ABSTRACT

Who participate and why?: Youth participation in Swedish club sports

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The main aim of this thesis is to increase knowledge of what characterizes club sport participation during childhood and youth, and what distinguishes young participators who continue club sport in their late teens and to understand why they continue.

An important premise for this thesis is that sport is one of the most widespread leisure activities among youth. Many young people in Sweden stop participating in club sport during their teens, but some continue. Rather than concentrating on those who drop out of club sports the focus of this thesis is on the ones who continue with club sports during teenager years. Aaron Antonovsky’s salutogenic theory and sense of coherence model (SOC) has inspired the analysis of what it is that seems to be comprehensible, manageable and meaningful when participating in club sport. Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu's key concept habitus and capital have been used as research tools when analyzing the relationship between sports participation and social position among teenagers.

This thesis is based on four studies and, empirically, it is partly longitudinal where the same 585 pupils born 1991 have answered a questionnaire at 10, 13, 16 and 19 years of age. The study is also based on 18 in-depth interviews with teenagers 15 to 19 years of age.

The results of this thesis show that club sports are successful in getting large numbers of children to attend and participate, but there seem to be many who just participate for a short time and only about one third stay on in their late teens. Very few start after the age of 13. Teenagers who are active participants appear to have started early, have taken part in different sports and do not mind taking part in competitions. Furthermore, they seem to possess specific dispositions (and certain assets) in terms of a habitus with a taste for sport and a specific cultural capital in terms of academic success. Moreover, it looks as if doing club sport is a social space where the teenagers can experience meaningfulness based on learning, developing physical ability, experiencing a feeling of belonging, and being challenged but few had elite ambitions.

The conclusion is that sports clubs should try to organize activities emphasizing development with numerous opportunities and challenges for motor and social learning with less focus on competitions as the only focal point. By asking questions about and taking into account what teens need to understand, cope with, and what they perceive as meaningful in sports, it is possible that more young people want to participate longer.