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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SCHOOL SPORTS CLUBS FOR POPULARIZATION OF SPORT AS DETERMINED BY A SURVEY AMONG ACTIVISTS OF POLISH SPORTS ASSOCIATIONS

Key words: Project "Sport for All Children", school sports clubs, "Youth Sports", diagnostic questionnaire for Polish Sports Associations.

ABSTRACT

In 1994 a national project "Sport for All Children" was launched in Poland, which resulted, among others, in the foundation of school sports clubs (SSCs). The data gathered by the authors showed over 6,700 active SSCs in Poland in 2007. The purpose of this paper was to characterize the activities of SSCs from the perspective of representatives of Polish Sports Associations. The knowledge of opinions of sports activists helped determine the significance of SSCs in popularization of sport in Poland. A diagnostic questionnaire was used as a research tool; the significance of SSCs was assessed with a questionnaire developed by the authors. The study was carried out at the turn of 2006 and 2007 and involved all the incorporated national sports associations in Poland. The presented results point to a significant contribution of the SSCs to the development of the majority of youth sports in Poland, which is confirmed both by figures and opinions of activists of Polish Sports Associations.

INTRODUCTION

The goals of physical education can be attained not only during physical education lessons, but also with leisure-time activities in a school sports club (SSC). Article 7 of the Act on Physical Education and Sport grants legal status to those clubs; students, parents, and teachers can all become SSC members. SSC activities remain within the framework of the Associations Incorporation Act of April 7, 1989; the clubs are subject to registration by the district prefect. The objective of school sports clubs is to organize sports activities and events at school, and encourage all students to participate in their leisure

time in sports and recreational activities. Parents play a supportive role, pay membership fees, and may also act as club sponsors. The initiator of the idea of school sports clubs perceived those associations as active at the school level or, at the most, within the community. In practice, however, their range of activities has been much more extensive, frequently crossing the Polish borders [9].

A. Dąbrowski in his exemplifications of new initiatives within extracurricular forms of physical education defines the SSCs as "a new form and new way of active, healthy and enjoyable leisure activities". He also reflects on SSCs stability and potential for long-standing function, and believes

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that the initiative “might help fight the tendency for physical fitness to decline, and increase the health potential of Polish children and adolescents” [1, pp. 162-163].

The first school sports clubs were set up in Poland in 1994. Free of charge supply of sports equipment as well as easy access to the financial resources of the “Sport for All Children” programme spurred their rapid development. Organizational and financial support from local the local authorities also played a considerable role. According to official statistics, 6,021 traditional sports clubs were operating in Poland in 2006; the data gathered by the authors in 2007 showed over 6,700 active school sports clubs in Poland [8].

The founders of school sports clubs planned that the clubs would popularize sport in the school environment. The goals to pursue included “enhancement of competitiveness”, “identification of sport talents”, and formation of instrumental attitude towards sport: “... we would like to remind you that sport is the best and the healthiest pastime. Practised with friends, it can be a lot of fun” [3, pp. 3-6].

However, a diagnostic survey carried out among SSC activists ten years after the first school sports clubs had been founded revealed that their objectives were ambiguous. Over 79% of the respondents perceived sports training as the principal goal; a similar percentage emphasized recreational purposes. Regular rather than sporadic participation in sports events was preferred. Based on questionnaire results the clubs were divided into three categories. The overwhelming majority (73%) of respondents defined their sports clubs as “mixed, i.e., both sport and recreation-oriented”. Almost 20% of SSCs were included in the category of a “sports” club; training or/and regular participation in sports competitions were their sole goals. “Recreation-oriented” clubs (7%) emphasized recreation, and, possibly, sporadic participation in sports events [6].

An important indicator of the contribution of SSCs to youth sport is the number of clubs undertaking activities of the “Youth Sport” Project. SSCs have participated in the project since 1995. Although, initially, the involvement of SSCs in sports events was rather insignificant, the training process and financial aid aimed at supporting their activities resulted in a growing number of SSC members participating in inter-regional youngster championships and Polish championships. After the

twelve-year implementation of the “Youth Sport” Project, numerous communities had already developed an organisational model of coaching young talents, which was rooted in the idea of co-operation between SSCs and sports association (incorporated company) training senior professionals. The model proved beneficial to both parties. The proportion of SSCs to other sports organizations participating in sports events of the Project increased from 7% in 1996 to 37% in 2006. A growing number of SSCs were engaged in children and youth competition in both common and less popular sports [7].

The purpose of the present paper is to describe the activities of SSCs from the perspective of representatives of Polish Sports Associations, who organize various sports competitions, cooperate with different sports clubs, represent Polish sport abroad, and prepare Polish representations to participate in international sports competitions. Getting acquainted with the opinions of sports activists helped assess the significance of SSCs in popularization of sport in Poland.

METHODS

The data on the activities of SSCs was obtained from activists of Polish Sports Associations by means of a diagnostic questionnaire. The research tool (“Questionnaire for SSC activity evaluation by Polish Sports Associations”) was developed by the authors and consisted of two parts: a cover letter and the questionnaire. The letter provided information about the origins of the studies of SSC activities, their course, results and aims; it also explained confidentiality policy in regards to respondent anonymity and use of survey data; also instructions were provided on how to fill in the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 27 questions; seventeen close-ended, 9 open-ended, and 1 half open-ended. The questions concerned the number of SSCs active in particular sports of interest to individual sports associations, financial support from the association’s budget, the role of a SSC in popularization of the sport, achievements of SSC competitors, and the participation of SSC activists in the association’s activities. The questionnaires were distributed to respondents by electronic mail; addresses were obtained from the e-mail address database of the Ministry of Sport. Such a procedure has not been yet mentioned in

research publications; however, it has proved much more efficient than possible alternatives; the advantages included no postage or printing costs and time-saving distribution.

The study was carried out at the turn of 2006 and 2007; all the incorporated national sports associations were included in the survey. Seventy questionnaires were sent out; they were returned by 65 associations (93%).

The tables present data concerning the number and percentage of responses; mean SSC-related expenditure from an association budget, standard deviation and median were calculated. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test revealed that the distribution of SSC-related expenditure was significantly different from normal ($p < 0.01$). Statistical differences in respondents' support for the significance of SSC activities were checked with nonparametric Mann-Whitney U test and Kruskal-Wallis test. Statistical significance was set at $p > 0.05$.

RESULTS

Number of incorporated SSCs involved in sports of interest to a particular association

The SSCs were active within 62 (95%) Polish Sports Associations; only Wu-Shu, Angling and English Billiards Associations noted no SSC involvement. The Polish Golf Association does not register any clubs, and the Polish Ringo Association is a federation of individuals, and not legal entities. However, its secretary-general informed us that SSCs had been regularly involved in championship events organized by the association for over 10 years; the Warsaw and Masovia Youth Olympics gather over 100 middle schools with ringo school sports clubs. The diagnostic questionnaire demonstrated that in twenty-one (34%) sports associations, the number of incorporated SSCs was higher than or equal to the number of other incorporated organizations. The Polish Ski Association had the highest percentage of incorporated SSCs (90%), including 287 school sports clubs representing cross-country skiing, and 77 Alpine skiing. The Polish Gymnastics Association incorporates 315 clubs, including 271 (86%) school sports clubs; the Polish Orienteering Association incorporates 93 clubs, including 76 (82%) SSCs and the Polish Floorball Federation incorporates 53 clubs, including 42 (79%) SSCs.

Participation of the SSCs in sports and recreation events

SSCs have organized sports and recreation events under the auspices of 48 associations (74%). The number and percentage of associations involving SSCs in their sports and recreation events were even higher, i.e. 62 (95%). An identical number of associations organized Polish Championships and Polish Cup events with participation of SSCs; 56 associations (86%) included SSC members in international events in or outside Poland. The majority of respondents, i.e. 47 (72%), declared that SSCs participated in competitions of the "Youth Sports" Project.

Sports achievements of SSC competitors

The respondents reported that Polish youth teams representing sports of 58 associations (89%) included SSC athletes. Senior national teams of 50 associations (77%) also comprised current or former SSC members.

The sports achievements of youth teams comprising SSC competitors are considerable and can be perceived as a planned target of SSC activities (Tomik 2007). An additional random outcome of activities of SSCs was their competitors' participation in professional senior teams. This was a result of some SSCs reaching sports and organizational standards and enabling their members to become involved in highest-level competitions in a given sport.

The following teams participated in senior-level competitions: MUKS Poznań in the Polish Women's Basketball League (top league teams, 2007/2008 season); SSC "Roben" Środa Śląska and SSC "Lis" Kościerzyna in the First League of Women's Handball; SSC ZSME "Zagłębie" Sosnowiec and MUKS Janów Katowice in the First Ice Hockey League. A team of SSC "Kormoran" from Bydgoszcz and SSC "Białoleka" from Warsaw won the second place in the Women's World Canoe Polo Championships in Essen in 2002. The competitors of SSC "Dęby" Osiedlisko and SSC "Demony" Miejska Górka participated in the European Senior Baseball Championships.

Individual SSC athletes were also winners of world, European and Polish senior championships. Beata Mikołajczyk from SSC "Kopernik" Bydgoszcz won a silver medal in European Senior Canoe Kayak Championships. Archeress Justyna Mospinek from SSC "Piątka" Zgierz earned the 14th

place at the Olympic Games in Athens in 2004; she then won the team bronze medal at the European Archery Championships held in Athens in 2006. At the World Championships in Leipzig, she finished 5th in the team competition, and 8th individually. Rafał Wieruszewski from SSC “Orkan” Środa Wielkopolska teamed up in 4 × 400 m relay winning a bronze medal at the European Championships in Athletics in Goteborg (2006). Marek Piekarski and Krzysztof Lipiński from SSC Nowiny Wielkie took part in the Winter Olympic luge competitions in Turin. A top senior swimming club SSC “Unia” Oświęcim earned the 4th place at the Summer Polish Championships of 2006 and All-Polish Championships in 2007. Another athlete from the same club, Iwona Prędecka, won a gold medal in the 200m breaststroke. Joanna Budzis from BUKS Warszawa teamed up in 4 × 200 m freestyle relay; she earned the second place at the European Senior Championships. Also a significant number of SSCs have been taking part in senior-level swimming competitions.

An SSC “AS” Zielona Góra competitor won the 3rd place in tumbling at the World Senior Acrobatics Championships, while Joanna Drabik from SSC “Pałac Młodzieży” Warszawa became the Polish champion in trampoline jumping. Hubert Łopatko from SSC “Top 54” Biała Podlaska won the third place at the World Billiards Championships of 2004. Polish Senior Judo Championships winners included Urszula Sadkowska from SSC “Rekord” Olsztyn and Łukasz Bałanda from SSC “Conrad” Gdańsk. Patrycja Kotlarz and Katarzyna Czuba from LUKS “Damis” Krynica won bronze medals at the European Senior Kick-Boxing Championships. The Polish 2005 senior-level pentathlon champion was an athlete from SSC “5” Ostrołęka Piotr Koprzenicki. In 2006, Joanna Łochowska from SSC Zielona Góra won a gold medal at the Polish Senior Weightlifting Championships. SSC “Nefryt” Lubartów competitors represented Poland at the Canicross World Championships. Aleksandra Gross of SSC “Zryw” Słomczyn and Jan Szymański and Paweł Milewski of SSC “Ambra-Sprandi-Rollsport” Warszawa participated in the European Senior Championships in speed skating. Monika Pietkiewicz and Marta Smętek of LUKS Ornet and Tomasz Lewandowski of LUKS “Pełcz” Górki Noteckie won medals at the Polish Senior Table Tennis Championships. Members of SSC “Absolwent”

Siedlec and SSC “Orły” Suwałki entered the Polish national floorball team.

SSC participation in the activities of Polish Sports Associations

Polish Sports Association activists declared that SSCs were represented in their collegiate bodies (54 of 65 respondents, i.e. 83%) and conventions (57 of 65 respondents, i.e. 88%), and that SSCs should have the same status as other associated organizations (59 of 65 respondents, i.e. 91%), and they were perceived consistently (56 of 65 respondents 86%).

SSC-related costs in budgets of Polish Sports Associations

Forty-six respondents (71%) revealed that SSCs requested financial assistance which was granted by a total of 45 respondents (70%). SSC-related allocation from the association budget was specified by 64 of 65 respondents. The mean 2006 allocation reached nearly 163 thousand PLN. The highest 2006 contribution was made by the Polish Football Association (1 million 645 thousand PLN), whereas 19 associations (30%) did not give SSCs any financial support. The distribution of SSC-related expenditure by the Polish Sports Association proved significantly different from normal (Table 1).

Table 1. SSC-related allocations from budgets of Polish Sports Associations

Thousands PLN	Number of associations (n)	%	n cumulated	% cumulated
0	19	29.69	19	29.69
0.1–200	26	40.63	45	70.31
201–400	14	21.88	59	92.19
401–600	1	1.56	60	93.75
601–800	3	4.69	63	98.44
801–1,000	0	0.00	63	98.44
1,001–1,200	0	0.00	63	98.44
1,201–1,400	0	0.00	63	98.44
1,401–1,600	0	0.00	63	98.44
1,601–1,800	1	1.56	64	100.00
No data	1	1.61	100	
Total	65	Min-max: 0–1645 (thousands PLN); \bar{x} = 162.89; s = 254.09; me = 65		

Kolmogorov-Smirnov test: $d=0.26$; $p<0.01$

Opinions of Polish Sports Association activists concerning the significance of SSC activities

A “very significant”, “significant”, and “insignificant” contribution of SSCs to the raising of the level of sports was mentioned by representatives of 16 (25%), 35 (55%), and 11 (17%) respondents, respectively. Only an activist of the Polish Golf Association did not note any significance of SSC activity. The role of SSCs in popularization of various sports among children and adolescents was perceived as “very big”, “big”, and “small” by 24 (37%), 29 (47%), and 9 (14%) respondents, respectively. The Mann-Whitney U-test results did not demonstrate a statistical difference in respondents’ perception of the role of SSC in popularization of sport among children and adolescents and in increasing the level of sports (p=0.388) (Table 2).

Table 2. The significance of SSCs in sports of interest to particular sports associations

Response	The role of SSC in			
	Popularization of sports of interest to particular sports associations among children and adolescents		Increasing the level of sports of interest to particular associations	
	n	%	n	%
Very significant	24	36.92%	16	25.00%
Significant	29	44.62%	35	54.69%
Insignificant	9	13.85%	11	17.19%
None	1	1.54%	1	1.56%
No response	2	3.08%	1	1.56%

Mann-Whitney U test: p=0.388

Other questionnaire responses also emphasized an invaluable role of SSCs in children and adolescents’ involvement in physical activity. Almost all responses were “yes” and “certainly yes”. The variance analysis did not reveal any significant differences between the respondents as to the effects of SSCs on all the four issues concerning school sport (F=1.571, p=0.197) (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

Comprehensive discussion on SSC activities is not possible yet as research into the area has been very scarce. The issue has been addressed mainly by the authors of the present paper. Thus, a comparison with other results poses certain problems.

The data obtained from the questionnaire concerning the number of SSCs shows that, after ten years since their establishment, the school sports clubs exert a significant influence on Polish sport; almost all Polish Sports Associations recognize the contribution of SSCs. Over 30% of the associations incorporate more SSCs than traditional clubs dating back to the early 20th century. This proves the commitment of teachers of physical education, who, according to some other results, are the main initiators of SSC foundation [6]. However, according to Z. Ważny, individual elements of physical education for adolescents in Poland do not form a coherent system; they are rather an effect of some initiatives of parents, extracurricular and sports organizations such as Schools of Sport Championships. This conclusion seems to be confirmed by the lack of a significant relationship between the number of SSCs, the

Table 3. Polish Sports Association activists’ opinion on the significance of SSC activity

Response	1. Improvement in children and adolescents’ fitness		2. Development of youth sport		3. Popularization of sport among children and adolescents		4. Identification of sports talents	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
“Certainly YES”	33	50.77	33	50.77	38	58.46	24	36.92
“YES”	32	94.12	32	91.43	26	40.00	41	63.08
“NO”	0	0	0	0	1	1.54	0	0
“Certainly NO”	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Unanswered	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Analysis of variance (Kruskal-Wallis test): F=1.571; p=0.197

number of schools with expanded sports curricula and Schools of Sport Championship in the country [10].

The significant influence of SSCs on youth sport has been confirmed by annual analyses of competitions held as part of the Ministry project "Youth Sport." The data are undoubtedly reliable and objective as they have been based on uniform point-grading systems by which a competitor is assessed while taking part in a cycle of sports competition. The number of SSCs involved in synchronized swimming, luge, baseball, biathlon, orienteering, and women's football exceeds the number of other sports organizations. In 2006, the SSCs won over some traditional sports organizations in such sports as badminton, synchronized swimming, orienteering, figure skating, luge, canoe polo, women's basketball, and floorball [7].

Some SSCs reached a high sports and organizational level, which enabled their members to become involved in the top level competitions, also in the senior category. The legal status of SSCs allowing unconstrained activity, and a long and successful work period with no organizational barriers certainly became a predominant motive to continue coaching individual and team competitors.

Letters of intent issued by the Minister of National Education A. Łuczak and Head of the Department for Physical Culture and Tourism S. Paszczyk predicted that SSCs would be extremely valuable in the process of identification of talented youth. Competitors who had originated from SSCs, and subsequently pursued a top-level sports career are numerous. The phrase "some of you may even reach the Olympic podium" has proved to be prophetic [3, p. 6]. Justyna Kowalczyk, who started her career with SSC "Biały" Kasina Wielka, won the bronze medal at the 2006 Turin Winter Olympics. Volleyball world vice-champion, Grzegorz Szymański had started with SSC MKS "Ostrovia" Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski, and tragically deceased volleyball player Arkadiusz Gołaś with UMKS MOS "Wola" Warszawa. Anna Podolec, a leading player of Polish national volleyball team, who won the European Championship in 2004, had started practicing volleyball in UMKS Łańcut.

Activists from the majority of Polish Sports Associations declared that the ministerial subsidies from the Fund for Physical Culture Development had been allocated to purchase sports equipment for SSCs. The money transferred for this purpose

through Polish Sports Associations amounted to 121.5 million PLN between 1994 and 2006 [8]. Unfortunately, no regulations concerning the proper use of the equipment had been devised. It happens that gaining new equipment is the main or the only aim of founding a club or a section; the arrival of sports equipment did not entail further and systematic work with children and adolescents.

Some questionnaire items were aimed at gaining knowledge on the respondents' subjective opinions concerning the significance of SSCs in popularization of sport among children and adolescents as well as increasing the level of sports of interest for particular associations. The respondents were also requested to give their statements on SSCs contribution to the improvement of physical fitness of children and adolescents, development of youth sport, popularization of sport among children and adolescents and identification of sports talents. The obtained opinions were highly enthusiastic. However, it should be kept in mind that subjective beliefs, and not objective empirical results were represented. Thus, they should be treated with caution as "they result not only from reason and logic, but also emotions and wishes" [5, p. 141]. The fact that the survey was being performed at the request of the Ministry of National Education and Sport, i.e. an institution allocating extra funds to sports associations, could also have caused some bias. While determining the significance of SSCs in Polish sport, two areas should be considered: "Sport for All Children" and "Youth Sport." The former is a commonly available educational process aimed at awakening interest in sport. It should result in "stimulation of developmental processes and promotion pro-health behaviour through beneficial effects of movement and physical exercise." "Youth Sport", on the other hand, includes adolescents talented in sports, and "(...) coached following the principles of a long-term training programme" [4, pp. 15-16].

It seems that effects of activities should be mainly expected in the first area. However, access to SSCs appears limited. Only in every fourth school did pupils have a chance to join a local school sports club; only does every tenth pupil participate in sport and recreational activities of SSCs [8]. Thus, some might perceive the actual function of SSCs as negligible; only a small percentage of children and adolescents in different types of schools became involved. However, if it had not been for the idea of SSCs, participation in

organized training would have only been possible within traditional sports associations with youth sections. The latter, according to the Central Statistical Office, are fewer than SSCs [2]. Recreation through sports competition would have been organized only in those regions whose authorities tend to allocate funds to extracurricular sports activities.

The presented results allow us to conclude that the contribution of SSCs to the development of youth sport in the majority of sports has been quite significant, which is confirmed both by figures and subjective opinions of activists of various Polish Sports Associations.

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