of elite coaching and coach development, alongside aspects that stressed the

protection of the welfare of (young) athletes (Bjørndal et al., 2017; Houlihan & Chapman, 2017; Miah & Rich, 2006; Velencei & Gál, 2011).

Thirteen articles focused on welfare policies in youth sport. The majority of the policies studied were oriented towards child protection and safeguarding in sport, centring on various prominent forms of exploitation such as sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. Studies identified a common policy backdrop of high-profile cases of abuse (predominantly by adult sports coaches) in specific countries (e.g. Brackenridge, 2004 and Garratt et al., 2013, in England; Donnelly et al., 2016; Parent & Hlimi, 2013 and Rhind et al., 2013 in Canada) and, in one article, across Belgium and Netherlands (Vertommen et al., 2016). In adopting a global orientation, Kerr and Kerr (2020) and Rhind et al. (2017) also focussed on policies to protect children from forms of abuse in sport. Kerr and Kerr (2020) and Yilmaz et al. (2020) also considered other forms of exploitation, such as economic exploitation, abduction, and trafficking of young players by intermediaries in the football industry; practices which also rendered them susceptible to the forms of maltreatment stated above.

The mechanisms by which policies, and policy-makers, sought to achieve policy objectives were recognised in articles across different youth sport policy topic areas. Besides funding for particular initiatives, a number of studies identified the allocation of organisational responsibilities as constituting means by which policy-makers sought to achieve their goals. In respect of school sport policies, for example, Phillpots and Grix (2014) recognised increased government influence and control of organisations in England, and Horrell et al. (2012) also identified the influential creation of a new policy taskforce as part of policy processes in Scotland. Furthermore, comparative studies of the USA and Netherlands (Pot & van Hilvoorde, 2013) and France and Spain (Hernández & Pardo, 2020) are particularly notable in recognising how national youth sport policy initiatives had different orientations according to institutionalised structures of schools and sport organisations in the different countries.

Clusters of studies considered the use of regulations and target setting as identified instruments in youth sport policies. Støckel et al. (2010, p. 632) recognised that, across Scandinavian countries, regulation of youth sport to protect children from perceived 'damaging aspects of adult sport' varied by degree with Norway imposing the strictest forms of mandatory regulation across all sport organisations and Denmark enacting comparatively less regulation. In school-orientated policies, measures and targets for participation and, especially, time allocations for physical education were a commonly identified policy instrument across multiple countries (e.g. Fry & McNeill, 2011, in Singapore; Burceson et al., 2003; Lu & Heinze, 2019, in USA; Horrell et al., 2012; Marsden & Weston, 2007; Phillpots & Grix, 2014, in the United Kingdom; Zhang & Yang, 2017, in China). Such measures were recognised as being incorporated into law in France (Hernández & Pardo, 2020), New Zealand (Pope, 2014) and the state of Texas (Cooper et al., 2016), although the lack of regulatory mechanisms to ensure implementation was mentioned where daily and weekly allocations for physical activity in schools were mandated in Queensland (Horton et al., 2014).

Collective research findings on policy-making processes and influences

Understanding policy-making processes and influences is a key aspect of sport policy analysis that Houlihan et al. (2009) identified as requiring further academic attention,

both for its intrinsic importance and also to inform work to contribute to sport policies in practice. However, only a small number of studies were identified that primarily focused on policy-making for youth sport, although other articles indicated a range of influences on policy-making for youth sport as part of wider research. A relatively small proportion of articles, reported in this section, were specifically oriented towards offering proposals for future youth sport policies.

A commonly recognised issue was the differential influence of overlapping policy priorities both within the field of youth sport and in terms of ‘spillover’ from other policy sectors. Multiple articles from North America, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom described the difficulties of reconciling twin policy agendas of sport-for-all with those of elite sport, which consequently had implications for youth sport policy-making (Chalip & Hutchinson, 2017; Chalip & Philip Scott, 2005; Collins et al., 2012; De Knop & De Martelaer, 2001; Houlihan, 2000; Riehl et al., 2019; Skille, 2004; Skirstad et al., 2012; Støckel et al., 2010). Spillover from, and trade-offs across, wider policy priorities was also especially highlighted as being influential on policies towards sport, physical activity, and physical education in schools. This was most broadly demonstrated in Fry and McNeill’s (2011) temporal account of how Singapore’s changing national context and policy priorities have shaped PE and school sport policies through different periods of the country’s development. More specific contemporary studies in England (Evans, 2013; Jung et al., 2016) and Norway (Kårhus, 2016) particularly showed how national priorities for development of elite sport came to be key drivers in policies for PE and sport in schools. Broader education priorities were also found to shape PE and school sport policy with it either becoming marginalised as priority was given to traditionally core subjects of reading, writing, and mathematics (Pope, 2011, 2014, in New Zealand) or incorporated as a potential contributor to wider educational policy goals (Houlihan & Green, 2006; Johnson et al., 2017). Health, and specifically policy concerns with obesity, was also identified (e.g. by Petrie & Ishaq, 2011; Wellard & Secker, 2017 and Horrell et al., 2012) as an increasing driver of policies towards sport and physical activity in schools.

Influences on youth sport policy as a result of organisational and stakeholder networks also came to the fore prominently. In France, for example, the impact of decentralisation and the changing nature of relationships within the state (with local authorities able to convey their own policies) has made co-ordination of multiple youth sport policy goals especially problematic (Schut & Collinet, 2016). Other studies recognised the power, or lack thereof, of particular coalitions of stakeholders; Kårhus (2016) identified how the ‘power and social position of elite sport networks’ in Norway influenced the development of school sport policies, and Phillpotts (2013) in England recognised how a tight ‘insider coalition’ from government departments and a single youth sport charity dominated youth sport policy-making. In the context of sport policy in the UK, Devine (2018) found that unequal political participation and representation led to male activity preferences receiving disproportionate funding compared to those of females. Whereas such studies suggested that the influence of different stakeholders on youth sport policies may be a ‘zero-sum’ game, Johnson et al.’s (2017) research on competitive balance policies for schools in the United States indicated that the establishment of representative committees had the potential to defuse different political agendas even

if they did not entirely eliminate attempts by private school stakeholders to protect their interests through threatening legal action.

A small number of articles also recognised how socio-cultural beliefs and values of wider groupings of stakeholders also influenced youth sport policies. Bjørndal et al. (2017) identified that wider ‘cultural values and societal norms’ in the Norwegian voluntary sport movement –combined with self-interest, competition, and collaboration between stakeholders – influenced the policy approach towards talent identification in handball. Johnson et al.’s (2017) research in the United States also found that key administrators and policy-makers relied on personal philosophies, which were often centred on equity and fairness, to guide their own policy decisions at state level regarding competitive balance in school sport competitions. Heinze and Zdroik (2018) further identified that ‘culturally distinct’ community beliefs about the value of extra-curricular sport led to divergence from increasingly prevalent policies towards charging school sport participation fees. However, a further set of articles from the United States also indicate struggles in policy-making due to the prevalence of competitive orientations amongst students and parents (Johnson et al., 2017), coaches (Chalip & Hutchinson, 2017), and clubs (Chalip & Philip Scott, 2005).

The importance of specific individuals in policy-making for youth sport was also highlighted by a small number of articles, many of which considered policy changes in PE and school sport in England at different times. Houlihan and Green (2006) highlighted that possibilities for change in PE and school sport policy emerged through the interest of high-level politicians, including particular Prime Ministers. Furthermore, the activities of various individual ‘policy entrepreneurs’ were recognised to be influential in bringing about and negotiating new policies for English PE and school sport at different times (Houlihan & Green, 2006; Lindsey, 2020; Phillpots, 2013). Interestingly, the temporal specificity of particular individuals’ policy influence was a point of commonality with Heinze and Zdroik’s (2018) study which found that changes in school sport policy in a particular district in the United States came about when a retiring key administrator refocused attention towards removing participation fees.

Conversely, the common exclusion of young people from decision-making processes for youth sport was a notable theme spanning research in Canada (Fusco, 2007), England (Devine, 2018; McCormack & Clayton, 2017; White et al., 2019), Norway (Strittmatter, 2016; Waldahl & Skille, 2016), and the USA (Chalip & Philip Scott, 2005). Research from England (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011; McCormack & Clayton, 2017) suggested that increased recognition from policy-makers contributed to lifestyle sports being a potential tool for youth engagement in sport policy-making processes. Indeed, it was emphasised that garnering ‘buy-in’ from young people as ‘active agents’ in processes of community planning requires commitment from local policy-makers to make existing processes more accessible (McCormack & Clayton, 2017)

Broader influences on youth sport policies included approaches and reforms to national systems of governance. The effects of transitions from communism were highlighted in articles on Hungary and Bulgaria. While Velenczei and Gál (2011) recognised accompanying scaling back of school and voluntary infrastructure supporting talent development policies in the former country, Girginov (2001) acknowledged the continuation of centralised state dominance of policy approaches in Bulgaria. In a variety of other contexts, neo-liberal reforms in education were recognised as shaping policies

towards PE and school sport (Chepyator-Thomson, 2014 across African countries; Jette et al., 2016 in the United States; Pope, 2014 in New Zealand). Similarly, in both Sweden and Norway, Lund (2014) and Kårhus (2016) respectively recognised how increased marketisation and competition in education systems contributed to shifting priorities towards elite sport in schools.

Most broadly, a small number of articles examined how global and international factors shaped youth sport policies. Sakka and Chatzigianni (2012) recognised embryonic stages of what they termed as the ‘Europeanisation’ of youth sport policies in Greece. In regard to youth high-performance sport, Shehu and Mokgwathi (2007) identified how learning from other countries including South Africa was a central part of policy development in Botswana. Brown and Connolly (2010) also undertook a comparative study of female elite sport laws and policies, including those related to youth talent development, which found that the impact of IOC mandates towards gender equity was mediated by existing national laws and systems in each of four contrasting countries.

It was at international level that articles specifically concerned with welfare and safeguarding were distinctively normative in advocating improvements for youth sport policy-making. Such articles were commonly informed by a human rights perspective and drew attention to the limitations of overarching international regulatory frameworks. Articles encouraged global, international and national sports governing bodies to incorporate facets of the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child and human rights concepts to improve policies to safeguard children from harm when participating in sport (Kerr & Kerr, 2020; Rhind et al., 2013; Rhind et al., 2017; Yilmaz et al., 2020). Yilmaz et al. (2020) for example, proposed that all planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of regulations concerning the recruitment and transfer of young people in professional football should be explicitly informed by globally-accepted standards of children’s rights, such as the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (Yilmaz et al., 2020). Similarly, Kerr and Kerr (2020) proposed the creation of an international surveillance and governance system to promote athlete welfare by standardising existing interventions beneath the international level. Calls to standardise practice were also evident in articles focused at a national level (particularly in Canada), with Parent and Hlimi (2013) advocating the adoption of a regulatory body equivalent to the UK Child Protection in Sport Unit, and Donnelly et al. (2016) advocating for a national pool of harassment officers.

Theoretical underpinnings of youth sport policy research

Table 2 indicates both theoretical and methodological approaches identified in all articles. Generally, theory has been under-utilised in youth sport policy research. Less than half of the identified articles (32 of 71) described any theoretical underpinning, and utilisation of theories within these articles varied in depth and quality. Theoretical eclecticism was evident with 21 articles featuring theories that were only used in one or two of the full set of articles reviewed. Only one author (Kathryn Heinze) used the same theory in more than one article. Such eclecticism may positively represent diversity with researchers utilising specific theories relevant to particular research, but it may also be indicative of a research field which lacks some coherence and has yet to collectively build on theoretical insights over time. There was, however, something of a broad

Table 2. Features of youth sport policy research articles.

Author & Year	Policy Focus Category ¹	Explicit use of theory	Named theory used ²	Methodological Orientation			Methods & Data				
				Empirical		Analytic Commentary & Position Paper	Documents	Interviews	Survey	Secondary Data	Other
				Qual. Methods	Quant. Methods						
Bjørndal et al. (2017)	HPS&E	✓	'Ecology of Games' theory	✓			✓	✓			
Brackenridge (2004)	BSP&G; W&S					✓					
Brown and Connolly (2010)	HPS&E			✓			✓				
Brown (2015)	HPS&E; SS&PA					✓					
Burceson et al. (2003)	SS&PA				✓				✓		
Chalip and Hutchinson (2017)	C-BP			✓							Observations Action research Observations
Chalip and Philip Scott (2005)	C-BP			✓			✓	✓			
Chepyator-Thomson (2014)	SS&PA					✓					
Collins et al. (2012)	C-BP; HPS&E					✓					
Cooper et al. (2016)	SS&PA					✓					
De Knop and De Martelaer (2001)	BSP&G; C-BP	✓	van Bottenburg's Theoretical Quality Model	✓			✓				
Devine (2018)	C-BP	✓	Critical feminist political and economic theory	✓			✓				
Donnelly et al. (2016)	W&S				✓		✓				
Erwin et al. (2014)	SS&PA			✓			✓				
Evans (2013)	SS&PA					✓					
Flintoff (2008)	SS&PA			✓			✓	✓			

Fry and McNeill (2011)	SS&PA				✓		
Fusco (2007)	C-BP	✓	Foucault	✓			✓
Garratt et al. (2013)	W&S	✓	Foucault		✓		✓
Gilchrist and Wheaton (2011)	C-BP			✓			✓
Girginov (2001)	BSP&G	✓	Strategic Relations Approach		✓		
Green and Collins (2008)	BSP&G	✓	Institutional Path Dependency	✓		✓	✓
Green (2006)	BSP&G	✓	Bevir & Rhodes' Interpretive Governance	✓		✓	✓
Heinze and Zdroik (2018)	SS&PA	✓	Institutional Theory	✓		✓	✓
Hernández and Pardo (2020)	SS&PA	✓	Crozier & Friedberg's Theory of Organised Action	✓			✓
Horrell et al. (2012)	SS&PA				✓		
Horton et al. (2014)	SS&PA	✓	Deleuze & Guattari's 'schizoanalysis'	✓		✓	
Houlihan and Chapman (2017)	HPS&E			✓		✓	✓
Houlihan and Green (2006)	SS&PA	✓	Advocacy Coalition Framework, Multiple Streams Framework	✓		✓	✓
Houlihan (2000)	SS&PA				✓		
Jette et al. (2016)	C-BP; SS&PA	✓	Foucault	✓		✓	
Johnson et al. (2017)	HPS&E; SS&PA	✓	Distributive Justice Theory	✓		✓	✓
Jung et al. (2016)	SS&PA	✓	Bernstein's 'theory of social construction of pedagogic discourse'	✓		✓	
Kärhus (2016)	HPS&E; SS&PA	✓	Bernstein's 'concepts of recontextualization rules and fields'	✓		✓	✓

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Author & Year	Policy Focus Category ¹	Explicit use of theory	Named theory used ²	Methodological Orientation			Methods & Data				
				Empirical		Analytic Commentary & Position Paper	Documents	Interviews	Survey	Secondary Data	Other
				Qual. Methods	Quant. Methods						
Kerr and Kerr (2020)	W&S	✓	Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory			✓					
Lindsey (2020)	SS&PA	✓	Punctuated equilibrium theory	✓	✓		✓	✓			
Lu and Heinze (2019)	W&S	✓	Institutional theory	✓	✓			✓		✓	
Lund (2014)	SS&PA			✓			✓	✓			
Marsden and Weston (2007)	SS&PA					✓					
McCormack and Clayton (2017)	C-BP	✓	Bourdieu's 'forms of capital'	✓			✓	✓			
Miah and Rich (2006)	HPS&E; W&S					✓					
Parent and Hlimi (2013)	W&S			✓			✓				
Penney (2008)	SS&PA					✓					
Penney (2017)	SS&PA	✓	Bernstein's 'recontextualizing fields' & Ball's 'policy enactment'			✓					
Petrie and Iisahunter (2011)	SS&PA					✓					
Phillpots and Grix (2014)	SS&PA	✓	'New' Governance Theory	✓			✓	✓			
Phillpots (2013)	SS&PA	✓	Advocacy Coalition Framework	✓			✓	✓			
Platts and Smith (2009)	HPS&E; W&S					✓					
Pope (2011)	SS&PA	✓	Murdoch's physical education and sport interface			✓					
Pope (2014)	SS&PA SS&PA					✓					

Table 2. Continued.

Author & Year	Policy Focus Category ¹	Explicit use of theory	Named theory used ²	Methodological Orientation			Methods & Data					
				Empirical		Analytic Commentary & Position Paper	Documents	Interviews	Survey	Secondary Data	Other	
				Qual. Methods	Quant. Methods							
White et al. (2019)	BSP&G; C-BP;	✓	Foucault's 'genealogical approach to relationships of power'	✓			✓					
Woolf and Swain (2014)	HPS&E; W&S		Kanter's homologous reproduction	✓	✓				✓			
Yilmaz et al. (2020)	W&S			✓			✓					
Zhang and Yang (2017)	SS&PA			✓	✓		✓					
Totals		32		43	8	26	37	25	3	2		5

¹Abbreviations used in this column are: BSP&G – Broader sport policy & governance; C-BP – Community-based participation; HPS&E – High performance sport & events; SS&PA – School sport & physical activity; W&S – Welfare & Safeguarding

²The representation of theory used in articles themselves is replicated in this column.

distinction across the literature with sociological theories more predominantly utilised to analyse the content of youth sport policies, whereas political science and policy analysis theories were more commonly used to examine policy-making processes.

Theoretical positions that emphasise the importance of discourse were, unsurprisingly, commonly presented in research that examined the content of youth sport policies. Many such articles drew on Foucault (Fusco, 2007; Garratt et al., 2013; Horrell et al., 2012; Jette et al., 2016; Shehu & Mokgwathi, 2007; Wellard & Secker, 2017), with Bernstein's theorisation of pedagogic discourse also underpinning research that considered policies associated with school sport and physical education (Jung et al., 2016; Kårhus, 2016; Penney, 2017). While theoretical links to discourse were commonly used to justify and contextualise studies of policy content, there were fewer studies in which theory was specifically utilised to inform analysis and interpretation of discourse in youth sport policies. Articles by Jette et al. (2016) and Penney (2017) represent high-quality exceptions in which theoretical concepts were integral to developing in-depth analysis of policy discourse, whilst other studies by Green (2006), Shehu and Mokgwathi (2007) and Strittmatter (2016) notably brought together their application of discourse analysis with additional theoretical perspectives associated with governance, post-structuralism, and neo-institutionalism respectively.

Amongst research that focused on policy-making processes for youth sport, there were clusters of studies with similar approaches to utilising theory. In the United Kingdom, a small set of authors utilised different meso-level theories of the policy process (Advocacy Coalition Framework, Houlihan & Green, 2006; Phillpots, 2013; Multiple Streams Framework, Houlihan & Green, 2006; Punctuated Equilibrium Theory, Lindsey, 2020) to examine PE and school sport policy over a collective period from the 1990s to 2010s. As a strength of this research cluster, the use of different theories to examine a particular policy issue in a single context adds to the richness of empirical explanations of youth sport policy. On the other hand, the absence of applications of such meso-level policy analysis theories to other youth sport policy issues and in other countries represents a gap to be addressed in the collective research base.

A further cluster of four articles presented research which applied insights from institutional theory to examine youth sport policy processes (Heinze & Zdroik, 2018; Lu & Heinze, 2019; Riehl et al., 2019; Strittmatter, 2016), with a fifth (Green & Collins, 2008) drawing a connection between institutional theory and policy path dependency. In these cases, the use of institutional theory enabled examination of the influences and pressures on policy-making organisations specifically, and the articles represented high-quality examples in which theory-informed analysis and interpretation of empirical data. That the four articles examined different youth sport policy issues – concussion legislation (Lu & Heinze, 2019), school sport participation fees (Heinze & Zdroik, 2018), proposals for local governance change in youth ice hockey (Riehl et al., 2019), and bidding for Youth Olympic Games (Strittmatter, 2016) – in different country contexts (USA, Canada, and Norway) speaks to the possibilities of further widespread application of institutional theory.

Other distinctive, if somewhat isolated examples, in the literature may also suggest new directions for theoretical development in youth sport policy research. Connecting with the earlier critique of young people being excluded from policy-making processes, future research could utilise particular theories in existing work on this issue; namely,

McCormack and Clayton's (2017) application of Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social capital, Waldahl and Skille's (2016) utilisation of corporatism and institutional thresholds, and White et al.'s (2019) consideration of Kanter's work on homologous reproduction. A different, yet similarly isolated, area for development is the application of normative theories to aspects of youth sport policy. In this regard, Kerr and Kerr (2020) draw on Bruno Latour's conceptualisation of the 'oligopticon' to offer proposals for an international athlete welfare surveillance system. Two other examples (Devine, 2018; Johnson et al., 2017) used normative theoretical conceptualisations of critical feminism and distributive justice respectively to analyse aspects of youth sport policies. While not explicitly recognised in these articles, the theories used in both align with broader bodies of work in political philosophy, the application of which is also largely absent in research on sport policy more broadly.

Methodologies used in youth sport policy research

Perhaps unsurprisingly given their focus on policy, a majority of articles presented data and information taken from documentary sources. Reviewing these articles indicated scope for improvements in use and reporting of documentary methods. Articles that the review classified as 'analytic commentaries and position papers', contained no explicit explanation of methods or data sources, yet many of these presented extracts from policy documents in support of their wider arguments. Examples of this included histories of policies in particular countries (Fry & McNeill, 2011; Waldahl & Skille, 2016) and comparisons across countries (Pot & van Hilvoorde, 2013). Authors of other such articles drew on policy examples with which they were familiar or from their previous research (Evans, 2013; Penney, 2008; Wellard & Secker, 2017) to pursue specific lines of argumentation. While some commentaries and argumentative positions offered on youth sport policies are of profound importance, the lack of explicit explanation of document selection and analysis limits the strength of their critique and consideration of their generalisability.

There was substantial variation amongst those articles that explained the use of documents as part of an explicitly empirical methodology. A small number of studies focused on analysis of a single policy document (e.g. Erwin et al., 2014; Shehu & Mokgwathi, 2007). Otherwise, most studies utilised multiple documents, although exact numbers and processes of document retrieval and selection were frequently unreported. There was diversity in the types of documents accessed and analysed. Ten articles analysed national government policy documents, complemented by those that analysed legislation (Brown & Connolly, 2010; Kårhus, 2016; Parent & Hlimi, 2013; Shehu & Mokgwathi, 2007), and parliamentary reports and debates (Lindsey, 2020; Skille, 2004). Other documentary sources spanned global sport organisations (Yilmaz et al., 2020), national sport organisation policies (Bjørndal et al., 2017; Donnelly et al., 2016; Erwin et al., 2014; Jung et al., 2016; Lindsey, 2020; Skirstad et al., 2012; Strittmatter, 2016; Waldahl & Skille, 2016), and local government (Fusco, 2007) and school board (Heinze & Zdroik, 2018) documents. Ten studies used newspaper articles, internet reports and social media which, in all cases, complemented specific analysis of policy documents. Some articles indicated the time periods covered by documents (e.g. Bjørndal et al., 2017; Jung et al., 2016; Lindsey, 2020; Velencei & Gál, 2011; Zhang & Yang, 2017), although specific comparison of policy documents over time was largely absent. Irrespective of these diverse

document-based approaches, the review indicates that future adoption of more standardised and detailed approaches to explaining document search and selection approaches would be beneficial to allow better appraisal of the rigour of these research methods.

Twenty-five of the 43 articles based on qualitative empirical research utilised interviews as a method, often in combination with other methods. For example, a range of studies utilised interviews to develop deeper insights on youth sport policies and policy processes after initial analysis of documents had been undertaken (e.g. Flintoff, 2008; Green & Collins, 2008; Heinze & Zdroik, 2018; Kårhus, 2016; Phillpots, 2013; Phillpots & Grix, 2014). There was, again, variation across articles in reporting the numbers of interviews undertaken and roles of interviewees, with Heinze and Zdroik (2018), Hernández and Pardo (2020) and Phillpots and Grix (2014) being exemplary for providing full lists of (anonymised) interviewee roles. Across the full body of studies interviewees included representatives of national governments and parliamentarians, national sporting bodies and, in more local research, individuals with responsibility for school sport. As a potential gap for future investigation, only three studies (Lu & Heinze, 2019; McCormack & Clayton, 2017; Woolf & Swain, 2014) specifically interviewed individuals who were purposively identified because of their advocacy activities in seeking to influence youth sport policies.

Beyond the predominance of interviews and documentary analysis, distinctive methods used in other articles offer valuable possibilities for future youth sport policy research. Observation of policy-making committees and meetings was undertaken by Strittmatter (2016) and Skille (2004) and two studies involved the same researcher being a participant in policy-making settings (Chalip & Hutchinson, 2017; Chalip & Philip Scott, 2005). Methods associated with forms of action research were undertaken with groups of participants by Chalip and Hutchinson (2017) and Rhind et al. (2017) in order to contribute to the development of policies. Schut and Collinet (2016) and Velenczei and Gál (2011) respectively combined analysis of policies with surveys of practitioners and athletes who were affected by them.

The extent of explanation of data analysis was a widespread limitation across the articles reviewed. Of the 46 articles that featured the use of empirical data, 24 contained no explanation of analysis procedures and explanations were highly limited in a further eight articles. Various approaches to data analysis were used in the remaining articles. Bjørndal et al. (2017), Lindsey (2020), Heinze and Zdroik (2018), Strittmatter (2016) and Waldahl and Skille (2016) undertook multi-stage data analysis processes, combining both theoretically-driven and more inductive analysis of qualitative data. Johnson et al. (2017), Rhind et al. (2017) and Riehl et al. (2019) represented good examples in explicitly seeking to demonstrate 'trustworthiness' and rigour through their explanation of qualitative analysis approaches. Besides studies that presented descriptive statistics (Burceson et al., 2003; Zhang & Yang, 2017), Lu and Heinze (2019) presented an isolated and high-quality example of quantitative analysis using inferential statistics to examine the influence of a range of factors on the adoption of concussion legislation in different American states.

Conclusions

This review assessed the scale, scope, findings, and theoretical and methodological approaches in existing research on youth sport policy, allowing for this conclusion to also indicate significant gaps and priority avenues for future research.

With young people being central within sport policies across the world, the review demonstrates the wide variety of the academic research on youth sport policy. The collective research consists of some connected clusters, for example PE and school sport policy research in the UK, safeguarding, the traditional and value-based policy process in Scandinavia as well as a number of discrete one-off articles in specific contexts. Otherwise, more research is required to develop a critical mass of studies in particular areas, such as community-based participation. Moreover, as the geographical spread of research is also highly clustered, building up studies in a wider range of countries is needed.

Analyses of the content of youth sport policies recognised the attention given towards the development of children in terms of health, physical and social aspects, linked to concerns regarding sedentariness and declining levels of participation in community-based sport and physical activity. In terms of school-oriented policies, a weakened or weakening prioritisation of physical education was commonly recognised in a variety of different country contexts. Talent development amongst young people was found to be a common policy concern in the high performance sport field. While many of these issues are long-standing ones, a small number of newer studies considered policy attention towards the rise of alternative and lifestyle sports. Inevitably, and importantly, policy research tends to focus on the orientation of existing policies, but youth sport researchers should also be attentive to emergent societal trends, such as the rise of e-sports as a leisure time activity, so as to consider the possibilities and actuality of increasing policy attention towards such issues in the future.

The review reinforces and extends insights into the crowded policy space of youth sport policy-making, with various actors involved and having differing degrees of influence in pursuing often competing agendas. As policy environments change, it would be beneficial to examine the role of newly emerging stakeholders in the youth policy processes. There are striking gaps in policy research focusing on diversity and difference across young people, and on increasing inclusion and integration in youth sport through policies that otherwise appear focused on increasing activity generally. These issues connect with the identified democratic deficit of not involving young people in policy-making. Future research on youth sport policy-making processes should seek to enhance understanding of democracy, representativeness and inclusion in sports governance in general, and how advocacy and structures may (or may not) facilitate more equitable policy and decision-making.

This recommendation also connects to importance of addressing the general lack of normatively-orientated youth sport policy research – even those articles that do offer policy suggestions tend to prioritise deconstructing existing policy as a main research objective. Multiple studies that normatively promoted the development of safeguarding policies represented a key exception in this regard. This highlights both the need for more effective policy development in this particular field, and, unfortunately, the policy gaps in the protection of young people participating in sport across many contexts.

Finally, the review points to recommendations for the use of theory and methodologies in future youth sport policy research. High-quality research that has benefited from thorough utilisation of theory has been identified - this good practice certainly needs to be more widely spread in the field of youth sport policy research. Surprisingly, the use of bespoke policy analysis theory is highly constrained to particular subsets of youth sport policy research and understanding of the policy process would be much

enhanced by further use of such theories. Future researchers of youth sport policy would also be advised to offer more detailed accounts of data collection and analysis methods to address limitations of a concerning proportion of existing articles. More substantively, greater use of multi-methods especially where this would complement documentary analysis is recommended, as is wider engagement of quantitative methods which have been largely absent from youth sport policy research to date.

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