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Original scientific paper

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ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PUPILS' INVOLVEMENT IN SPORTS IN SERBIA

INTRODUCTION

Participating in a sport or any kind of physical exercise contributes to a great extent to a healthier physical and psychological development of children. Benefits of sport and physical exercising as factors of prevention of various negative influences in the period of maturing of the youth, such as delinquency and different kinds of addiction, are treated in a great number of studies (Pate et al., 2000). Sedentary way of life is becoming more and more spread among the youth, therefore there is a great tendency to advocate healthy and active life style for children and youth in the developed European and American countries. The continuous decrease of physical activity and exercising within the family and then in social community, as well as reduced possibilities for everyday physical exercising of children in schools are stated as some of the major reasons for insufficient physical activity of the youth (Hardman, 2003).

Developed countries worldwide dedicate more and more significance to the role of physical education and sport in promotion of healthy life style and healthy food. It is thought that one of the major factors in formation of positive relations of the youth towards physical exercises and sport is PE instruction, i.e. students' positive attitude and relations towards PE classes (Carlson, 1995; Ennis, 1996; Portman, 1995; Robinson, 1990). It is clear that students who express negative attitudes and feelings towards PE instruction, in majority cases do not get involved in physical activities out of school (Carlson, 1995; Ennis, 1996; Portman, 1995; Robinson, 1990). The greatest number of authors dealing with studies of physical activity of children (Strong et al., 2005, Pate et al., 2006) recommend a minimum of 30 up to an optimum of 60 minutes of any physical activity in the course of one day. Since the time predicted for the realization of PE class within the national curriculum, of 3x45 minutes per

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week does not satisfy the recommended optimal time for doing physical exercises, it is very important that PE teachers stimulate and direct pupils to go in for some sports activities or physical exercise in their free time.

Sports activities appear in the syllabuses of PE instruction in Serbia, as one form of extracurricular activity. Schools have opportunities to form school clubs to gather children interested in particular sports branches and events. School clubs should be managed by PE teachers. Previously, this way of organization of extracurricular activities (the so called „sections”, clubs) functioned very well, therefore a large number of children was involved in various sports activities. However, after the political transition in Serbia, regardless of the attempts of new democratic Government to reform education in elementary school, the organization of sports activities within schools, as well as participation of PE teachers in them, was greatly reduced. As in other East European countries (Hamar et al., 2006), even in Serbia there are problems related to PE instruction because the majority of elementary schools in the Republic of Serbia lack material preconditions for its realization (Nikolić, 2001). Besides, even the schools that have the conditions for the organization of school sections and clubs, cannot organize them due to the problem of renting school facilities for PE instruction to private entities (Milanović, 2002). Additionally, there are problems regarding insufficient financing of PE teachers, so most of them are not motivated to get involved in additional activities with students. On the other hand, new Law on Sport is still not enacted in Serbia, so all the issues related to legal position and work of organizations in sports fields, as well as the problem of professional work in sport is still not legally regulated. Current legally unsolved position in sports field in Serbia is favourable for many private entities that start different sports schools and sports clubs which often employ inexperienced and insufficiently professionally-educated personnel to work with children. Great problems refer also to the professional qualification of the personnel who should work in sports clubs. Additionally, there is a general opinion among sports experts and professionals that a great number of children are included in some sports, although that is not substantiated by any official data because there are few researches that analyze children's engagement in extracurricular sports activities, as the way of organization of children's sports clubs.

This research was aimed at examining the involvement of senior grade pupils of elementary schools in sport, as well as at comparing the obtained data with the data from other countries.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample of subjects consisted of 417 pupils: 188 girls and 229 boys (average age = 13.65 years; SD = 731). The subjects were 7th and 8th grade pupils of two elementary schools in Belgrade, one of them situated in the city centre and the other in the suburban area. Both schools have optimal conditions for the realization of PE classes.

Instrument

The questionnaire was used in the research to obtain information about gender and age of pupils, as well as the type of sports activities they participate in during their free time.

Statistical data processing

For the obtained data the basic descriptive parameters (mean values, frequencies) were calculated. The data were processed using the statistical program SPSS 10.0 for Windows.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After the statistical data processing, the obtained results were analyzed. All the pupils have three 45-minute classes of PE weekly and 231 pupils (55%) additionally practice some sports in their free time. From the total number of girls, 54% are involved in some sports activity, while the percentage of boys involved in various sports activities (57%) is slightly higher. Some more recent studies in our country (Milanović, Radisavljević, 2007) indicate a slightly higher percentage of students who participate in a sports activity in their free time (58%), but the sample of subjects in that study included junior school pupils, who evidently join more additional sports activities than senior pupils, which was also confirmed in other researches (Pate et al., 2000).

According to those researches, a great number of children stops active involvement in some sport or some kind of physical exercising in puberty. From the aspect of elite sport and achievement of certain sports results, that also has no great significance, but if observed from the health-related aspect, it is very important that children and the youth are still motivated in order to continue their sports activities. This must be approached in an organized way, primarily through cooperation of parents and PE teachers, as well as with unavoidable support of the entire society.

Taking into account the percentage of all students who are involved in extracurricular sports activities, it can be noticed that in Serbia the percentage is lower than in some other countries (Pate et al., 2000, Klomsten et al., 2005). So for example, according to the data from Norway, where around 77% of state elementary school pupils are involved in some sports activity (Klomsten et al., 2005) in their free time, it can be concluded that the percentage of pupils involved in some sports activities in Serbia is considerably lower than in Norway. This fact indicates that there is a great number of children in our country, who are not involved in sports activity in an organized way in their free time. Reasons for this may be very different, but it can be supposed that transitional changes in Serbia are one of the leading reasons, because they prevented a great number of parents to support financially additional sports activities of their children, and school, as we have mentioned previously, had lost its function of the promoter and founder of sports clubs in local communities. In the developed countries, the organization of children's sports activities is mostly arranged through schools and PE teachers in collaboration with local sports clubs. This kind of cooperation also exists in the USA where the greatest number of children is involved in sports activities through school clubs or some clubs organized by schools and some local clubs, while much lower number of children (11%) are in clubs which are not in school organization (Pate et al, 2006). According to the obtained data from our research, a very small percentage of pupils (6%) is engaged in sports activities in school clubs or sections.

Pupils participate in great number of various sports in our country, but differences can be noticed in the interests of boys and girls, and there is no even distribution when it comes to selection of sports. Table 1 displays representations of sports in the entire sample. Team sports are the most frequent, first basketball (25.2%) and volleyball (21.2%), then football (12.9%). It is interesting that there is no great interest of students in handball, although it was a very popular sport in our country until recently. It can be presumed that the decrease of students' interest was caused by weaker results of our national handball teams at European and World competitions. Unlike similar researches abroad (Klomsten et al., 2005) our research shows that a very small percentage of students is involved in basic sports such as track and field athletics, swimming and gymnastics. Regardless of the fact that the involvement in this sport has a very positive influence on the regular growth and development of children, a very small number of children is engaged in these sports, mostly due to insufficient material investments in organization and promotion of these sports.

Table 1. Distribution of sports according to gender

Sport	Boys	Girls	Overall	%
Football	29	1	30	12.9
Water polo	11	0	11	4.7
Basketball	50	8	58	25.2
Dance	2	25	27	11.7
Volleyball	8	41	49	21.2
Tennis	3	7	10	4.3
Swimming	7	1	8	3.5
Handball	7	4	11	4.8
Martial Arts	10	9	19	8.2
Other sports	3	5	8	3.5
Overall	130	101	231	100

The results obtained in this research are similar to the results of some studies abroad according to some parameters (Klomsten et al., 2005), therefore it can be concluded that, for example, in our country as well as in other countries, girls mostly opt for various sports activities when compared to the boys, and that usually slightly lower percentage of girls is involved in sports activities than boys. Regardless of cultural differences in almost all countries all around the world it can be noticed that there are gender differences in the selection of sports, so in most cases boys opt more for sports such as boxing, martial arts, football, handball, ice hockey, while girls prefer participating in sports such as ballet, dance, ice skating and aerobic (Fasting, 2003, Klomsten et al., 2005). Girls opt more for those sports in which aesthetic component is stressed, while boys opt for those sports characterized by power, competing, challenge, velocity and team spirit (Koivula, 2001). In our sample of subjects, the most popular sports for girls are volleyball and dance, while the majority of boys involved in sport, opts for team sports with basketball and football in the first place. The interests of our students in particular sports greatly coincide with the interests of boys and girls in other countries, except that it must be noted that, when it comes to the selection of sports, good results achieved by our national teams play an important role in the children's opting for these sports. So for example, good results of the female volleyball national team attracted attention of great number of girls who, for this very reason, have chosen to train this sport.

CONCLUSION

Participating in a sport or any kind of physical exercise contributes to a great extent to a healthier physical and psychological development of children. The greatest number of authors dealing with studies of physical activity of children (Strong et al, 2005, Pate et al, 2005) recommend a minimum of 30 up to an optimum of 60 minutes of any physical activity in the course of one day. Since the time, predicted for the realization of PE class within the national curriculum, of 3 x 45 minutes per week does not satisfy the recommended optimal time for doing physical exercises, it is very important that PE teachers stimulate and direct pupils to go in for some sports activities or physical exercise in their free time. However, despite the attempts of new democratic Government to reform elementary school education, the organization of sports activities within schools, as well as participation of PE teachers in them was greatly reduced after the political transition in Serbia. Current legally unsolved position in sports field in Serbia is favourable for many private entities who open different sports schools and sports clubs which often employ inexperienced and insufficiently professionally-educated personnel to work with children. Additionally, there is a general opinion among sports experts and professionals that a great number of children participate in some sport, although that is not substantiated by any official data, because there are few researches that analyze children's engagement in extra sports activities, as well as data on the way of organizing sports clubs for children.

This research was aimed at examining the involvement of senior grade elementary school pupils in sport, as well as at comparing the obtained data with the data from other countries.

All the pupils had three classes of PE weekly and 231 pupils (55 %) additionally participate in some sports in their free time. From the total number of girls, 54 % are involved in some sports activity, and the most popular sports with girls are volleyball and dancing. A slightly higher percentage of boys (57%) compared with the girls, is involved in various sports activities. The greatest number of boys who go in for sports opt for team sports, primarily basketball and football. The results obtained in this research, according to some parameters are similar or alike the results of some researches from abroad (Klomsten et al., 2005), so even here, as in other countries, girls mostly opt for various sports activities when compared with boys, and usually there is a lower percentage of girls who are involved in sports activities than boys. According to some other parameters, such as the percentage of pupils who are involved in extracurricular sports activities, that percentage is lower in Serbia than in some other countries (Pate et al., 2000).

In order to achieve more positive results in the future, it is necessary to promote a healthy life style of the entire society, participation in sports and physical exercising. Only by common action of parents, PE teachers, schools and government institutions,

more visible improvements can be reached towards what is our mutual aim, but obligation as well, that is, to enable children and the youth to have appropriate growth, healthier physical and psychological development and good health thanks to various sports activities and physical exercising.

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ABSTRACT

Participating in a sport or being involved in any kind of physical exercise contributes to a great extent to a healthier physical and psychological development of children. However, organization of sports activities within schools, as well as participation of PE teachers in them was greatly reduced after the political transition in Serbia. Although the general opinion among sports experts and professionals is that a great number of children are included in some sports, there is insufficient new data in the researches indicating the percentage of pupils who are involved in extracurricular sports activities, and there is no data on the way sports clubs for children are organized.

This research was aimed at examining the involvement of senior grade pupils of elementary schools in sport, as well as at comparing the obtained data with the data from other countries. The research sample consisted of 417 pupils: 188 girls and 229 boys (average age = 13.65 years; SD = 731). The questionnaire was used in the research to obtain information about gender and age of pupils, as well as time and length of their sports engagement.

All the pupils had three classes of PE weekly and 231 pupils (55 %) are additionally included in some sports activity in their free time. From the total number of girls, 54 % are involved in some sports activity, and the most popular sports with girls are volleyball and dancing. A slightly higher percentage of boys (57%) compared with the girls, is involved in various sports activities. The greatest number of boys who go in for sports opt for team sports, primarily basketball and football. According to some other parameters, such as the percentage of pupils who are involved in extracurricular sports activities, that percentage is lower in Serbia than in some other countries (Pate et al., 2000).

Key words: pupils, elementary school, involvement, sport