Early Specialization in Youth Hockey: A Parental Perspective

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Introduction and Purpose

Early sport specialization is a phenomenon that continues to be practiced in today’s youth sports environment. In the context of youth ice hockey precisely, minor players are specializing at an alarming rate for the purpose of developing an elite skill set. However, research has shown that athletes who had diversified sport backgrounds and engaged in deliberate play during childhood can still attain an elite level in sport (Baker, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). The purpose of this study was to explore practices around early specialization within minor hockey. More specifically, the study intended to uncover the rates of specialization, the factors that influence those who specialize and finally, to disclose parental perspectives on specialization versus diversification relative to their child’s experience in the sport of ice hockey.

Methods

The parents of hockey players in the sampling years (c.f., Côté’, 1999) were the focus of the study. More specifically, parents of Minor Peewee AA aged hockey players (11 and 12 years old) within a Canadian region made up the sample. To help further frame the study, these players would also fall within the retention/transition phase of Sotiriadou, Shilbury and Quick’s (2013) study of the sport development process. A concurrent embedded mixed methods design was utilized (Creswell, 2009). SPSS was employed to analyse survey data; thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was utilized to analyse interview data. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from a university research ethics board.

Data were collected throughout the hockey season (September to April) via parent surveys (n=114) and semi-structured interviews (n=15). Survey data disclosed the rates of specialization within the context, while interview data divulged parent perceptions of specialization versus diversification and the factors they believed contributed to the phenomenon.

Results and Conclusion

Findings reveal a large majority of parents foster specialization in their child as 87% of survey respondents identified as having a child who specializes in the sport of ice hockey. In contrast, interview data revealed that parents favored development through diversification.

Individual influences such as parents and coaching staff were found to be contributing factors to the phenomenon of specialization. Further, the availability of resources within the hockey context (e.g., private training clinics) was additionally found to influence specialization. Finally, Hockey Canada’s current position was cogitated with the results to reveal a strong inclination towards elite development.

There is a clear need for parent and coach education regarding their role in early specialization and how to assist in creating diversification of youth sport experiences. It is of particular importance during the transitioning years where stakeholders (parents, coaches, administration) foster the sense of well-rounded development of a participating child not just for the preparation for the elite stages of sport but for overall wellness of the individual. The findings have several management implications for sport organization’s and stakeholders which will be discussed.