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The lack of age representation in the governance of rugby union in England

Abstract

Diversity and representation in sport governing bodies has become an issue for both public discussion and academic debate in recent times. Previous work has primarily centered on gender inequalities within the forever changing masculine terrain of sport. However, no work has yet examined the representation and participation of young people in the decision-making structures of sporting bodies. This paper holds up England's Rugby Union for organizational analysis, using the notion of homologous reproduction as a heuristic framework. In doing so, it explores the reproduction of this governing body for the systematic exclusion of young people in decision-making processes over the last few decades. This framework is then twined with Article 11 of the United Nation's Convention for the Rights of the Child, to make the case that the RFU desires homologous reproduction in order to avoid dealing with what youth are currently concerned with –head injuries. Given such a high proportion of rugby's participants being under twenty-five years of age, we conclude the lack of young people within the decision-making process represents a form of willful discrimination.

Introduction

In 1995, the England rugby player, Will Carling, commented that ‘You do not need 57 old farts running rugby’ as part of his criticism of the Rugby Football Union’s (RFU) approach to professionalism (Williams 2002, p. 127). Two decades later, the governance structures of the RFU are still being contested in public forums (Slaughter and May 2011), primarily concerning the lack of representation within the decision making and governance system.

In England, rugby union participation figures show that between 70 and 80 percent of participants are under 24 years of age (Rugby Football Union 2011). Research across the past few decades has found that stakeholders—athletes, parents and volunteers—are keen to engage in the governance processes within sport (John 2009, Newig and Fritsch 2009, Trail and Chelladurai 2000). For example, Katawala (2000) suggests the increasing stakeholder engagement is a result of ‘increasingly educated, assertive and networked citizens [who] expect to have a say on issues which they care about’ (Katwala 2000:7). Simultaneous to this is a decline in trust that National Governing Bodies (NGBs) are representing stakeholder’s interests (Katwala 2000, Hindley 2007).

Sport is continually developing and changing, with advances in technology, technique and culture (Anderson 2014, Anderson and McGuire 2010, Anderson and White, 2018, Murray and White 2015, White and Anderson, 2017). Young athletes are usually at the frontline of change, and therefore should be central to policy decisions that affect them. Accordingly, there is increasing pressure to involve athletes in the decisions that affect them, and pressure is especially being levied against international sporting bodies to listen to the elite performers—who are generally also young (Thibault, Kihl and Babiak 2010). Despite this, there is little or no recognition of other stakeholders, such as youth participants, their parents, or young adult players in many sports.

This article holds one such sport, Rugby Football Union and its governing board, under an analytical lens of homologous reproduction in order to understand how this elderly-masculinist governing board persists, and how, according to the United Nations, its demographic homogeneity may be viewed as violating the rights of children.

We accomplish this through the investigation of rugby union’s governance structures in three domains. First, we examine the overall governance and decision-

making structures, analyzing how many young people are directly involved and consulted on the decisions that affect them. Second, we examine the RFU National Youth Council, and the level of influence they have over decisions made that affect the youth game. Third, we evaluate how the England Rugby Football Schools Union (ERFSU), which is the constituent body responsible for school-based rugby, intersects with youth participation in sport governance.

Segregation and Segmentation in Sport

Organised, competitive team sport was largely founded in the West during late 19th and early 20th centuries as a mechanism for the social reproduction of masculinist values. This project saw segregation occur on multiple fronts. The most salient is and remains that of gender segregation: apart from some churches in the United Kingdom, sport remains the last major institution that continues to be segregated by gender.

Race, ability status, athletic capital, and other ascribed and achieved variables have traditionally been used to sort children into and out of various sports. However, sport, as an all-encompassing institution, involves not only the men and women who play the games, but those who train the athletes (Acosta and Carpenter, 2006); those who hire and manage the coaches, athletic directors and sport agents (Hoeber, 2007); those who market and promote sports (Cunningham, 2007); and those who report on the successes and failures of athletes through sport media (Lapchick, Brenden, and Wright, 2006). White, heterosexual, men are now and have always been highly over-represented in all of these positions. Accordingly, both athletes and sports' stakeholders are overrepresented by men of cultural privilege (Knoppers and Anthonissen, 2008).

Management was born out of this historical period, too. Industry managers were selected from a work pool associated with an even higher degree of masculinity than the workers they supervised (Collinson & Hearn, 1996; Maier, 1999; Rutherford, 2001). This, "I did it so you can too" ethos is embedded in much of the managerial leadership styles even today. It appears in the informal assumptions; the taken for granted norms, values, and processes that are perpetuated over time (Cunningham, 2008).

Governance structures in sport, whether paid or not, have not changed much since their inception. They remain dominated by white, middle-class men (Bradbury

2013, Cashmore and Cleland 2014, Fink, Pastore and Reimer 2001, Fink and Pastore 1999, Sartore and Cunningham 2007). For example, in England women Chief Executives comprise sixteen percent (n=10 of 61) of English National Governing Bodies and sporting organizations and just thirty-three percent of all board members (Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation 2015). Women are under-represented in leadership positions, often marginalized, and receive a fraction of men's wages for their work (Joseph and Anderson 2015, Acosta and Carpenter 2006, Whisenant et al. 2002).

Addressing this aspect of gender-segmented labor, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) produced new policies with quotas for women representatives in the 1990s of which Claringbould and Knoppers (2007) comment, 'The absence of female board members is, therefore, no longer deemed acceptable in sport governance' (P. 496). Yet, the introduction of this policy led to only a small increase in the number of women on executive boards, and in higher level management positions within Olympic sports. It is still the "old-boys" networks that holds the power and seeks to keep it within a trusted circle of likeminded allies (Shaw and Hoerber 2003). So slow are governance bodies to relinquish power from the "old boys" network that, currently, Sport England has tasked NGBs to have at least (and we highlight, only) twenty-five percent of both sexes on their management boards by 2017 (Sport England 2012).

And while considerable, and valuable, research has examined sport management as a segmented industry of gendered labor, we have yet to see a systematic examination of sport's managing bodies—in both the employment and volunteer capacities—as a segmented industry by age. In the case we analyze here, Rugby Football Union, over seventy percent of participants are under the age of 25 years, yet there is nobody at all within that age demographic situated within decision-making forums within the sports' governing body.

A number of scholars have suggested that it is important that non-profit sporting bodies are representative of the populations demographic that they serve (Thibault and Babiak 2005, Jackson and Ritchie 2007, Kihl et al. 2007). Despite this, the representation of young people within sporting governance and decision-making in practice has not been a focus of analysis. Because the organization of analysis here is sport, the lack of youth represented in the sport's governing body means elite players themselves (Thibault, Kihl and Babiak 2010); although not children, they tend

to be young people. Thus, similar to that of gender representation, young athletes often lack influence and organizations deploy tokenistic structures for athlete participation in decision-making (Thibault, Kihl and Babiak 2010).

This lack of representation is made obscene when one considers that sport participation for children and young people is often made compulsory in the schooling environment, as a stipulation of the National Curriculum (DfE 2012), with further government efforts to increase participation levels among those aged 24 years and below (HM Government 2016). As such, we suggest children and young people should be consulted and engaged throughout all decision-making processes on a sporting activity that directly affects them. We are not alone in this call; the United Nations has also highlighted the segmentation of decision-making boards as a problem.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The inclusion of children and young people within an authority or organization, especially those that have a significantly high demographic of child and youth participation, is not only fair, democratic and representative; it is a legal imperative in England (United Nations 1989). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), established in 1989, is the World's most widely supported human rights treaty (Alderson 2000), with 195 state signatories. The UK Government ratified the UNCRC in 1991, with implementation from the 1st January 1992. The convention, while not binding within any given country, is symbolic of the beliefs of the rights of the child. This convention is compiled of 54 articles, each internationally constructed, with the best interests of the child at the center (United Nations 1989).

Article 12 of this convention affords children the right to input views into all matters that affect them. Article 12 is noteworthy, as Freeman (1996) states, '...not only for what it says, but because it recognizes the child as a full human being with integrity and personality and the ability to participate freely in society' (P.37). The article also contains two statements that are key to children and young people's right to participate in decision-making. The first discusses children being afforded the right

to express their views about all matters affecting them, and the second suggests that due weight should be given to those views in accordance to the age and maturity of the child. In full, Article 12 reads:

State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (United Nations 1989).

Article 12 has caused much discussion among politicians and academics due to its somewhat ambiguous nature (Kilbourne 1998, Limber and Flekkøy 1995), namely that the phrase ‘due weight in accordance to the age and maturity of the child’ is highly subjective. This clause often sparks debate and unease among adults, who feel that some of their power is being removed. In fact, part of the reason the U.S. has not yet signed the treaty is that they fear it would give children ‘a state-guaranteed license to rebel’ (D. W. Phillips, personal communication to members of Congress, October 20, 1993 cited in Limber and Flekkøy 1995, p.7). Regardless of these concerns, Lundy (2007) asserts, ‘Implicit within the notion of due weight is the fact that children have a right to have their views listened to (not just heard) by those involved in the decision-making processes’ (P. 935).

In the UK, Article 12 has been implemented in various areas of society, the most studied is that of youth participation within education. The Committee on Human Rights of the Child (CHRC) criticized the UK’s first report, in 1995, stating:

Greater priority to be given to incorporating the general principles of the conventions, especially ... article 12, concerning the child’s right to make his/her views known and to have these views given due weight (CHRC 1995).

Similarly, in 2002, further comments from the CHRC expressed ‘In education, schoolchildren are not systematically consulted in matters that affect them’ (CHRC 1995). In response, as part of the Education Act (2002), schools were required to consult with students, with Ofsted inspectors tasked to monitor the degree that schools

obtained and responded upon student views (Shier 2001). The act similarly placed an obligation on Local Authorities to consult pupils in matters affecting them.

Youth participation in decision-making

Children and young people should have the ability to effect change in the organizations and contexts that they are situated (O'Donoghue, Kirshner and McLaughlin 2002). Lundy's (2007) work on children's agency and the UNCRC is especially notable for this article because of the holistic conceptualization of youth participation she proffers. Through a more holistic deployment of the UNCRC, specifically articles 2, 3, 5, 12, 13 and 19, it is evident to Lundy that more is needed than just offering children and young persons the framework to offer their opinion; rather, decision-making power and influence is more appropriate. Lundy (2007) suggests four core elements for such influence to actualize: space, voice, audience and influence.

For young people to effectively engage in decision-making, it is important to have a space or forum where they are able to discuss freely their views and opinions. Here, young people should be given a 'voice', meaning they are afforded the opportunity to express perspectives and opinions; which is a human right for all people, not just children and young people (Universal Declaration on Human Rights 1948). Lundy (2007, P. 935) asserts, 'Children's right to express their views is not dependent upon their capacity to express a mature view; it is dependent only on their ability to form a view, mature or not.' A young person's voice is meaningless if it is not heard by the decision-makers and those with power, meaning the appropriate 'audience' is required (Lundy 2007). It is this approach that most take: listening to but not acting upon children and young people's desires.

Accordingly, we take as the starting point the UNCRC (1989) and Lundy's (2007) theoretical framework of youth participation to explicitly recognize that young people have a legal claim to influencing decision-making processes in all areas of their lives, including sport (David 2004). Article 31 affords children the right to be involved in sport governance structures. Unfortunately, there is a clear lack of research on the governance systems of sport in relation to one's legal entitlement for representation, especially for children and young people. This study thus seeks to add

to this body of the literature by considering how the RFU is managing children and youth participation in governance.

Methods

Methodological Approach

Case study research has grown in reputation as an effective qualitative methodology to investigate and understand complex issues (Stewart 2014). Traditionally, sociologists use the approach as a positivist tool to investigate peoples lived-experience and interpretation of culture, including in sport (Holt et al. 2008). Contemporary case study research also uses constructivist and interpretivist paradigms, including grounded theory approaches (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The uptake of case study research in the political sciences, particularly during the later decades of the 20th century (Phelan 2011), led to a more integrated methodological approach of policy analysis, too (George and Bennett 2005). Policy related case studies permit us to better understand the complexities of institutions, practices, politics, and social outcomes (Anthony and Jack 2009). The value of a case study approach to rugby policy in this research is that it permits us to avoid philosophical positioning in relation to ontology and epistemology (Guba and Lincoln 1994). In the case of rugby, a case study approach permits us to inductively theorize our findings (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). In order to accomplish this, we turn to an institutional analysis of the Rugby Football Union in the United Kingdom.

Organization of Analysis

Formed in 1871, The Rugby Football Union was the first governing body for rugby worldwide. It is currently the largest rugby union governing body worldwide and the second largest NGB in England, after the Football Association. It has over 500 paid staff, 60,000 volunteers and 2,000 member rugby clubs. The organization is based upon the core values of: sportsmanship, discipline, teamwork, respect and enjoyment. The organization looks to make a profit with all proceeds being reinvested into the sport, both at the elite and grassroots levels. It receives its primary income from ‘sponsorship, government, ticket sales from international matches at Twickenham,

merchandise and licensing, hospitality and catering, a travel company, and television rights' (Rugby Football Union 2015).

Although there are a vast number of NGBs that could be examined in relation to age representation, we have selected the RFU for a number of pertinent reasons. First, the primary author has previously been an athlete in the RFU's ranks, worked for the organization, was a member of its National Youth Council, and continues to hold various governance positions within the game, specifically related to young people. Therefore, the ease of access has allowed a thorough understanding of the organizational structure.

Secondly, the RFU is the second largest NGB within the United Kingdom, achieving substantial funding from Sport England in the 2013-2017 funding cycle (Sport England 2012b). It could therefore be considered an influential body in the national sporting landscape.

Thirdly, considerable media focus has been given to the RFU since 2010 regarding its governance structures, and in 2014 and 2015, with regard to concerns over player safety, specifically head trauma, as a product of Allyson Pollock's (2014) book *Tackling Rugby: What every parent should know about Injuries*. Most recently, seventy academics called for the removal of the tackle from the school game as a result of the high levels of risk associated with the phase of the game (Batten, et al. 2016, Anderson and White 2017). This is not to say young people are excluded because of their concerns around injury, rather it suggests that young people's voices are more pertinent in light of the current injury worries.

Finally, seventy to eighty percent of rugby participants are under twenty-Five years of age (Rugby Football Union 2015), and as such, this is an organization saturated with young people.

Procedures

We accomplish this case study approach to the organizational analysis of the RFU through the investigation of rugby union's governance structures, in three domains. Firstly, we examine the overall governance and decision-making structures, analyzing how many young people are directly involved and consulted on the decisions that affect them. We did this through an analysis of the members of each committee and their age in the 2015-2016 season.

Second, we examine the RFU National Youth Council, and the level of influence they have over decisions made that affect the youth game. This was accomplished through considering the configuration of the National Youth Council and the committees that each of their members are assigned. Consideration is also given to the role and decision-making power of those committees. Likewise, the (in)actions following proposals and reports proposed by the National Youth Council have also been examined.

Third, we evaluate how the England Rugby Football Schools Union (ERFSU), which is the constituent body responsible for school-based rugby, intersects with youth participation in sport governance. Using evidence from four committee documents and subsequent reports show the intentions of the constituent body in regards to youth participation.

Theory

To understand the existence of rugby as a domain of old, white men we turn to theoretical work by Rosabeth Kanter; namely her (1977) work on gender in corporations. Kanter was looking to understand the influencing factors that prevented women from reaching the boardrooms of many business organizations, after all she said, “women populate organizations, they practically never run them” (p.16). Many managers were (and still are) anxious around business uncertainty with often a large and diverse workforce. Thus, in an attempt to reduce their concerns, managers tend to develop, “...exclusive management circles closed to outsiders” (Kanter 1977, p. 48). Here, they appoint people who are in similar demographic categories in order to create equilibrium and within the management structures. Kanter (1977) suggests that managers set in “...motion forces leading to the replication of managers of the same kind of social individuals” (Kanter 1977, p. 48). Simply speaking, managers appoint similar people to themselves.

In the context of sport, homologous reproduction has been used to understand the difference between male and female coaches in a variety of sporting settings. For example, Stangl and Kane (1991), utilizing data from Ohio public schools, found that when women were the athletic director significantly more women were the head coach than when a man was the athletic director. Acosta and Carpenter (2002), similarly, recognize that the number of female coaches is directly influenced by the gender of the athletic directors. The women who do get into the management

positions of sport, however, are often similar in their manner to many men. Sports' stakeholders are overrepresented by men in an institution run mostly by and for men.

More recently, Joseph and Anderson (2015) examined how sport-based employers in the United Kingdom used men's teamsport participation to reproduce men's advantage in sport-related occupations during hiring for sport employment positions. They found that not only does formalized gender segregation in sport provide men with vital social networks less attainable to women, but teamsport competition experience, through gendered notions of what counts as 'teamwork,' being a 'team player,' and 'leadership qualities,' also provides an illusory image of employment competency implicitly gendered as masculine. Results illustrated how men's privilege of 'teamsport hegemony' occurs at the moment of social reproduction through expectations of social role congruity in leadership as well as how patterns of gender segregation within sport contribute to occupational segregation impeding women's equality.

As with Joseph and Anderson work (2015), we highlight that social reproduction of a dominating class of people need not be based in intentional bias or antipathy toward others. Homologous reproduction essentially occurs because people maintain an implicit bias toward their own kind. Thus, men who sit on the board of governor's likely maintain that they are uniquely and best-qualified to do the job they do. At least this is what was found in similar research (Joseph and Anderson 2015).

A byproduct of homologous reproduction, of course, is that the governing body will either not see issues related to other demographics of people; not see them as well; or not understand them in relation to changing cultural context that youth emerge. Put simply, it is hard to hear voices if those voices are not present to be heard; it is hard to understand voices if the broader context of their voice is not understood.

Thus, the organizing principle we use to shape our conceptual framework is Kanter's homologous reproduction. However, in the case of sport governance, homologous reproduction might not only be viewed through a lens of occupational gender-segmentation, but through one that violates the rights of children and young people who make up the bulk of those whom are governed by 57 old farts, too. Because there is a dearth of literature on youth representation in sport, we turn to the literature in youth representation in decision making more broadly.

Findings

The Structure of the Rugby Football Union

As of March 2016, the RFU is a friendly society, meaning it is accountable to the membership rugby clubs, for which there is in excess of two-thousand, who are the primary stakeholders for the organization. Each member club is affiliated to a larger constituent body that is usually, but not always, divided by geographical county boundaries (for example, rugby clubs in Cumbria are affiliated to the Cumbria Rugby Football Union). Constituent Bodies are constituted of a minimum of 30 clubs in membership, and each member club has representation on the respective constituent body, and that organization is responsible for the management and governance of rugby union within their area.

In England, there are thirty-five Constituent Bodies, which are made of twenty-eight geographical Constituent Bodies, five national constituent bodies, with Oxford University and Cambridge University getting their own organizations. The national constituent bodies include; the Student's Rugby Football Union, which is responsible for the development and governance of university-based rugby, and the ERFUSU, which is responsible for school-based rugby. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between clubs, schools, colleges and universities with their subsequent constituent body.

[INSERT Figure 1 here]

Often, with very few exceptions, the volunteers within constituent bodies are retired players, usually in their forty's or older. Oxfordshire RFU has only one of nine members of the organization under forty years of age on the constituent body's executive committee. Similarly, the ERFUSU (responsible for school rugby) which has a total of forty-three members, has only four members under the age of forty years, one who is under thirty years of age. Within its executive committee of seventeen members, only one (the first author) is under thirty years of age. Across the wealth of boards, committees and sub-committees, there is not a single active player involved in representing (school children) on any of their decision-making bodies.

Each constituent body nominates representatives to the RFU Council, which is the main decision-making forum of the organization. The RFU Council has fifty-seven members, of which only one is a woman and none are under the age of 30

years. Those members that are under fifty years of age are often ex-international rugby players, whose positions are likely due to their international experience of the game. The majority of the council is aged over sixty years, with many not actively playing the sport for over twenty years at the time of publication. Over the previous ten years, only one person under twenty-five years of age has been a representative at the RFU Council, as a temporary representative for Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and Derbyshire.

The RFU Council nominates members to the Management Board, see Figure 2 which is responsible for the strategic management and governance of the organization. This board directs the work of the employed staff members of the RFU, through the executive management team. On the management board, there are no members under thirty years of age and two women (one from the RFU Council and one member of the executive staff).

As illustrated in figure 2, there are two primary decision-making boards below the management Board; the Professional Game Board and the Community Game Board. These boards have oversight for all matters within either the Professional game (Premiership and Championship) or the Community Games (including National league 1 and below) respectively. At this level, there are still no members who are under the age of 30 years and there is a decrease in women representatives. For example, on the Community Game Board, of the eleven members, there is only one woman and on the Professional Game Board this are no women representatives. Again, on both of these committees there are no representatives under 30 years of age.

[INSERT Figure 2 here]

The Community Game Board has six sub-committees that are responsible for; rugby growth, player development, club development, education development, game development and competitions (Rugby Football Union 2015), as seen in Figure 3. Of those six committees, there is a combined total of seventy-four seats, of which only six are filled with women and five are filled with persons under the age of 30 years. All of the young people on these sub-committees are members of the RFU National Youth Council. The RFU National Youth Council has only one seat on five of the Community Game Board subcommittees and therefore, their input to the decision-

making forums (Community Game Board, Professional Game Board, Management Board and RFU Council) is somewhat removed.

[INSERT Figure 3 here]

The age demographic of participants of rugby is somewhat different to that of the RFU's governance structures. In 2011, participation in the under twenty-five age demographic was reported as seventy-eight percent by the RFU National Youth Council (2011). At a similar time, the Active People's survey, conducted by Sport England, found that among those who participated once per week, eighty-three percent were from the sixteen to twenty-four years of age demographic (Sport England 2011). Recent figures provided by the RFU show, using data from the active people survey, seventy-four percent of participation being fourteen to twenty-four years of age, with RFU membership data showing eighty percent under twenty-five years (Rugby Football Union 2015c). Clearly, the participation population of the RFU is dominated by young people under twenty-five years of age.

With such a high proportion of rugby's participants being under twenty-five years of age, the lack of young people within the decision-making process can be seen as structural discrimination, non-representative and undemocratic. An intricate knowledge of the RFU structure is not required to see a clear disparity between the participants and the gatekeepers of this sport. There are, however, some elements of progression in the structures that are looking to engage younger people in the decision-making procedures of the organization: the National Youth Council and the ERFSU.

ERFSU and School-Based Rugby Governance

The ERFSU is the constituent body responsible for any rugby played within the school environment in England. It is important to recognize that many rugby participants (which are often not recorded in RFU participation data) come from the school environment through curricular and extra-curricular rugby. This constituent body has its own structure of organization, somewhat similar to that of the RFU (see figure 4).

This constituent body has representatives from each geographical area who sit on the Full Committee. These members also sit on the ERFSU's sub-committees,

which include; Governance, Development and Competitions. The strategic direction is organized by the Executive Committee. As mentioned above, this organization, which represents those aged under 18 in rugby, has few members under 40 years of age, and only one under 30 years. The first author is the only member of the executive committee, of seventeen, who is under 50 years of age.

The ERFSU is, however, committed to engaging and involving young people in its decision-making structures. The organization chairman, Nigel Orton, recently submitted a paper to the committee that reads:

I will now generalize greatly, but for good reasons... the senior roles in many [County Schools Unions] fall to more veteran colleagues. Their presence in our ranks is, of course, valued for all their experience, energy and available time, but we do need to try to get more representation of the girls' game and hear younger voices (Orton 2015:1).

This work is somewhat in its early infancy and possibly a product of the first author's success on the Executive Committee, who may have showed the value young people can add to the decision-making elements of sport.

[INSERT Figure 4 here]

The ERFSU has also shown an awareness that more is needed than simply recruiting young people onto their committees. Through the Chairman's call for action, recognition is given to the need for youth autonomy and power. He states, 'If, for example, [young people] tell us that teachers aren't knowledgeable about the scrum... then we need to find the money and let them develop the idea' (Orton 2015, P. 2). Additionally, there is an understanding of the current pressures that young people may face, such as education or careers by suggesting short-term commitments may be more appropriate. He notes that young people are '...more likely to be interested in undertaking short assignments that they can complete... and move on in their parallel studies and careers without any long term commitment' (Orton 2015, P.2).

Continuing their commitment to youth participation, a proposal for the initiation of a youth engagement sub-committee of the ERFSU was accepted by the executive in November 2015. That paper reads:

All of the ERFSU (ERFSU) work is based upon young people and, subsequently, our end-users are all young. Therefore, it is only fair, representative and right that we engage young people in all aspects of the ERFSU business, whether that is planning, implementing or the evaluation of business projects.

(ERFSU 2015)

Although this is somewhat promising, without further evidence of impact, at this stage, we cannot evaluate the extent to which younger members of rugby have an influence on this organization's governance and decision making. However, it would seem that not only are the ERFSU aware of the underrepresentation of young people in the organization, but they are pushing for change at the most senior levels.

The National Youth Council

In an attempt to engage young volunteers within the governance and decision-making processes of the organization, the RFU set up the National Youth Council in 2009. This group is responsible for offering perspectives of younger people to the decision-making sub-committees and boards of the RFU. The group was made from twelve young people, all under the age of twenty-five years, who are actively involved in the game as either a player, coach, referee or volunteer (National Youth Council 2011). This group, until the 2015 – 2016 season, reported into the Education Development sub-committee (which is below the Community Game Board), having one seat alongside the Schools, Colleges and Universities Constituent Bodies. They now have a seat on five of the six sub-committees that feed into the Community Game Board.

In 2010, the National Youth Council launched the *Your Say, Your Voice* survey. This was a qualitative online survey targeted at those under the age of twenty-five, including both current and ex-participants of the game. The survey received 2482 responses from the sixteen to twenty-four years' age bracket (National Youth Council 2011). It reported several key findings, including that injury was reported as the top concern for young people regarding rugby union and the third most influential

factor for why non-participants are not currently involved in the game (National Youth Council 2011).

Exemplifying some of the youths' concerns, when asked for the negatives of rugby, a 17-year-old male referee from Berkshire responded, "Perhaps the risk of injury, which is strongly connected with physical size," similarly a 24-year-old player from Berkshire succinctly suggested, the "Potential for serious injury" as a negative aspect of rugby union. A 22-year-old woman explained how injury had affected her brother, commenting:

My brother has been playing rugby since he was 11 [years of age] and cannot play as much any more due to an injury. As he played hooker his back and ribs are always an issue. I feel this sport should be played competitively later in life... at least starting around the age of 16-17.

Recognising injuries to be a concern, a 24-year-old coach and referee from Middlesex offered some recommendations to the RFU:

I would ensure that school rugby is coached and refereed by RFU qualified staff to prevent unnecessary injury. I have spent many Saturdays watching school matches and have been very concerned by the level of refereeing particularly at the breakdown and scrums.

Based upon the findings of the *Your Say, Your Voice* survey, the National Youth Council recommended the RFU should:

Highlight injury rate in comparison to numbers playing in other sports, tell young people what to do if they think they might be injured, give them approximate recovery times and or actions to follow, promote touch as a game for those returning from injury (National Youth Council 2011: 13).

In 2014, Allyson Pollock, a Professor of Public Health, released her book *Tackling Rugby: What Every Parent Should Know about Injuries*, which indicted rugby for its high risks and rates of injury, and explained some of the injury data currently available in peer-reviewed research journals. Despite the media attention

surrounding her book, and three years after the RFU National Youth Council delivered its recommendations to the Community Game Board, the RFU is still unable to provide comprehensive data on injuries within rugby. It is concerning that comprehensive injury data is not available, especially in light of the youth voice expressing the lacking information as a huge concern within rugby (National Youth Council 2011).

Although there are many critiques of the *Your Voice, Your Say* survey, we are more concerned in the subsequent lack of action that the survey initiated at the RFU. Many of the key findings were reported by the National Youth Council to the RFU, in the form of a report, and the minute presentation at the Community Game Board in 2011 with limited action from the governing body. It is important to note, the lack of age representation in sport governance is not a product of the current injury discourses, rather because of the current social concern around injury, the lack of representation for young people has become more apparent and important.

Discussion

Since 1989, children and young people have had a right to both give their views and have them considered in the decision-making processes that influence their lives. Through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the UK Government in 1991, young people should no longer be silenced or marginalized in the governance structures of institutions that engage with children and young people. This includes cultural activities, including sport, as confirmed through Article 31 of the convention (Pollock 2014). In short, children's rights are applicable within the sporting terrain.

This study has examined that extent children and young people, including professional players, are represented in the decision-making processes of the RFU. We wanted to know how a specific sporting organization, the RFU, responded to the mandates of the UNCRC.

Our findings overwhelmingly show that the governance structures of the RFU privilege one specific demographic: old white men. We found that, even considering that over 70% of rugby's playing population are under 25 years of age, there is little opportunity for children or young people to influence the decision-making process within the RFU. This may reflect structural processes and not intentional design, but

the end result is the exclusion of youth voices. Both at constituent body level and the RFU Council, there is an almost near total void of age-representation, with minimal youth representation (no children) on community game sub-committees.

At present, there is no evidence that the RFU is giving children and young people the space, voice, audience or influence to direct decision making. The RFU are not fully complying with the UNCRC in relation to children and youth participation in decision-making. Succinctly, children and young people are not able to impact the decisions that affect them in the rugby terrain through structural barriers. Indeed, this is increasingly pertinent given the current social concern around injury and brain trauma within the sporting context (Mez et al. 2017, Pollock, White and Kirkwood 2017, White, 2016, White et al. 2018).

Although the RFU has a youth participation forum, the National Youth Council, the level of participation youth are permitted in decision making is near totally absent. Young people have only very limited access to the decision-making boards and a lack of power in the decisions affecting them. Youth do have input into some of the community game sub-committees, yet, are lacking access to the Community Game Board and the Management Boards respectively. It is here that key strategic decisions are made.

Our research also concludes that the *Your Voice, Your Say* survey, conducted in 2011 (National Youth Council 2011), serves as evidence of the lack of initiative to address these issue on part of the RFU. Its recommendations were not considered by the RFU. Unlike recent research showing that unintentional discrimination occurs in the moment of homologous reproduction (Joseph and Anderson 2015), in this case we suggest that the denial of children and youth voices is not necessarily by design intentional, but nonetheless serves the function of exclusion.

We suggest that homologous reproduction (Kanter 1977) is a necessity for the present power-structure of the RFU because heterogeneity would likely include voices concerned with physical safety of young players. In other words, the RFU reproduces its leadership with old, white, male, ex-professional players because these are men who have bought into the masculinist ethos of the sport and are men who have matriculated through the system.

The RFU perpetually and systematically deny young people's representation and this hides the fact that children and young people are concerned with the physical harms of playing rugby, which, if made more culturally visible, would serve to the

detriment of the governing bodies image. At minimum, it is apparent that the National Youth Council exist only as tokens, with no real decision-making power or even able to input in their own strategic directions. The National Youth Council, therefore, does not help the RFU comply with the UNCRC and represents a deficient structure for children and youth participation. It provides illusion, only.

There is, however, one sign of hope for child and youth participation in the RFU. It comes in the fact that the England Rugby Football Schools Union's interest in affecting change within their organization. The ERFSU, being one of few Constituent Bodies that have younger administrators on their executive committees, is driving for more youth participation among their decision-making processes. There may be a number of factors that have influenced the ERFSU's decision to try to recruit younger members within its governance structures.

Having experience of younger decision makers within the governance structure, their experiences may be positive and subsequently conducive to change. Additionally, as the ERFSU is responsible for school rugby, the members may be familiar with child and youth participation through their education and school experiences, whereby the student voice has been on the agenda for some time (Alderson 2000, Flutter and Rudduck 2004, Robinson and Taylor 2007). It is encouraging that the ERFSU is giving firm consideration to non-tokenistic and appropriate ways to engage younger people. This is one project that may need future examination and academic interest.

Conclusion

Through analysis of the structure of the RFU, its National Youth Council and one constituent body, we have found little evidence that the UNCRC (1989) is currently being upheld or embraced effectively by the RFU. The RFU is still dominated by older-men who are far removed from the current game being played by contemporary children and young people, something Will Carling protested some 20 years ago. These are not the same old men as they were 20 years ago, either. Thus, a systematic form of exclusion promotes the homogenous reproduction of like-minds among the RFU leadership: The RFU effectively denies young people's voice and representation, which in this instance hides the fact that children and young people are concerned with the physical harms of playing rugby.

This research contributes to the current literature on diversity and inclusion within sporting governance, adding a critical dimension of age-representation and the youth voice within sporting governance. Of course, the intersectionality of representation is important, and age should also be considered alongside issues of gender, race, social class, (dis)ability and sexuality. Theoretically, this work also extends Kanter's (1977) notion of homologous reproduction, showing that it can also be deployed to the understanding of age discrimination in organizational research, in addition to gender within the sporting context (Joseph & Anderson, 2015).

Through initiating the debate on child and youth participation in NGB decision making, we hope others will continue to explore age-representation in different NGBs and sporting governance structures, particularly important in sports where youthful bodies and brains is in peril. If we are to understand that sport is a vehicle for social development and inclusion, then governing organizations need to reflect this inclusivity by effectively involving and responding to the voices of children and young peoples in the decision-making framework. We recommend sport governing bodies take steps to review and implement meaningful and engaging youth participation strategies within their organizations and start to address the concerns of the youth population.

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