

SPORTING OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH FORMAL EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND: LESSONS FROM THE LEARNING THROUGH SOCCER PROGRAMME (LTSP)

Ann Bourke Quinn School of Business, University College, Dublin, Ireland

Context

The details of specialist schools which target and provide support for the development of young athletes during formal schooling are provided in an EU Commission Report (2004). There are no such schools in Ireland; in fact, the role of sport in primary and secondary schools is marginal, due mainly to a poor infrastructure and lack of investment in facilities (Bourke, 2004). Houlihan (2003) presents the various perspectives on sports politics and policy highlighting the role of interest groups, motivations and allocation of resources. This paper reviews Irish educational policy with respect to developing young talented athletes during formal schooling noting policy variations across borders. Drawing on a case study [Learning through Soccer Programme, at Larkin Community College] insights are provided on an opportunity to develop sporting talent during formal second level schooling.

The paper consists of six parts. In part one, the factors which influence government education policy formulation are outlined. Part two focuses on the variations in the role of sport during second level schooling in many EU member states. Current initiatives to develop young athletes in Ireland are also detailed. Part three describes the essence of the Learning through Soccer Programme (LTSP): its history, aims and objectives, management features and its key stakeholders. In part four, the research objectives and methodology used for the project are outlined. Drawing on theory, secondary and primary data, insights are provided in part five on policy issues and good practice in programme design, and delivery. The final part of the paper discusses the main findings and implications for future programme offerings and policy formulation.

Methods

The aims of the study were as follows (a) to ascertain Irish government policy in relation to the role of sport in second level schools, (b) to identify the main barriers to embedding sport within the school curriculum and (c) using the Learning through Soccer Programme as a case study, to identify its key 'success' factors and ascertain the potential to replicate this programme at national level. The research draws on secondary and primary data. Secondary sources used include reports, curriculum documentation, articles and press releases in relation to sport and education, government and various agency web pages, reports/publications compiled on sport in the formal education context. Primary data were collected through personal interviews and a self administered questionnaire between January and March 2005. Purposive sampling was used to select the interviewees – individuals representing the Department of Education and Science (DES), the Vocational Education Committee (VEC) and Larkin Community College. Convenience sampling was used to select our student sample population. Fifty five students completed the questionnaire designed to (i) compile a profile of the LTS programme participants, (ii) identify the reasons why the programme is an attractive option for some students and (iii) the positive and negative features of the programme. Questionnaire data were analysed using SPSS.

Results

The specialist sports schools in many EU countries typically have high quality training facilities and coaching support, as well as specialist education support and flexibility to help young athletes combine their sport and compulsory education. The orientation of these schools may be *general* or *elite performance* – in some countries both types of schools exist (EU Commission Report, 2004). Various institutions offer second level schooling in Ireland: secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools (www.des.ie). Programme offerings have mainly an academic focus – an exception being the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). This programme offers more practical subjects to students, and includes a sports module which is optional.

The Irish Junior Cycle Physical Education curriculum is very ambitious in its aims to develop talented youths. However, many primary and secondary schools are poorly endowed in terms of sports facilities, resources and equipment (Connor, 2003). Timetable constraints exist - PE is often relegated to accommodate other academic subjects. The LTS Programme was launched as part of the Irish government's stay at school initiative and is designed for 'at risk' students in 'disadvantaged' areas of Dublin's inner city (Molloy, 2004). Our research reveals that (i) the profile of LTSP students has changed since its inception (ii) LTSP students have a better school attendance record than other students at the school (iii) over half the LTSP students surveyed plan to complete the Leaving Certificate (iv) students' self confidence has been raised and (v) managing the programme is demanding and constantly under review.

Discussion

Students and parents tend to be conservative in relation to educational paths – the LTSP was not an instant success. However, due to the personal commitment of many individuals, it has attracts an increasing number of students from the inner city each year. The case study provides a formula for replication in other schools however, it is unlikely to be implemented as parents, teachers and many students consider sport to be distinct from school - a leisure pursuit. Two other factors which may limit the replication of such a programme at national level are management demands and funding.

References

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Author contact: anne.bourke@ucd.ie