

# Theoretical Framework and Evolutionary Logic of After-School Sports Services in British Primary and Secondary Schools — An Analysis Based on Historical Institutionalism

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**Abstract:** The systematic examination of the inherent logic of policy evolution in after-school sports services serves as the theoretical prerequisite for deeply understanding their operational mechanisms and reference value. In the context of China, after-school sports services have been endowed with new connotations and missions. From a comparative education perspective, this study employs the analytical framework of historical institutionalism to systematically explore the theoretical foundations and evolutionary logic of the policy system for after-school sports services (i.e., organized sports activities after the normal school day) in British primary and secondary schools. The research finds that the development of after-school sports services in Britain has undergone four key stages: the Free Development Period (pre-1970s), the Policy Germination Period (1980s-1990s), the System Construction Period (2000s-2010s), and the Quality Optimization Period (post-2010s), exhibiting clear characteristics of path dependency. Britain has formed a multi-actor governance theoretical framework centered on "state guidance - school leadership - societal participation." The government provides institutional guarantees through legislation and special funding (e.g., PE and Sport Premium), schools act as implementing bodies responsible for specific organization, and social sports organizations offer professional support. This governance structure effectively integrates resources from all parties, ensuring the sustainability and professionalism of the services. The study further reveals the dynamic mechanisms driving British policy evolution, including responses to social issues (e.g., youth health), seizing political opportunities (e.g., the Olympics), and updates in educational philosophy. Finally, considering the practical needs under China's "Double Reduction" context, the study proposes recommendations such as strengthening the institutional guarantee for after-school sports services, constructing a multi-actor collaborative supply system, and establishing a scientific evaluation mechanism, providing theoretical reference for the high-quality development of after-school sports services in China.

**Keywords:** After-school sports services; British education policy; Historical institutionalism; Multi-actor governance; Double Reduction policy; Comparative education

## 1. Introduction

The period following the formal school day represents a significant, yet often under-utilized, space for child and adolescent development <sup>[1, 2]</sup>. Within this context, organized after-school sports services have gained increasing recognition as a vital component of holistic education <sup>[3]</sup>, extending opportunities for physical activity, skill acquisition, and social learning beyond the standard curriculum <sup>[4]</sup>. The provision of these services is not merely an administrative task but a complex socio-educational undertaking shaped by historical trajectories, evolving policy paradigms, and dynamic interactions between multiple institutional actors.

Britain's experience in developing after-school sports services within its state-funded primary and secondary school system offers a compelling case for academic inquiry. Over several decades, a distinct ecosystem has emerged, characterized by specific governance arrangements, funding mechanisms, and partnerships between the state, educational institutions, and civil society organizations. While much existing scholarship has documented the operational features of specific British programs (e.g., the School Games, the PE and Sport Premium) <sup>[5, 6]</sup>, a critical gap remains in understanding the deeper

theoretical foundations and historical-institutional logic underpinning this system's formation and evolution. Questions regarding how the roles of the state, schools, and sports organizations were conceptually defined and institutionally embedded over time, and what forces drove significant policy shifts, are yet to be comprehensively addressed through a robust theoretical lens.

This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by posing the following core research questions: What theoretical framework best explains the governance and delivery structure of after-school sports services in British schools? Furthermore, what historical logic and evolutionary mechanisms characterize the development of the related policy ecosystem? To answer these questions, this paper adopts the perspective of historical institutionalism<sup>[7]</sup>. This theoretical approach is particularly apt for this analysis, as it provides the tools to examine how institutions—understood as formal rules, norms, and established practices—are created, how they persist through path dependency<sup>[8]</sup>, and how they change in response to critical junctures and evolving societal and political pressures. By applying this lens, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts to uncover the formative processes and enduring structures that have shaped the contemporary landscape of after-school sports provision in Britain.

The findings of this analysis are intended to contribute to broader international and interdisciplinary dialogues on education policy, youth sport governance, and the political economy of extracurricular service provision. By deconstructing the British case, this research aims to offer a nuanced, theory-informed narrative of institutional development that can inform comparative studies and stimulate critical reflection on the diverse pathways through which societies seek to support youth development through structured physical activity outside formal teaching hours.

## 2. Methods

This study was supported by Scientific Research Fund of Hunan Provincial Education Department, China (Grant No. 23B0554). To investigate the theoretical framework and evolutionary logic of after-school sports services in Britain, this study employs a qualitative research design anchored in historical institutionalism. This approach is particularly suited to tracing the development of policy systems over time, examining the interplay between structure and agency, and identifying the critical junctures and path-dependent processes that shape institutional outcome<sup>[9, 10]</sup>. The research does not seek to test a specific hypothesis but rather to construct a theoretically informed, empirically grounded narrative of institutional formation and change.

The primary method utilized is historical policy and document analysis. This involved the systematic collection and critical examination of a wide range of archival and contemporary materials. The corpus of documents included: 1) Primary Policy Documents: Key government white papers, strategy documents, and official guidance issued by relevant departments, principally the Department for Education and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), from the post-war period to the present. 2) Legislative and Parliamentary Records: Relevant sections of Education Acts, parliamentary debate transcripts, and reports from select committees (e.g., the Education Committee) pertaining to school sport, physical education, and youth activities. 3) Official Reports and Reviews: Reports from non-departmental public bodies such as Sport England and Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) that evaluate school sport and physical activity provision. 4) Institutional Publications: Strategic plans, annual reports, and advocacy documents from pivotal non-governmental organizations, most notably the Youth Sport Trust, which has played a central role in policy implementation. 5) Academic Literature: Scholarly work on British educational history, sports policy, and social history to contextualize the policy developments within broader societal trends.

The analysis was conducted in two interrelated phases. First, a chronological and thematic mapping was performed to establish a timeline of key policy initiatives, identify dominant policy themes in different eras, and delineate potential evolutionary stages. Second, a historical institutionalist analysis was applied to this mapped landscape. This involved: 1) Identifying critical junctures—significant moments of contingency where decisions or events established new institutional trajectories<sup>[11]</sup>. 2) Tracing path dependency—analyzing how initial policy choices constrained or enabled subsequent developments, creating self-reinforcing patterns. 3) Examining the interaction of structures and actors—analyzing how the evolving institutional framework (rules, resources, norms) shaped the strategies and roles of key actors (state agencies, schools, sports organizations), and vice-versa. 4) Interpreting the evolution of policy ideas—tracking shifts in the dominant discourse surrounding the value of after-school sport, from notions of health and discipline to broader concepts of wellbeing, social development, and lifelong participation.

This methodological approach provides a robust framework for moving beyond a simple chronology of events. It enables the study to construct a causal narrative that explains not just *what* policies were enacted, but *how* and *why* the British system for after-school sports services took its particular form, offering insights into the dynamic relationship between policy, institutions, and historical context.

### 3. Results

The analysis of the documentary record reveals a distinct evolutionary trajectory for after-school sports services in Britain, demarcated by four sequential stages. Each stage is characterized by a specific configuration of state involvement, institutional responsibilities, and underlying policy rationales, illustrating a process of gradual accretion and punctuated change.

#### 3.1. Stage 1: Free Development Period (Pre-1970s)

During this stage, a national-level policy system for after-school sports services had not yet formed in Britain. After-school sports activities existed mainly in two forms: first, a small number of activities spontaneously organized by schools based on their own traditions and teacher resources; second, extracurricular sports activities provided by community sports clubs and youth organizations (e.g., Scouts, Cadets). The 1944 Education Act established the educational goal of promoting students' holistic development, providing a legal basis for school physical education, but did not specify provisions for after-school services. After-school sports during this period were characterized by distinct autonomy and fragmentation, lacking uniform standards, dedicated funding, and systematic planning. However, this tradition based on school and community autonomy implanted the initial gene of social force participation in British after-school sports services, forming the path dependency for subsequent policy development.

#### 3.2. Stage 2: Policy Germination Period (1980s-1990s)

As social concern for youth health issues (e.g., rising obesity rates, insufficient physical activity) increased, along with a growing emphasis on students' holistic development in educational philosophy, the government began to recognize the value of extracurricular sports activities. A critical juncture in this stage was the British government's 1995 White Paper, *Sport: Raising the Game*. This document explicitly required schools to provide a wide range of sporting opportunities for students beyond the curriculum for the first time, linking it to raising educational standards and social inclusion. The government began to provide project-based funding through channels like the "National Lottery Fund" to support some schools or regions in developing extracurricular sports programs. However, overall, the state's role remained primarily one of advocacy and demonstration, lacking mandatory requirements and universal resource investment. Schools remained the main organizers, and the participation of specialized social organizations was limited and non-systematic.

#### 3.3. Stage 3: System Construction Period (2000s-2010s)

Leveraging the significant opportunity presented by the bid for and hosting of the 2012 London Olympics, British after-school sports services policy entered a phase of rapid development and systematic construction, essentially forming a modern multi-actor collaborative governance model. A series of landmark policies were introduced intensively: the 2002 "School Sport and Club Links Programme" aimed to establish institutionalized channels for school-community collaboration; the 2008 creation of a national "School Games" competition system; and most significantly, the 2013 introduction of the "PE and Sport Premium." The government provides annual dedicated funding to all state-funded primary schools (continuing to the present), explicitly requiring its use to improve the quality of physical education and extracurricular sports activities, providing a stable and reliable financial foundation for after-school sports services.

During this stage, the government's role transformed into that of institutional designer and resource guarantor. Simultaneously, professional sports social organizations, represented by the Youth Sport Trust, became deeply involved, providing schools with comprehensive professional support including curriculum resources, teacher training, and program evaluation. Stable partnerships formed among schools, government agencies, and social organizations, constructing an operational framework of "government guidance - school responsibility - societal participation." The policy focus shifted from "encouraging provision" to "how to provide quality," significantly improving the coverage,

standardization, and quality of services.

#### **3.4. Stage 4: *Quality Optimization Period (Late 2010s-Present)***

With the basic establishment of the service system, the policy focus turned to connotative development and quality enhancement, paying more attention to the effectiveness, inclusivity, and comprehensive contribution of services to students' holistic development. The 2019 School Sport and Activity Action Plan emphasized activity diversity, skill development, and the role of physical activity in mental health and socio-emotional skill development. Post-COVID-19, the government provided additional investment to support the recovery and innovation of extracurricular sports, positioning it as an important means to promote youth psychological recovery and social rebuilding. Current policies increasingly emphasize educational equity, striving to ensure all students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have access to high-quality after-school sports services.

The characteristic of this stage is "precision governance." Policy tools have become more refined, including strict evaluation of funding usage effectiveness, data-based quality monitoring, and focused attention on cross-cutting issues like sports and mental health, and social integration. The governance network operates with increasing maturity, with all actors innovating collaboratively under clear rules, promoting the transformation of after-school sports services from "having" to "excelling."

### **4. Discussion**

The theoretical framework of "state-school-society" multi-actor governance and the evolutionary path constructed through four historical stages offer a profound lens for understanding the development of after-school sports services in British primary and secondary schools. The application of historical institutionalism reveals that the formation of this policy system is not merely the accumulation of discrete measures, but rather the product of a dynamic interplay between existing institutional structures (path dependency), critical political and social moments (critical junctures), and continuous adaptive adjustments (incremental change).

The stable operation of the service system hinges on the clear, complementary functional division among the three core actors. The state's role as the rule-maker<sup>[12]</sup> and resource guarantor<sup>[13]</sup>, primarily realized through legislation, strategic planning, and the provision of dedicated, sustained funding such as the PE and Sport Premium, provides the essential top-level design and financial bedrock. This interventionist approach distinguishes the modern system from its earlier, purely voluntary origins. The school's position as the organizer and implementer is crucial<sup>[14]</sup>. It transforms national policy and societal resources into localized, tailored service programs, directly responding to student needs and acting as the central node in the governance network. Social organizations, including professional sports bodies, clubs, and community groups, act as specialist service providers, injecting professional coaching, advanced curricula, and industry knowledge that schools alone may lack. This tripartite structure forms a synergistic governance ecosystem that balances centralized guidance with localized autonomy and professional input.

The analysis of evolutionary dynamics highlights that policy shifts are driven by a confluence of factors<sup>[15]</sup>. Responses to persistent social concerns, such as youth health crises and educational inequality, provide a continuous underlying impetus. Major events, most notably the 2012 London Olympics, serve as powerful critical junctures that catalyze political will, public attention, and resource mobilization, enabling significant policy leaps. Concurrently, evolving educational philosophies—from a focus on physical training to an emphasis on holistic development, well-being, and lifelong participation—continuously reshape the values and goals embedded within the policy framework. This multi-dimensional dynamic explains the transition from fragmented provision to systemic construction and, finally, to the current focus on quality, equity, and broader educational outcomes.

However, this seemingly mature model is not without its inherent tensions and challenges. The inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities remains a significant concern, with service quality often correlating with school location and socio-economic status, potentially exacerbating existing inequalities<sup>[16]</sup>. The long-term financial sustainability of the model, heavily reliant on specific government grants, poses a question regarding its resilience to shifting political and economic priorities. Furthermore, the increased workload for teachers involved in organizing and supervising these activities raises issues of professional capacity<sup>[17]</sup> and burnout<sup>[18]</sup>, which could affect both service quality and staff well-being if not adequately addressed. These limitations underscore that even well-established systems

must continually adapt to internal contradictions and external pressures.

From a theoretical standpoint, the British case offers valuable insights for the broader field of educational and social policy analysis. It exemplifies how a multi-level governance framework can be operationalized to deliver a complex public service, demonstrating the importance of aligning roles, resources, and accountability mechanisms across different sectors. It also vividly illustrates the utility of historical institutionalism in unpacking the "how" and "why" of policy development, moving beyond description to explain the processes of stability and change. This case encourages scholars and policymakers elsewhere to examine not just the surface features of such programs, but the deeper institutional arrangements, historical legacies, and actor configurations that underpin their effectiveness and evolution.

## 5. Conclusion

This study elucidates the historical-institutional evolution of after-school sports services in British primary and secondary schools. The analysis traces four developmental stages—free development, policy germination, systematic construction, and quality optimization—revealing how a tripartite governance framework of state guidance, school-based implementation, and societal professionalisation has emerged as the system's structural foundation. The research demonstrates that the development of these services reflects path-dependent institutionalisation, punctuated by critical junctures—most notably the 2012 London Olympics—and shaped by evolving policy priorities from access to quality and equity.

While the British model illustrates how structured multi-actor collaboration can support sustainable service delivery, it also highlights persistent challenges in equity, financial dependency, and professional capacity. Ultimately, this case provides a meaningful example of how extra-curricular services can evolve within a public education ecosystem, offering conceptual and institutional insights relevant to the broader comparative study of youth sports policy, educational governance, and the role of non-formal learning in holistic development.

## 6. Limitations and Future Research

This study, while providing a historical-institutional analysis of UK after-school sports policy, acknowledges certain limitations. As a qualitative review focused primarily on national-level policy documents, it does not capture the granular, operational realities or stakeholder perspectives at the school and community levels. Furthermore, the use of historical institutionalism, though insightful, means alternative theoretical frameworks—such as implementation science or network governance theory—could offer complementary interpretations of the policy process.

Future research should address these gaps through empirical and comparative investigations. A critical next step is an in-depth examination of the operational mechanisms and service delivery models in practice. Mixed-methods research, incorporating case studies of specific local authorities or school clusters, surveys, and stakeholder interviews, could reveal how the tripartite governance framework functions on the ground. Key lines of inquiry include the practical coordination between schools and external sports providers, the innovation and adaptation of delivery models in response to local needs, and the resource allocation processes that determine service accessibility and quality. Concurrently, research should systematically explore the foundational experiences and quality assurance practices that constitute effective service provision. Employing methods like grounded theory, future studies could identify and analyse the core components of quality—such as staff training, safeguarding protocols, inclusive programming, and outcome evaluation—and how these are developed and sustained across diverse settings. Comparative case studies could distinguish between context-specific practices and transferable principles of effective quality assurance. Finally, longitudinal and cross-national comparative studies would significantly enhance the field. Tracking the long-term development of these services and their adaptation to socio-economic or public health challenges would provide insights into system resilience. Comparing the UK's approach with systems in other nations (e.g., Canada, Australia, or Nordic countries) would help delineate which aspects of policy and practice are uniquely contextual and which represent broader principles for effective after-school sports provision.

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