

Early Selection in Swedish Youth Sport – a Rare or Common Practice?

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Aim

During the last decade there has been a growing body of research concerning children's rights and child protection in sport, and early intensive training is identified as a potential risk (David, 2005). Although research shows that it is not possible to foresee late success, early elite training which includes early specialization and early selection (the tendency to select a small number of children under 13 years of age from a larger group and put them in a special team or group that receive extra training and other resources) seems to be more and more common in Swedish youth sport today. There are many potentially problematic aspects related to early selection practices among children, and more knowledge is needed about a number of questions that concern for example its prevalence (how common is it?), its consequences (what does it imply in terms of intensive training? How does it affect children?), and how clubs legitimize early selection (why are children selected early?). The aim of this study was to make an explorative mapping of the occurrence of early selection in Swedish youth sport. The research questions were: How common is early selection in youth sport? Is there a variation according to sport, region and gender and, in that case, how does the pattern look like? In what ways do clubs or coaches justify early selection in youth sport?

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The prevailing situation in many countries is that youth sport is characterized by early talent identification, selection and specialization (David, 2005). This situation has long been questioned and studies point to e.g. the medical risks of excessive training in young years (Jayanthi et al, 2013). Researcher also show that it is a fine line and a difficult balance between starting early with intensive elite sport and having a "normal" childhood (Martindale et al, 2005; Baker et al, 2017). In addition, studies show that overemphasizing a child's talent can lead to problems such as overtraining, burnout and stress fractures, since the talent development models that are applied seldom is based on the best interests of the child, but rather on subjective ideas of what is required for future sports success (Donnelly, 2008). The theoretical starting point is that the supply of sport, including youth sport, in society is not a coincidence but a result of a socially constructed demand.

Method

The mapping was done in five different sports (alpine skiing, football, ice hockey, figure skating and tennis). A greater emphasize was placed on football and the sample consisted of the 90 largest youth football clubs, and the 10-15 largest clubs in the four remaining sports. In total, 135 clubs from four different regions in Sweden were part of the mapping. The mapping was done in a qualitative way. In a first step information was gathered from the clubs' web pages (youth programs, policies, team lists, etc) and follow up interviews with coaches and club representatives were made in the next step. Questions guiding the interview were 1) Does selection occur where players/athletes are placed in different groups according to their ability? In that case: 2) At what age? 3) Does it involve both boys and girls? 4) How is the selection done? 5) What is the reason behind the selection? The data analysis consisted of a descriptive and an analytic part. The analyses was guided by a socio-cultural perspective as well as ideas from the new sociology of childhood where the commodification of children has been highlighted.

Results

Preliminary findings show that selecting children are more common than rare in some sports, especially football and tennis. In those sports selecting children to special academies, teams or groups appear to be a natural practice in many clubs. In figure skating there are certain ability tests that serve as selection instruments. Alpine skiing seems to be the most inclusive sport among the five studied – everyone was welcome to participate (if they knew how to ski). Early selection practices were more prevalent in some regions and in football they were more common in boys' football than in girls'. The clubs justify selection mainly by stating that i) it is in the best interest of (all) children, ii) parents require selection practices, and iii) all the other clubs do, so why should we not do it.

Conclusion and Implication

The area needs to be further explored but considering the potential risks with early selection practices, sport federations and clubs must be aware of and reconsider the way children's sport is carried out. The way clubs justify early selection practices imply that clubs need more knowledge about what it means to organize sport in the best interest of the child.

References

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