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SPORT MANAGEMENT

Sport Academies in Schools: Examining Their Rise in Popularity

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Abstract

This paper looks at the increasing number school sports academies in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. An examination of the information available via literature and public school websites shows that the number of school sports academies grew from two schools in 2005 to 30 schools in 2018. There are 12 sport specializations offered across the 30 schools, with ice hockey available at 22 of the schools. This growth in the number of school sports academies can be traced back to the Province of Alberta's Alternative Programs policy, which allows school districts to develop local courses that cater to the needs of their students, and the principle of opening the boundaries between school boards and schools throughout the province. The opening of the boundaries has allowed students and their parents to choose where they want to attend school anywhere in Alberta (student mobility), including the option of a school that offers a school sports academy program as an alternative to the regular physical education program.

A number of public schools at all levels (primary, middle, and secondary) in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, offer a school sports academy (SSA) alternative in place of the regular physical education (PE) program to students. The number of SSAs grew from two schools in 2005 to 30 schools in 2018, which represents approximately 7.5% of the 398 schools in Edmonton. This paper looks at some of the factors that have contributed to this growth in the number of

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SSAs. The term "regular" for the purposes of this paper refers to the PE program that would be offered to all students in that school.

Participation in sports at school can affect a student's personal growth (Pope, 2002). School sports participation influences students' personal health (Beets & Pitetti, 2005), improves their understanding of the importance of physical activity (PA), increases their self-confidence and self-esteem, and helps in their social and cognitive development (Bailey et al., 2009). School sports participation also enriches the school community and provides students a range of different learning experiences to "learn about themselves" (Pope, 2002, p. 91). The World Health Organization asserted that sports participation improves self-esteem, self-perception, and psychological well-being and in a Council of Europe report stressed the important contribution that sport makes to processes of personality development (Svoboda, 1994). There are also the negative aspects of sport participation. Grupe and Kruger (as cited in Pope, 2002) observed that sports participation can give rise to less desirable attributes such as being too competitive, being discriminatory, putting too much emphasis on winning, and being too violent. Plus, there is also little to no empirical data to support the notion that sport builds character, even though it is known that young people value participation in sport (Clough et al., 1993). Considering the pros and cons of sports being taught in schools, Gilroy (as cited in Pope, 2002) believes that the positive aspects can overcome the negatives if the sport is taught properly in a caring and safe environment that is "guarded from the perils of many adult agendas" (p. 91).

Current PE programs are important in providing and influencing the physical literacy (PL) and PA patterns that students need to live a healthier life (Bailey et al., 2009; Beets & Pitetti, 2005; Roetert & MacDonald, 2015). PL is the ability of a person to move with competence and confidence in a variety of physical activities in multiple environments that benefit the healthy development of the whole person (Lundvall, 2015). The development of PL is important for every individual (young and old), because it is related to the holistic nature of a person, the importance of their relationship to the environment in which they live, and the role of movement in the development of both cognitive functions and sense of self (Jurbala, 2015). Way et al. (2010) wrote in their Canadian Sport Policy report that PL is

recognized as "a precondition for the lifelong participation in, and enjoyment of sport" (p. 7). Way et al. added that the development of PL begins during childhood and improves throughout the child's early years of growth. Jurbala (2015) stated that the development of PL is characterized as the attainment of a lengthy list of locomotor, object control, and balance skills, without which "a child will have difficulty participating in any sport" (p. 370). Jurbala also contended that individuals are considered physically literate if they can perform the fundamental sports skills for the four basic environments of land, air, water, and ice. Further, Jurbala said that a physically literate individual moves with poise, economy, and confidence in a wide variety of physically challenging environments while applying intelligence and imagination.

PA is vital in enhancing the health and well-being of children and can help in the prevention of obesity (Goran et al., 1999; Janssen & LeBlanc, 2010) and of a future sedentary lifestyle that may lead to problems as an adult. Quality of life in later years can be influenced by PA patterns that are established in childhood and adolescence (Humbert, 2006). Ratey and Hagerman (2008) studied the effect of PA in optimizing brain function, in their 2003 study on a junior high school in Naperville, Illinois. The Naperville PA program stressed a variety of physical activities that were physically strenuous for the students (Sattelmair & Ratey, 2009). Ratey determined that there is a link between type of PA and academic performance (Tedx Talks, 2012), as Naperville students were scoring significantly higher than the national average in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS) test. PE4life, which was based on the Naperville PA program, implemented the PE4life program around the United States and also saw positive results. In a school in Titusville, Pennsylvania, the PE4life program implementation saw increased performance in standardized tests in reading and math from below state average to above state average by 17% and 18%, respectively (Sattelmair & Ratey, 2009). In an elementary school in Kansas City, Missouri, PE4life program implementation resulted in a reduced number of students on academic probation and improved literacy, plus a 67% drop in suspensions from the previous year (Sattelmair & Ratey, 2009). On the basis of their study, Ratey believes the type of PA can influence student academic performance

and behaviors (Tedx Talks, 2012). PA prepares the brain to learn. Ratey called PA "learning readiness" and contended that a side effect of PA is being healthy and that more schools should value the idea of preparing students for the "learning readiness" state (Tedx Talks, 2012).

For some students, there is a gap in what they want from PE class and what they experience in a PE class (Humbert, 2006). An SSA program as an alternative for the regular PE program can close the gap for students. If designed properly, an SSA program can provide the equivalent amount of PA and PL as a regular PE program. Grant and Pope (2007) felt that many of the fundamental skills taught in PE can be best expressed through sport along with teaching positive values about competition such as sportsmanship, fair play, teamwork, communication, and respect for others.

The benefits of teaching sport at school in place of a regular PE program are not supported by some scholars. Penney and Jess (2004) proposed that a futures-oriented PE program be developed through the activities that students will participate in as adults. They contended that it creates a better link to measure the importance of PE being taught in schools. An SSA program, where students are learning skills specific to a particular sport, would not be supported by Penney and Jess, because it does not prepare students for future life-related activities. Their view is that sports have been prioritized over focusing on which activities are best suited for the students. Jurbala (2015) would also not be in favor of an SSA that focuses on one sport, such as an ice hockey academy. Individuals would become very good on the ice, but what about their PL in the water or in the air? Roetert and MacDonald (2015) contended that PL is a lifelong process and that "physical literacy necessitates teaching a broad spectrum of movement activities from multiple categories and not relying on a sport model that appeals to only the highly skilled and competitive students" (p. 112). Lundvall (2015) pointed out that teaching movement for a specific sport does not lead to PL and that focusing on one sport equates to teaching a "single skill perspective" (p. 115). Therefore, Lundvall is not in favor of a sport teaching model, as sport is often associated with competition between children and/or adolescents, whereas PL is aimed at personal development and realization of individual potential.

SSAs in Alberta "come in all shapes and sizes and focus on different sports" (Balderson, 2015, p. 28). Some SSAs have been established to become centers for excellence to develop future elite athletes and still other SSAs have been created through a grassroots effort to meet the needs of the local population or school (Balderson, 2015; Pope, 2002).

As a person who has grown up with an interest in elite level sports, I (Douglas Leong) have always thought of the sports academy as a training center for highly athletically gifted individuals to train to become elite level athletes. My perspective goes back to the Cold War era when Eastern Bloc countries such as East Germany and the Soviet Union were seen as leading the way in developing sporting excellence based upon the number of medals that they had won at the Olympic Games from 1952 to 1988 (Green & Oakley, 2001). These two and other communist countries used sport and sporting success to achieve a measure of recognition and prestige over the West (Riordan, 2002). In an effort to keep up the Eastern Bloc countries in respect to Olympic medals won, Western nations began to take the development of sporting excellence more seriously and started to establish their own centers of excellence to copy what was happening in the Eastern Bloc countries (Green & Oakley, 2001). Canada adopted sports policies that were similar to the Soviet model (Houlihan, 1997) and, in 2002 through the Canadian Sport Policy report, called for the establishment of a Long-Term Athlete Development model, which laid the groundwork in the establishment of centers of excellence for elite athlete development throughout the country (Government of Canada, 2002).

The World Academy of Sport based in Manchester, England, is another example of an organization that focuses on creating centers of excellence for elite athlete development. The World Academy of Sport has partnered with International Baccalaureate schools throughout the world to create the highest possible quality of education for competitive (elite) athletes. The World Academy of Sport offers the Athlete Friendly Education Centre accreditation to schools that demonstrate support to their student athletes in achieving their education and athletic goals. Currently, 21 schools around the world have this accreditation.[1]

[1] https://www.worldacademysport.com/?view=sp&sp_sec=AFEC

In Alberta, the first two schools that focused on being centers of excellence were the National Sport School, founded in 1994, and the Edge School for Athletes, founded in 1999. These schools provided a flexible academic schedule for students who wanted to train during the school year. These two early provincial SSAs would not have been possible without the implementation of the Province of Alberta's Alternative Programs policy in 1988. This policy allowed local school boards to develop programs to cater to the needs of students who wished to pursue excellence in sport and academics (Way et al., 2010).

Elite athletes may also be drawn to SSAs because they get training time during school hours (Pope, 2002). Ericsson et al. (1993) argued that it takes approximately 10 years of training or 10,000 hr of deliberate practice to reach an elite level of performance. Because many of the training hours take place during the years that students are attending secondary school (Way et al., 2010), attending an SSA is one way that students get those training hours in. This seems to be a win-win situation for elite level athletes, but research has found that the link between deliberate practice and elite performance is not as strong as Ericsson et al. (1993) showed it to be (Macnamara et al., 2014).

Pope (2002) provided an example of a New Zealand SSA that was established as a grassroots effort focused on a local need. In place of the regular PE program, the SSA program focused on the sport of rugby at Aranui High School. The academy was created "as the hook to raise students' motivation and adjust their personal aspirations, particularly toward their vocational goals" (Pope, 2002, p. 94). The Aranui High School case study showed that if an SSA program could interest the students in sport, it could get them to focus on academics. The case study also showed that an SSA program is a viable alternative to the regular PE program for students. At the grassroots level, other reasons for local school boards to create a school sports academy include to increase enrollment, to retain students, to increase student and teacher engagement, and to provide parents an alternative choice of schooling for their children (Balderson, 2015).

In Alberta, the SSAs established to focus on elite athlete development and those established based on a local need can be distinguished by the types of students they attract and by the amount tuition fees

charged (Balderson, 2015). The elite development SSAs charge higher tuition fees[2] and draw students from outside their established school boundary area. The higher tuition fees go toward payment of coaching, scholarships, room, students' room and board, food, and all athletic-related travel. The goal of the students who attend elite SSAs is to earn a postsecondary scholarship (Balderson, 2015). The academies that are not focused on elite athlete development tend to focus more on individual skill development and have lower tuition costs[3] (Balderson, 2015). Students who attend the nonelite SSAs are usually from within the school's established boundary area.

Two provincial initiatives have allowed for the establishment of SSAs and their growing popularity. First, the province's Alternative Programs policy[4] allows local school boards to offer alternative educational programs if they determine there is sufficient demand. The Alternative Programs policy, therefore, provides the flexibility for schools to offer the SSA program as an alternative to a regular PE program to their students. The regular PE program must be offered to those who do not want to enroll in the alternative program. The second initiative was a change to the Alberta's School Act[5] in 1988. This change opened the boundaries between school boards and schools, therefore allowing for student mobility and for students and parents to choose a school that best meets their needs (Taylor & Mackay, 2008; Wagner, 1999).

Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Edmonton, Alberta, is located in Western Canada with a metropolitan population of 1.3 million and is Canada's sixth largest metropolitan region (Statistics Canada, 2017). Edmonton's River Valley park system is Canada's largest urban park with more than 160 km of maintained pathways, along with 20 major parks along the route (City of Edmonton, n.d.). Edmonton is known for its ice hockey team, the Edmonton Oilers Hockey club, and for one of the largest shopping malls in the world, West Edmonton Mall.

A normal school year in Alberta stretches over 10 months beginning in September and ending in June. Students in Edmonton

[2] Range from $15,000 to $30,000 CAD

[3] Range from $500 to $1,500 CAD

[4] https://www.alberta.ca/alternative-education-programs.aspx

[5] http://canlii.ca/t/53r8r

receive 950 instructional hours at the elementary and junior high school levels and 1,000 instructional hours at the senior high level during the school year (Edmonton Public Schools, 2014).

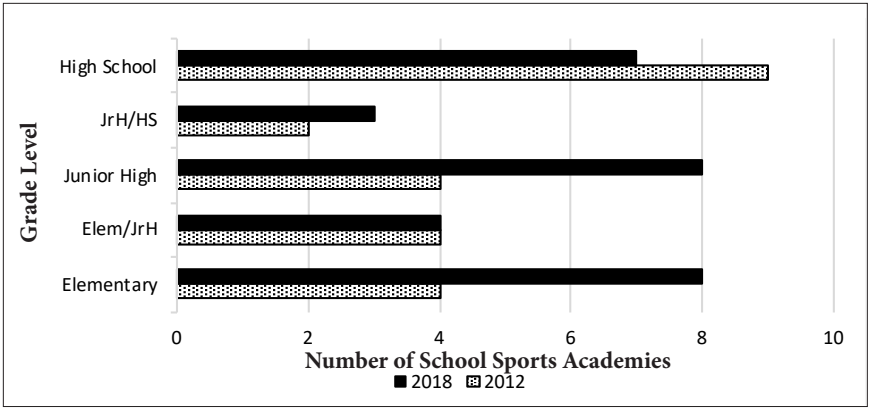
The Edmonton School District is viewed as an early leader in the creation of sports academies within the education system (Way et al., 2010). Locally Developed Courses (LDC) allowed by Alberta's Alternative Programs policy aided in the development of sport-oriented courses and the rise in the number of SSAs in the region. To get an understanding of the number of SSAs in the Edmonton region, we reviewed the literature; conducted a review of schools, school boards, and provincial sports organization websites; and had phone conversations with provincial sports organization personnel. SSA information was located on the 12 regional school board websites, which we cross-referenced to individual school websites. We grouped grades into the levels of elementary (Grades 1 to 6), junior high (Grades 7 to 9), and high school (Grades 10 to 12). We made no attempt to collect information on the specific curriculum offered at any of the sports academies.

In 2005, there were two SSAs in the Edmonton region (Vimy Ridge Academy and St. Francis Xavier High School). By 2012, this increased to 23 SSAs, which represented 25% of the total number (93) of SSAs in Alberta (Balderson, 2015). The Edmonton region includes school boards in the City of Edmonton and the communities of Leduc, Sherwood Park, St. Albert, Spruce Grove, Stony Plain, and Devon. The breakdown of the 23 SSAs were one private, 15 Catholic, and seven public. The breakdown by grade level was four elementary, four elementary/junior high, four junior high, two junior high/high school, and nine high school.

By early 2018, the number of SSAs had increased to 30 schools. Currently, 20 Catholic and 10 public SSAs operate in the Edmonton region. By grade level, there are eight elementary, four elementary/junior high, eight junior high, three junior high/high school, and seven high schools. Figure 1 shows an increase of eight SSAs at the elementary and junior high levels and a decrease of two at the high school level from 2012 to 2018.

Figure 1

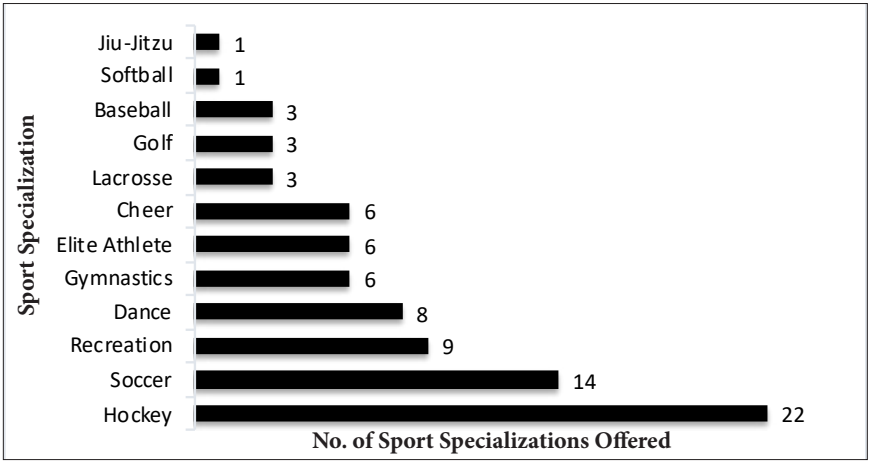
Number of School Sports Academies in the Edmonton Region



Data were also collected on the types of sport specializations offered at the SSAs (Figure 2). In total, there are 12 sport specializations in the Edmonton region. Ice hockey is offered at the most schools at 22, with soccer the next most popular at 14 schools. Six of the specializations focus on team sports[6] and the other six are individual[7] focused.

Figure 2

Sport Specializations Offered in the Edmonton Region School Sports Academies in 2018



[6] Baseball, cheer, hockey, lacrosse, soccer, softball

[7] Brazilian Jiu-Jitzu, dance, elite athlete, golf, gymnastics, recreation

Of note is that the growth in the past 6 years has been at the younger grade levels: elementary and junior high school. The decrease at the high school level could be a result of the lack of demand. At high school age (15 to 18), students start focusing on getting into a postsecondary institution, which may result in a switch of focus from sport to academics. In some cases, there is also less parental involvement and some parents allow their children to make their own decision of whether to continue at an SSA.

Discussion

Sports Organizations

Way et al. (2010) pointed out that the majority of the international elite SSAs work with their respective national sports organizations to ensure that the proper programs and instruction are being offered. Way et al. stressed that cooperation between schools and sports organizations is necessary for maximum efficiency and success of sports academies. They recommended five guiding principles to advance SSAs:

1. quality human resources (i.e. teachers, coaches, sport support services, etc.)
2. connections or partnerships with local sports organizations, provincial sports organization, and national sports organizations
3. proximity to world-class facilities or centers of excellence
4. flexibility of educational requirements
5. integration with "traditional stream" students

In conversations with personnel from four of the provincial sports organizations in the sports of gymnastics, lacrosse, golf, and softball, all of the individuals confirmed they were not involved in how the sport was being instructed at the SSAs. Access to expertise and resources, however, is made available when the SSAs request it. The provincial sports organizations were aware of the sport programs being offered in Edmonton region SSAs but seemed to be indifferent to wanting to be more involved in the teaching of their specific sport in any official capacity in schools.

On the basis of these conversations and information from websites, we conclude that most of the SSAs in the Edmonton region are

not focusing on elite athlete development except for the two schools affiliated with Hockey Alberta, a provincial sports organization.

Although a standardized SSA framework across the board is recommended by Way et al. (2010) and the Long-Term Athlete Development model, research has shown that successful SSAs have also been grassroots initiatives that account for the local factors based on physical and human resources, community connection, staff experience, and resilient leadership (Pope, 2002).

The provincial sports organizations could help the advancement of SSAs in the Edmonton region in the following ways:

1. be more involved with the SSAs in developing a sports curriculum to incorporate Long-Term Athlete Development model principles
2. assist in developing guidelines to distinguish biological age versus maturational age skills
3. develop a formal knowledge transfer mechanism between SSAs

Parental Involvement

Parents have an effect on whether their child attends an SSA, although their role and that of their child are different. Parents serve as a provider, interpreter, and role model of their young student athlete, who is effectively a user or consumer of the sport experience (Harwood et al., 2010). Parents who had boys enrolled in elite football[8] academies experienced four general dimensions of parental stress: academy processes and quality of communication (poor quality and regularity of feedback), match-related stressors (watching kids play—resultant anxieties around mistakes), sport–family role conflict (challenging nature of getting kids to matches—guilt associated with perceptions of neglect of other children), and school support and educational issues (making sure children finish their homework and study for exams; Harwood, et al., 2010). Further research in this area could determine why parents enroll their children in SSAs and what opportunities are available for students graduating from an SSA.

A development to monitor going forward in Alberta is the partnership of the private sector and local schools to operate the SSA.

[8] Referred to as soccer in North America

In 2015, the Foothills School Division in Southern Alberta entered into a partnership with Global Sports Academy (Campbell, 2015). This partnership allows the Foothills School Division to focus on academics and save money by outsourcing the cost of operating the SSA to someone else. This raises questions, how much control will the school division have on the sports curriculum being taught, and what extra costs will be borne by the parents for their children to be enrolled in the program? Will the potential extra costs be a barrier for those families that want an SSA experience for their children but cannot afford it?

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