

# Designing and Implementing Effective Policies to Promote Dual career through Sports Schools

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## ABSTRACT

Evaluations of educational policies continue to be a critical issue since they must provide the authorities with a clear understanding of the procedures and practices, they need to develop to become more successful. The purpose of this article was the assessment of the evaluation process of the sports school in Cyprus taking into account the objective model. The study concluded with possible implications for other countries related to policy design and emphasized that evaluating the effectiveness of a policy is crucial and undoubtedly, the objective model might lead to an effective implementation.

**Keywords:** dual career, evaluation, implementation, sports school, policy.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Authorities from various countries have developed and implemented educational policies related to sports schools that empower young talented athletes to combine their sports careers with education. The European Commission (EC) highlights the importance of balancing education and sports commitments, a concept that is called dual career (EC, DG Education & Culture, 2004) and in 2012 they published “guidelines on dual careers of athletes” to encourage the formulation and adoption of dual-career policies including sports schools (Åbelkalns & Geske, 2013; European Commission, 2012; Pavlidis & Gargalianos, 2014). The first sports school was established in the former German Democratic Republic and the Soviet Union and its primary aim was to guarantee victory in the Olympics games (Metsä-Tokila, 2002). Over time, a similar aim was adopted by different types of sports schools which was developed in other countries such as China, Norway, USA, Hungary, Denmark and Slovakia, combining the academic support of student-athletes. Researchers emphasize extensive contrasts among countries in supporting student-athletes which range from consolidated and institutionalized measures to the lack of structures to guarantee a prosperous dual career path (Guidotti *et al.*, 2015).

Quality policy design is essential, and its effective implementation requires that the objectives and procedures be set with clarity and coherence of the intentions it expresses (Ruthven *et al.*, 2009). According to Bell and Stevenson (2006) those working in schools are engaged in understanding the policy since they are faced with the task of implementing it. However, policymakers often fail to specify clear objectives needed for the effective implementation of each policy. To this end, policies over

time might not be implemented as they should. As Spillane (2005) indicates, implementation failure is the outcome of poor clarity of a policy. Policy goals may include a variety of ideas such as general philosophical principles and specific causal logics (Howlett, 2014); therefore, they have to be specific.

This article is concerned with the sports school’s policy as implemented in Cyprus and how it is evaluated. Evaluation of a policy is of great importance as it aims to a more efficient decision-making process and increases the overall effectiveness (Stufflebeam, 2000) of an educational system. Researchers over the years have developed a significant number of evaluation models and each one emphasizes different aspects of the evaluation by approaching it from diverse perspectives, depending on the priorities and particularities of the context (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2004). The objective model is the model most frequently adopted by many researchers and organizations. Hence, the principal aim of this paper is the evaluation of the sports school’s policy taking into account the objective model.

## II. DESIGNING AN EDUCATIONAL POLICY: THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE OBJECTIVE MODEL

Evaluation is indispensable at improvements which concern the quality of education or school effectiveness (Aziz *et al.*, 2018). The literature presents numerous evaluation models of policies that provide clear explanations and rationales for any practitioner or policymakers (Reynolds *et al.*, 2014). An evaluation model stipulates the enquiry that a given kind of evaluation seeks to be answered and it also specifies how to arrange the assessment criteria. The objective model is a classic model which was created by Tyler R.W in 1930 and its outcomes are evaluated in

relation to the predetermined goals. The basic characteristic of this model is that the focus is placed on whether or not the objectives of the evaluated policy have been achieved. According to Vo (2018) “*unattained objectives mean that the policy has inadequacies*“. Tyler’s evaluation model refers to a number of steps. Primarily, the formulation and definition of the policy objectives and the classification of the purposes. Then, the collection of situations that will reveal the presence or absence of each objective and development of more practicable methods and finally, the collection of data and their comparison with the results of the predetermined goals.

The objective model is certainly one innovation in the field of education which avoids the subjectivity of a professional judgment (Stufflebeam, 2000) but it has limitations too. It can only evaluate the goals that can be easily quantified whereas in cases where objectives are related to behaviours, these cannot be objectively quantified. It cannot make explicit whether it is the policy being evaluated that has caused the observed effects and it does not try to establish how and why a policy brings about the observed outcomes. It takes for granted the predetermined goals and does not evaluate their appropriateness. In other words, the objective model does not provide a feedback mechanism for improving a policy, it does not generate suggestions, therefore policy-makers do not know how to improve the certain policy. It seems that there is absence of the procedure between evaluation and organization.

Another aspect that is worth assessing is the input evaluation, meaning the evaluation of the available resources and budget issues that is also absent from this model. An attempt to give a critical review suggested that policy makers cannot make their programs or services better, if they do not know their weaknesses. They are unable to plan effectively and invest their time and resources in a wise way, if they are not aware of the options and their relative merits (Stufflebeam, 2000). To conclude, the objective model does not provide information about the necessities, it can only compare the performance data with the objectives specified. Thus, it cannot be applied to evaluate policies with unstable and/or unclear objectives (Vo, 2018). In other words, its effectiveness depends on how clearly the objectives are defined.

The objective model recommends evaluations to be designed in terms of their purpose, to take into consideration the long-term view of outcome and carefully manage objectives. Thus, the goal-attainment model is able to furnish politicians with feedback as to the extent to which the already set aims have been succeeded (Hansen, 2005). As Sanderson (2002) argues, if a policy is goal-driven, evaluation should be goal-oriented. Besides, the steps in the objective model’s application are easily followed owing to the fact that they are exact and rational. It can provide good guiding principles for directing policy design. The responsibility of the central authorities is to define policy objectives in the clearest possible terms, (Telhaug *et al.*, 2006) and help stakeholders to implement the policy effectively.

#### A. Critical Review of Sports Schools

According to the literature, a sports school is an

educational institution that utilizes sports talents. A sports school was first established in the 1930s, for the children who came from the Soviet Union and formed the basis of a strong system of physical culture, fitness, and sports. The purpose of the sports schools was to guarantee success in the Olympics and other international games. The popularity of sports-oriented schools expanded speedily, while authorities from a lot of countries around the world have become acquainted with the socialist countries’ elite sport school systems (Riordan, 1991). In 1965, in Sweden, policymakers were concerned about the academic progress of young promising athletes who stopped their education in order to train more and decided their inclusion in the ordinary secondary schools with additional training by professional coaches. In 1972, a sports-oriented school was established in Finland as it was appreciated for receiving appropriate education while seeking an international sporting career was hard.

China adopted the Soviet Unions’ policy (Metsä-Tokila, 2002) and established many sports schools, being equipped with state-of-the-art facilities to ensure the development of talented children aged 6 and above. China’s sports system was excellent as of the 1980s and the Chinese government had a huge interest in the collection of Olympic gold medals. The vast majority of the kids enter sports schools for pragmatic reasons, which is to get a better life for themselves and their family by earning an Olympic medal. According to Kristiansen and Houlihan (2017), sports schools vary considerably in terms of emphasis on sport. Numerous countries perceive them as an integral part of their elite sports performance strategy (Metsä-Tokila, 2002; Kristiansen & Houlihan, 2017; Radtke & Coalter, 2007; Skrubbeltrang *et al.*, 2020). In many of the aforementioned countries, the primary objective of sports school’ policy is clear, which is to win medals in Olympics and other international games. In the case of the evaluation of sports school policy, schools’ record of sporting achievements will be a dominant factor and they must have substantial records of achievement in order to be considered effective.

A systematic literature research was applied to find evaluations of sports schools’ policy in other countries. The searching was focused on an English-language articles included in the following electronic databases: Scopus, eric, web of science and sportdiscus, using the keywords “assessment or evaluation,” ‘sports schools’ and “dual career.” Although designing “correct” policies with clear objectives has been focal of national governments over the past decades (Schouwstra & Ellman 2006), very little attention is dedicated to the systematic evaluation of whether policies achieve their planned goals. An international review conducted in 2007, adopted the objective model, taking into consideration the records of achievement. Radtke and Coalter (2007) revealed that 82% of all medals by were won by German current or former student-athletes. In 2009 another evaluation (Emrich *et al.*, 2009) found out a trend towards a lower professional qualification by the sports schools’ students. Among the athletes who participated in the 2004 Olympics, the students from sports schools achieved no greater athletic success than athletes who intended typical schools. One more study was conducted by using the objective model in Netherlands (Van

Rens *et al.*, 2015) and indicated no significant differences in the sports performance levels between students from sports schools and students at typical schools.

Similar policy study was conducted in Flanders (De Bosscher *et al.*, 2016) taking into consideration the level of inputs–throughputs and outputs of sports schools, from the viewpoint of the athletes. The results indicated that the levels of sport performance of talented athletes at mainstream secondary schools is similar that of their counterparts who had attended sports schools. Through the literature review, it appears that evaluations that adopted the objective model, can easily inform stakeholders if the dual career policy has the desired results. Additionally, any doubts that existed about the necessity of this policy would have been diminished, if evaluations would reveal, that the athletes of the sports schools performed better than the athletes who attended regular schools. Even when evaluations shed light on the opposite effect, policymakers must consider ways to improve the policy. Due to the above-mentioned reasons the present research is carried out. The goal is to apply the objective model in the evaluation of the sports schools in Cyprus. For the readers who are not aware of the Cypriot context, we provide information on appendix A.

### III. RESEARCH AIMS AND THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This article presents a case study of Sports schools in Cyprus. By presenting the different sports schools' policies in various countries and by explaining the main assumptions of the objective model, the current study aims to evaluate the sports school's policy in Cyprus and its impact, by the means of the constant comparative method. Throughout the review of related literature, it was found that the institution of sports school, was examined by the Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus, investigating the opinions of stakeholders, but no further investigation appears to have been conducted so far in terms of the evaluation of the effectiveness of this policy.

The vision of the sports school in Cyprus as stated in the most recent official policy document (env.num.: 7.12.26.2/5) "*is the multifaceted support and promotion of talents in sports, by enhancing their training, monitoring their academic progress, and adopting proper athletic behavior.*" In other words, its primary interest is neither the participation in Olympic Games nor winning Olympic medals.

#### A. Participants and Data Collection

In-depth interviews have been conducted intentionally with policymakers (inspectors of PE) and stakeholders (principals and supervisors) of the sports schools in Cyprus. The individuals responsible for formulating and promoting the policy of sports schools are the only ones who can provide the richest information and these are the inspectors of PE, the principals of sports schools and supervisors. As of March 2020, due to the covid-19 pandemic, schools closed and restrictive measures were applied to all professions, thus making contact with those responsible, difficult and in some cases impossible. The initial thought of this study was to compare the information provided by PE inspectors and sports schools' principals through semi-structured

interviews. Unfortunately, owing to the above-mentioned situation, the communication with the directors was not reachable and the inspectors were interviewed as a group rather than individually, without this being a research priority. Instead of the directors, data was collected by two supervisors who were randomly selected based on ease of access and communication. For confidentiality, the names of the participants were not used, all were given a number.

Participants were informed about the goals of the study and the duration of the interview through a letter. In view of the restrictive measures of covid-19, they had the opportunity and option, to be interviewed online, based on their own schedule, in their own place. They were also informed that their interview would have been recorded for analysis purposes. The interview questions were designed to gather information for the evaluation of sports school policy and the major themes were concerned with the goal of the policy and the procedures that would follow. The first part of the interview included clarifying questions in order to investigate whether the views of the inspectors converge or diverge with content of the circulars but also with the answers of the sports schools' supervisors. The second part was focused on finding out how they offered support where needed, and the last part concerned their own views on the obstacles to this institution or room for improvement.

Additionally, a content analysis of all the official educational documents issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) from 2005 until 2019 was conducted, that included circulars, regulations and guidelines on aspects related to sports schools. The transcribed results of the interviews were then compared with the policy documents to examine clarity and the extent to which they were in line with them. Each policy document was examined considering its clarity and the extent to which it was in line with the policymakers' answers.

#### B. Data Analysis

A constant comparative method was used for analyzing the data in order to discover patterns by finding conceptual similarities, defining categories and connecting them. Particularly, the information gathered from content analysis was compared and contrasted with the data collected through the interviews. Patterns emerged from the data set and were then coded into emergent themes and different categories were developed based on similarities and differences between the data. Integration of data yielded an understanding of the settings being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The data analysis was performed by the first author and the second author checked the reliability of the results to avoid bias. All data from both sources were triangulated to ensure the trustworthiness of this study.

## IV. RESULTS

### A. Documentary Analysis

In order to evaluate the sports school policy, documentary analysis was conducted first. Twenty-five official documents were collected by the MoEC and most of them were circulars published from 2005 to 2019. As content analysis revealed, the original goal of sports school, as it was first published by the Cyprus Ministerial Council

(Decision No. 62.664, 28/9/2005) was the following: “*The cultivation of sportsmanship and the improvement of the quality of sports firstly through the systematic sports training of the student-athlete from a young age.*” It seems that the definition and the formulation of the purpose of this policy has not been deliberated properly and for this reason the goal seems ambiguous. The students of sports schools are already active athletes who perform regularly in their academies and their athletic spirit and mentality are already developed. Besides, it seems vague to state that with the participation of a few student-athletes, the quality of sports will be improved generally. The above aim is not stated clearly and does not provide the real reasons of the creation of the sports school.

The results of this study revealed that the sports school policy was problematic for long enough without producing actions to continue or improve this institution till 2016. Certainly, the original form of this policy, has evolved to a great extent and the changes concerning the purpose, objectives and procedures are strongly discernible. As it was mentioned earlier, the most recent policy document (env. num.: 7.12.26.2/5) refers to the multifaceted support and the promotion of talents in sports, and emphasizes the need to embrace their effort and adopt proper sports behaviour. Similar to the original purpose of this institution, there are some ambiguities and gaps in policy formulation. The expression “*multifaceted support*” is a general statement, and it does not give any information about the kind or categories of support that will be provided, and it definitely does not explain the means of doing so. In addition, the meaning of the word “*talent*” has many senses and in this case, it is necessary that it should be clearly stated as well as to whom it is being addressed. Perhaps there are certain criteria for each sport but the term talent does not always refer to the results of a race or competition. Supporting a talent for example, could also mean to look for gifted children through the subject of PE in elementary schools, who did not have the opportunity to be involved in afternoon activities, but clearly that is not the real purpose of this policy. Additionally, the adoption of a proper sporting behaviour usually takes place at the initiation of a competitive sporting activity, since athletes are obliged to follow specific rules and must be disciplined. Even if we acknowledge that this statement is the objective of this policy it is yet not clear how it is expected to be achieved and/ or how to be evaluated. By analysing the official policy documents the results indicated that the formulation of this policy needs some changes so as to be understandable and reasonable. Besides, no reference is made to professional and athletic careers for high school students-athletes; thus, it would have been easier to implement and succeed the objectives set by this policy if they were explained with clarity.

The time schedule is stated in details (env. num.: 7.12.26.2/5): “*The schedule of sports school is the same as the mainstream secondary public schools, except for the first two periods (7:30 to 9:00). On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, the first two sessions (7:30 to 9:00) students-athletes train, a total of six (6) periods, in specific sports venues. 1. For the first grade of Gymnasium, one period is exempted from the subjects Domestic Science and Music*

*and half a period of Design Technology. 2. For the second grade of Gymnasium, one period is exempted from the courses Domestic Science, Music and Design Technology. 3. For the third grade of Gymnasium, one period is exempted from the courses Domestic Science and Computer Science.*”

The missing information in this part, regards to the reasons for choosing these specific courses for exception instead of others. There must be some explanation for each decision either for the choice of the subjects or the decision for the six hours of training. Moreover, it was stated that academic support will be given to all student-athletes but it is not clear how the academic support will be provided, neither the evaluation of the certain processes is clarified.

The selection criteria for Sports schools are clear to the reader and easy to check. Student-athletes should exercise regularly in the afternoons in an Olympic sport, and participate in games of their Federation, in order to apply for sports school. Moreover, the selection criteria have been formulated in more details regarding the track and field and swimming specifically, based on the performance of the athletes in the various competitions. The only point that is not clear in this passage, is the number of seats available per sport and/or province that is listed and is not specific. How many student-athletes are already studying at the sports school and how many more can join in each sport?

Finally, it is written that sports school offers psychological support (env. num.: 7.12.26.2/5, *psychological support is provided to students-athletes, where deemed necessary*) but in the case of such need, the procedures to be followed by competent bodies or student-athletes are not specified. Being a student with a dual role is very tough sometimes and psychology has a vital role for succeeding. Who is responsible for identifying a child who faces that kind of issue and how will the psychological support be eventually assessed by policymakers? Dual career is usually achievable only with the help of supporting services and a balanced performance team (EC, 2012).

### B. Interviews

The publication and review of policy documents are not enough, since actions must also be taken by stakeholders in order to support schools in their effort to implement this policy effectively (Kyriakides *et al.*, 2015). As Kyriakides *et al.* (2018) mentioned, inspectors’ role is crucial, as they need to clarify regulations and guidelines of each educational policy. According to inspector 1: “*The purpose of sports school and the ultimate goal of Cyprus is the promotion of talents and the improvement of their athletic performance. This is the reason why we have criteria in choosing athletes admitted to sports schools.*” This statement is partly in line with the official documents but some issues must be addressed. Once more, the term talent is not described and what they argue about improvement is not explained at all. How will it be measured and especially how can they proof that the benefits are won through morning trainings instead of afternoons? What does it really mean to promote these talents and how exactly will it be done? As he/she added: “*...six additional hours of training, are enough, since student-athletes are young children and during their difficult and tedious training program they must have some time to rest and study as well. Morning training*

*complements the afternoon training with technical support and general strengthening.”*

This statement can be characterized as a general theory, or more likely as a personal opinion, since no empirical evidence was mentioned by the inspectors or used by the policy-makers to lead to this decision. Although the time schedule is clearly stated, the procedures of evaluating the impact of these extra hours of training was not mentioned at all. There is no evidence that these extra training hours have an impact on the students-athletes performance.

Furthermore, the results revealed that coaches who are employed at sports schools have the freedom to formulate their own goals, methods and training-program. Although classroom teachers are obliged to follow the curriculum issued by the MoEC and be evaluated by inspectors on the basis of their teaching skills, coaches do not follow any curriculum and are not evaluated for their teaching skills. Authorities do not provide them with seminars based on their sport, therefore, support for professional development is not applicable. Educational research has repeatedly indicated the necessity and importance of professional development of teachers for school effectiveness (Day, 1999; Hargreaves, 1994). Coaches of sports school must have a continuous training, in order to acquire specialized knowledge so that they can implement and manage this innovation properly. Regarding the above phenomenon, inspector 1 revealed:

*“We cannot ask the coaches to teach today this and tomorrow that. It depends on the progress of the student-athletes. The training program depends on the scientific knowledge of each coach and as we noticed, this kind of freedom in coaching brought good results. It is not like any other subject in schools, in sports school we want to improve their athletic performance.”* Once more, inspector 1 guesses that this kind of freedom provided good results so far, but the truth is that there is no empirical evidence revealing the aforementioned statement; that was his/her personal opinion.

Further to this, the inspectors were asked about the psychological support that is stated in the official documents and inspector 1 said: *“supervisors inform us, and the psychologist provides their services at school.”* This statement is in line with the official documents, but the fact is that Inspector 1 answered generally and did not provide information on the process of identifying such a problem nor did he/she mentioned that such problems are very important to be addressed early and with caution.

Finally, according to the inspectors, the institution of the sports school, is necessary for the Cypriot educational system, as inspector 1 argued that *‘sports talents can be found through school sporting activities* and inspector 2 added: *“...prior to the creation of sports school, talents would have been found through school sporting activities and nowadays through sports school we provide talents to the federations with additional training in order to become better athletes.”* However, this statement is not in line with the official policy documents, since in the circular it is written clearly that talents are chosen through their sport federations with certain criteria according to their performance and not the opposite.

The academic support of lyceum students-athletes, as the

inspectors mentioned, is achieved with the afternoon classes that the government offer them for free. In addition, sports school offers free ergometric exams twice per year and it is important to note that this is a very good clue, since the performance of student-athletes is somehow evaluated. Inspectors characterize sports school, as a scholarship, because each student-athlete cost 17000 euros to the state. They also expressed that if there was more money, they would improve the facilities and could hire more coaches for greater support of students-athletes but they did not mention any thoughts regarding the formative policy evaluation. Finally, it is significant to mention that there was complete unanimity among the respondents indicating that the implementation of the sports school’ policy is excellent and as inspectors 2 said: *“there is the goodwill on behalf of the Ministry of Education, and I believe that improvements have been made and they will continue to be made. Nothing has been stable yet, however, if we compare the Cypriot sports school with similar institutions abroad it seems to be better.”*

He/she answered generally and did not mention in which sections or procedures is better than others, and most importantly he/she did not refer to any research findings. Additionally, they were asked how they understand if the goals of this policy are accomplished and inspector 2 answered *“we discuss in committees, we discuss with our superiors, we discuss with the parliament, and with our coaches. Even a bad coach can provide information about how things are done.”* The results indicate that there is no proof for the aforesaid statement. No official meetings are recorded in the official documents and certainly no evaluation was provided by the MoEC, except the assessment which conducted by the Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus that examined the opinions of stakeholders. The certain statement can be described as unfortunate for this innovation since its evaluation or efforts for improvements are based on informal discussions between the stakeholders.

PE inspectors, after clarifying the guidelines of the policy, to school principals, those in turn, must forward them to the supervisors, who are responsible for the smooth and proper implementation of the institution. Supervisors stated that the purpose of sports school is to help students-athletes to enhance their training with extra hours of practice and educate them. In case of a failure in their sports career, sports school must provide them with the opportunity to continue their academic studies. Regarding the psychological support that is stated in the policy, supervisor 1 mentioned: *“there is a unique relationship between the sports psychologist, the athlete, and the coach, and the three of them are responsible for the recognition of such a problem. When a coach identifies such a problem, they arrange a meeting with the psychologist.... We cannot deny facing similar problems in the past with the student-athletes. As a result, we expect them to exist.”*

As both inspectors emphasized, the concept of psychology, is very important for everyone involved in sports school (meaning academic teachers, coaches, student-athletes but also parents). They also stated, that many years ago, specific seminars were held for teachers and coaches by sports psychologists, concerning the student-athlete’s dual role but as it is noticed these seminars are not planned

regularly. The results revealed that there is no evidence nor certain procedures to be followed regarding the evaluation of this innovative service. Different mechanisms should be developed for early identification of potential problems that student-athletes may face. The fact that children should contact the sports psychologist by themselves, is rather inappropriate management by the state.

Regarding the number of students-athletes that may entered in each sport, supervisor 1 explained: *“in team sports, there is the minimum and the maximum number for each sport for the completion and the creation of the basic team. For example, in basketball, the minimum number of student-athletes is five and the maximum number of athletes is twelve.... In individual sports, the maximum number of students-athletes is determined by the number of sports classes in the school and their pursuit is not to have a large number of students in each class.”*

This declaration is not in line with the official policy documents, particularly there is a gap concerning the specific number of student-athletes. It should have been written with clarity and had to be understandable for everyone who is interested. Additionally, supervisors clarified that it would be for the benefit of the state, if there were more sports sections, opportunity to discover more talents could be given. Especially in secondary schools, student-athletes are chosen at the age of twelve (not fully developed physically and mentally), and their potentials cannot be undeniable about their evolution as athletes-talents.

The data emerged from the interviews indicated that inconsistency and laziness constitute repressive factors for the achievement of the policy's objectives. As supervisor 2 stated: *“when student-athletes do not train regularly, sports school might fail.”* Another factor that threatens its success according to supervisor 1, is the fatigue of children and parents due to the long distance between the school, the facilities and their homes, thus, the constructive time of the student-athletes is not properly managed. As Donnelly (1993) mentioned, it is more and more challenging for young athletes to reach a balance between the growing training pressure as well as the desired athletic development with regular schooling without organizational assessment to adapt timetables. Additionally, when supervisor 1 was asked if an evaluation of the policy is made, he/she answered fleetingly: *“I believe that is evaluated”* and when he/she was asked about the acknowledgment of failure or success of this policy he/she stated: *“when 10 out of 17 student-athletes succeeded in continuing their studies in accredited universities as well as 3 out of 7 studied abroad with a scholarship that means success.”* He/she did not state anything about the athletic performance of student-athletes neither compared the graduations from regular schools. There are so many factors that may have an impact on the students results but none of them were mentioned or examined.

Lastly, it seems that supervisors energetically explained some elements of the policy in more details and that may be due to the fact that those who ultimately implement the policy know their school needs in a more sufficient degree; consequently, they are possibly more able to direct effort, resources and educational processes to meet them in a more

efficient way (Nir & Ben Ami, 2005).

## V. DISCUSSION

Every educational innovation to be effective requires thoughtful planning, careful implementation and systematic evaluation. In the present study, it was of great significance to assess the evaluation process of the sports school in Cyprus and to evaluate to which degree the objective model was adopted or not. According to the objective model, it is important to define the vision with clarity and explain the reasons for the design of this innovation. What is more, it is essential to assess the necessity and success of this institution in order to justify the use of public money. During the development phase of a policy, expertise inspectors are required to establish the main feasible goal with clarity, and then design the various sub-objectives in such a way that they can later be evaluated for their effectiveness. It is very crucial to have a balance between the general and the most specific policy guidelines and above all, these guidelines should be clear and unambiguous to the reader (Kyriakides *et al.*, 2018).

The analysis developed in this paper shows that the lack of evaluation makes people think that everything is perfect while in fact there are many problems. Media and parents recently had issues with the students' admissions in sports schools and/or their academic failure. Policy-makers do not care if the goals of this policy have been achieved and do not take into account the reason for creating this innovation. The results indicated that this policy was established without developing its vision with clarity. Data refers to a “multifaceted support” which is not explained further. As such, this is a very general goal that does not provide specific information. In other words, this innovation lacks orientation, thus it is hard to be assessed. As a result, various problems are going to be created. What kind of support will student-athletes receive, why and how is it expected to be evaluated? Since this policy was developed without a clear purpose or specific objectives, it is not applicable to examine the extent to which the indicators were achieved. Another point that lacks clarity as a vision of this policy, and it does not indicate the real purpose for creating this innovation, is the ‘adoption of proper athletic behavior’ and its evaluation. Student-athletes attending sports schools are already sports talents with high sporting performances meaning that they have already developed the proper athletic demeanor and ethos. Besides, is that a real goal for such educational innovation?

European institutions have increased their efforts to facilitate the demands of combining a dual career in academia and elite sport (De Knop *et al.*, 1999) whereas each one has a different vision according to their context. Reviewing existing quality evaluations of sports schools, most of them are based on the objective model. The main objectives of their policy are defined with clarity, and it is easy to check by evaluating their identifiable output criteria such as the amount of adequate school-leaving qualifications and/or obtained medals (De Bosscher *et al.*, 2016; Van Rens *et al.*, 2015; Radtke & Coalter, 2007; Emrich *et al.*, 2009). In Cyprus, no measurable criteria for evaluation were

indicated in the data and in this regard the achievement or failure of sports school cannot be documented. After eleven years of sports school' existence, it appears that authorities have never evaluated the implementation of this policy, therefore there is no clear picture of its effectiveness. If each student-athlete costs 17.000 euros for the state and there is no justification, then the existence of this innovation is under questioning. Besides, evaluations that do not happen, cannot provide any feedback about the weaknesses or further improvement of the policy. In addition, at first glance, it seems that the Republic of Cyprus does not adopt the objective model, since they have never evaluated its effectiveness, but there are some objectives on which they relied on the aforementioned model in order to design this policy. It was adopted to develop criteria and procedures necessary for its implementation.

The objective model was used to establish the syllabus, to develop criteria for admissions and hiring of coaches. For instance, the criteria for admissions were described in details and with clarity for each sport. There is no doubt, that a student must have a competitive activity in an Olympic sport that is approved by sports federations and must be awarded with a 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> place all over Cyprus, in order to be able to apply for sports school. Another example, is the criteria for hiring the coaches which are unquestionable. They must have a PE University degree, have experience in coaching and their "afternoon" athletes should attend sports school, otherwise they cannot be hired. As it was mentioned above, the objective model provides guidelines for the design of a policy, and indicators can be evaluated for their effectiveness. If the vision of this innovation was clear, it would have been easy to establish the indicators in such a way that can be later evaluated for their effectiveness. It is recommended that some indicators be determined with quantitative character in order to be assessed easily by the policy-makers. Such indicators can be the obtained medals awarded in national competitions and/or academic qualifications prior and after the graduation of student-athletes.

However, some limitations of this study can also be identified. First, the participants of the study were only inspectors and supervisors. We specifically studied only these groups because we considered that hierarchically they are the first responsible for the implementation of this innovation. Unquestionably, if more resources were available, they would provide us with richer information. This implies that further research is needed to examine the perceptions of teachers, parents and students related to the objectives of this program and the reasons of their attendance.

In addition, it can be claimed that the results of this research are consistent with the centralized nature of education in Cyprus. Questions arise as to *why* the certain model is not adopted for the evaluation and if this fact concerns only the sports department or the wider educational system. It seems that in this context, there is a tendency; the authorities to evaluate their innovations and programs through the perceptions of stakeholders, which is not enough. It can therefore be claimed that the Cypriot culture or the centralized system leads to ineffective policy design and assessments. It is a fact that the objective model

does not focus on what is wrong; rather it focuses on what is working and seeks to nurture it (Rossman & Rallis, 2000). In some cases, the objective model may be used in an inappropriate way; but definitely can assess the effectiveness of its implementation. Therefore, it is recommended to adopt this model for the evaluation of sports schools in Cyprus. It may provide guiding principles for directing the policy design and mainly define the vision and indicators with clarity. Feedback will be provided to policy makers regarding the extent to which the designed goals have been achieved (Hansen, 2005). This implies that further research is needed to evaluate this policy based on the objective model. Besides, this study might contribute to the promotion of a new, more effective direction in design and evaluation.

## APPENDIX

### A. Context of Cypriot Educational System

The educational system in Cyprus is characterized by a centralized administration. Pre-primary, primary, and secondary education are under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC), which is responsible for educational policymaking, the administration of education, and the enforcement of educational laws (Kyriakides *et al.*, 2006). The development and implementation of any educational policy are achieved through presidential elections decrees, ministerial decisions, and published policy documents by MoEC. Relevant mechanisms (civil servants and/or external advisors) are developed to clarify the policy guidelines and regulations to the school management team and other school stakeholders (Kyriakides *et al.*, 2018). This takes place beyond the announcement of the official policies in documents. Public secondary education extends over six years and is divided into two cycles: the lower, which is called the *Gymnasium*, and the upper, *Lyceum*. Syllabuses for all curriculum subjects taught in public schools in Cyprus are prescribed and supervised by the MoEC. Physical education (PE) is a compulsory subject in all grades and students are entitled to 40 minutes of PE on average twice per week (Tsangaridou, 2016). Cyprus belongs to those countries where PE as a subject, has less importance than other academic subjects at schools (Christodoulou, 2010) and as Tsangaridou and Yiallourides, (2008) mentioned, PE lessons are often abandoned when time is required for the main school subjects such as maths and language. To conclude, the content of education is sometimes influenced by international educational innovations due to the need of the government to integrate into international institutions and follow the most developed countries.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

I declare that I do not have any conflict of interest.

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