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School Sports Is the Solution:

What Is the Problem?

Abstract

Since the late 1980s, the Swedish education system has undergone major changes that resulted in the school system being decentralised, market adjusted, and privatised. This has created local, quasi-markets in which there is a constant struggle for pupils. During the same period, the presence of school sports has increased significantly. The aim of this paper is to elucidate the reasons why schools have chosen to specialise in sports and to determine what makes sports so viable for schools. As an empirical foundation for the study, telephone interviews with principals at 50 selected schools offering school sports were conducted. The results show that the principals experienced increased competition in the local school market, and following Bourdieu's concept of capital, that school sports fill an important need for schools because they bring different forms of important and necessary capital. Furthermore, school sports are valuable due to the diversity and the various meanings and values that society associates with sports. This article shows that a side effect of the market adaptation of the Swedish school system is that school sports have evolved into a marketing product for recruiting pupils.

Keywords: principals, pupil recruitment, school market, secondary school, Sweden

Introduction

Throughout the last few decades, many Westernised countries have gone through a process of neoliberalisation (Lund, 2014). Rooted in political and economic philosophy, and based on classical liberal ideas of the development of society without state intervention, this process is often manifested in the deregulation of national markets, reduction of state power, and privatisation of public programs (Coakley, 2011a), all aimed at increasing consumer choice. In Sweden, a country traditionally known for its large-scale welfare system, this process has comprised the deregulation and market adaptation of childcare, care for the elderly, health care (Blomquist, 2004), and the school system (Daun, 2006). The changes to the Swedish school system have been large (von Greiff, 2009); as a consequence of the market adaptation, local quasi-markets, in which pupils and their parents are the consumers, have been created (Lund, 2008; Bunar, 2009). During the same period, the presence of school sports has increased significantly (Ferry, Meckbach, & Larsson, 2013).

In light of this development, the aim of this article is to elucidate the reasons as to why, according to principals, Swedish secondary schools (grades 7–9) have chosen to specialise in school sports, and what factors make sports so viable for schools. Empirically, the article is based on data from interviews with 50 principals from schools offering school sports. Based on the analysis of this data, and drawing on Bourdieu's concept of capital (e.g., 1978; 1986), I will show that the provision of school sports is viewed as a way for schools to gain a competitive advantage in an increasingly competitive environment. The reasons why sports have developed into such a viable product can be found in the various meanings and values associated with sports in Swedish society. Interestingly, although sports are seen as a viable product in the competition of pupils, the intrinsic values that are sometimes ascribed to sports—sport for sport's sake—is to a large extent disparaged by the principals.

The paper begins with a review of some implications of the neoliberalisation of the

Swedish school system, followed by an overview of the Swedish sports system, a presentation of the analytical framework, and the method underlying the findings.

Neoliberal Discourses and Education as a Quasi-Market

The implications of the neoliberalisation of Swedish society and its school system have been wide-ranging, radically changing the conditions of public schools (Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2002). According to Daun (2006) and von Greiff (2009), the developments have been extremely significant and have changed the Swedish school system from one of the most centralised systems in the West to the most decentralised. The reforms began in the late 1980s, when responsibility for the schools was decentralised from the state to local municipalities; meanwhile, the state retained the control. Following this, in the early 1990s, three major reforms were introduced: a voucher system, in which each pupil is associated with a certain amount of money allocated to the school the pupil attends; the abolishment of the proximity principle, according to which pupils would attend the school nearest their housing; and facilitated opportunities for starting independent schools with municipal funds (Daun, 2006; Lindbom, 2010). Blomquist (2004) referred to these reforms as the choice revolution, meaning that the reforms increased choices for pupils and parents.

As a result of the market adaptation of the Swedish school system, competition among schools has increased (Johnson & Lindgren, 2010), and local *quasi-markets* have been created (Lund, 2008; Bunar, 2009; 2010). In these markets, education has become a commodity (Apple, 2001), and schools have become producers that compete for pupils and parents, who are the consumers (Palme, 2008). As a result, schools in Sweden need to market themselves in order to attract new pupils, as well as to keep the ones they already have (Johnsson & Lindgren, 2010). In response, schools have developed different types of information systems (e.g., websites and brochures) to guide families and to facilitate consumer choice (Johansson & Lindgren, 2010; Lindblad, 2011). With the use of these

systems, schools have an opportunity to present their assets and resources, e.g. school premises, pupils, teachers, and connections with the society, which influence parents' and pupils' choice of school (Palme, 2008).

Bunar (2010) stated that in conjunction with the increased competition among schools, there is a growing awareness of the importance of school choice among parents. However, research shows that primarily middle-class parents, who have enough money, resources, and understanding of the market, benefit from the increased freedom of choice (Apple, 2001). This is because, as argued by Bunar (2010), middle-class parents are knowledgeable of the main factors for future educational success, such as school reputation, status, and social networks.

For schools, middle-class families are attractive and valuable because they, according to Apple (2001, p. 413), consist of “motivated parents with ‘able’ children”. It is therefore important that the school's reputation and position are appealing to them (Palme, 2008). As a result, the average grades and national test results of the school's pupils and local school rankings have become important assets, which are presented openly by the schools to potential consumers. Schools have also understood that parents and pupils search for different kinds of specialisations, leading to the idea that schools need to distinguish themselves in order to be “discoverable” and experienced as an interesting option to parents and pupils (Bunar, 2010). One way to distinguish the school is by specialising in one area or by offering special subjects (e.g., music, arts, language). In this context, school sports have become a popular way to distinguish and to profile schools (Palme, 2008).

Sports in Sweden

Sports are often pursued by children and young people “for the fun of it” (cf. Trondman, 2005; Thedin Jakobsson, 2012) in accordance with a “fun discourse”, where sport simply is seen as a source of enjoyment for the participants (Walters, Payne, Schluter, &

Thomson, 2010). Following this principle, intrinsic values seem to play an important role for participation in the early years of life (cf. Engström, 1999). However, according to Coakley (2011b), different “sports evangelists” also attribute participation in sports and physical activities to a variety of positive outcomes and extrinsic values in domains such as social development, lifestyle, physical abilities, school achievement, and personal characteristics (cf. Laker, 2001; Bailey, 2006; Pot & van Hilvoorde, 2013). The belief in sports and physical activities as both the tool of and the solution to a variety of societal problems is prevalent in Swedish society as well (e.g., Ericsson, 2008; Lund, 2014; Österlind & Wright, 2012). This is maybe most apparent through the increased public funding that the voluntary sports movement has received during the last decades (Österlind & Wright, 2012).

The significance of sports in society is also evident in terms of the number of participants. From an international perspective, the overall participation rate in sports and physical activities is high in Sweden (Gratton, Rowe, & Veal, 2011), and sports in different forms are very popular among children and youth. For example, the mandatory subject of physical education (PE) is often ranked as one of the most popular subjects in school (Redelius & Larsson, 2010), and over 80% of all young persons have, at some point in life, been involved in a voluntary sports club (Trondman, 2005; Thedin Jakobsson, Lundvall, Redelius, & Engström, 2012). In comparison, about 30–46% of Swedish young people participate in cultural activities, such as handicrafts, music, dance, and theatre (Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2011), and about 1 in 4 young people plays an instrument (Statistics Sweden, 2009).

Historically, sports in Sweden have been organised on two different fields: in school through compulsory PE and during leisure time through the activities in voluntary sports clubs, a division that is sometimes referred to as the “Scandinavian sports model” (cf. Bairner, 2010; Seippel et al., 2010). Cooperation has existed between the two fields, but has

traditionally meant that PE has focused on sports for all children, with an emphasis on health orientation, while sports clubs have focused on competitive sports and training (Sandahl, 2005). In recent years, however, the traditional divided sports model has evolved and changed (Ferry et al., 2013), in part due to the influence of a growing commercial sector oriented to the gym and fitness industry (Sten-Johnsen & Lund Kirkegaard, 2010), and also in part due to the growth of competitive sports in school, also known as school sports (Ferry & Olofsson, 2011).

School Sports in Sweden

Internationally, the concept of school sports usually refers to competitive sports organised in a school setting (Laker, 2001; Stokvis, 2009; Pot & van Hilvoorde, 2013). In Sweden, the concept instead can be explained as one in which some pupils have the opportunity to train and develop as athletes during the school day in sports they pursue during their leisure time (Ferry et al., 2013). Similar to school sports in the Netherlands (Pot & van Hilvoorde, 2013), one distinguishing feature of the Swedish school sports system is that the actual sports competitions do not take place in a school setting, as they would in the United States or Australia, but are instead a matter for the voluntary sports clubs. To clarify the different purposes with school sports, pupils in Sweden can be said to participate in school sports during school hours in order to compete during leisure time, while pupils in other countries (e.g., the United States) practice sports during leisure time in order to compete in school sports.

School sports have existed in Sweden since the 1970s, when it was introduced with the aim to make it easier for elite sports pupils to simultaneously develop as athletes and to receive an upper-secondary education (Lund, 2014). First and foremost, school sports existed at the upper-secondary school level, but later on, also at the compulsory school level (Ferry et al., 2013). On the upper-secondary school level, participation is regulated through the subject

of Special Sports, which has a national syllabus and is the same regardless of the sport or athletic level. In compulsory school, however, there exists no specific subject; instead, schools use the time intended for the pupil's option (*elevens val*), a specific time regulated through the Education Act for pupils to deepen their expertise in an optional subject (SFS, 2010:800).

A survey (Eliasson, Ferry, & Olofsson, 2012) of the presence, organisation, and purposes of school sports in Swedish secondary schools (grades 7–9) concluded that the availability of school sports has grown. Roughly 1 in 4 schools offers school sports; 1 in 3 of all municipal schools, 1 in 10 of all independent schools, and nearly 1 in 8 pupils participates in school sports lessons. Unlike Germany (Radke & Coalter, 2007), for example, there is no explicit national strategy or system that regulates the supply and setting of school sports in Swedish compulsory schools. As a result, there is great variation in ownership, location, and size of the schools offering school sport, as well as in how schools arrange the lessons in school sports, what content is taught, how much time is allotted, and who the teachers are (Eliasson et al., 2012). There exist two main kinds of school sports: one in which the pupils participate in a wide range of physical activities and sports (sports-for-all approach), and one in which pupils have opportunities to immerse themselves in a specific chosen sport, for example soccer, ice hockey, and athletics (competitive sports). Both kinds are equally common, and among the competitive sports, team sports are more common. Soccer, which is also the largest sport in Sweden, is by far the most common sport, offered by half of all schools.

Despite the large variation, a closer inspection of the statistics retrieved from The Swedish National Agency for Education's online information system on results and quality (SIRIS) reveals that the schools that offer sports share a number of common features. In comparison with other schools in the municipalities that do not offer school sports, they have

- a higher proportion of male pupils
- a higher proportion of pupils with immigrant backgrounds
- pupils whose parents have lower levels of education, and
- pupils with lower academic achievement.

Eliasson et al. (2012) suggested that this indicates that a selection of pupils with certain backgrounds prefers schools offering school sports, but they could not explain the reasons and mechanisms involved in this preference.

Analytical Framework

Bourdieu's concept of capital (e.g., Bourdieu, 1978; 1986) has been chosen as the main analytical tool in this article. The concept is widely used among scholars and has been shown to be a useful tool in understanding the sociology of education (cf. Palme, 2008; Vryonides, 2009; Heath, Fuller, & Johnston, 2010) and sports (cf. Larsson, 2008; Horne, Lingard, Weiner, & Forbes, 2011). Capital can generally be explained as symbolic and material assets for which there is a constant struggle in an area or a field (Broady, 1998). Another way to explain the concept is in terms of what is recognised as valuable within a certain context and therefore has market value (Bourdieu, 2004). An important premise for this article is that both individuals and institutions (e.g., schools) may possess different forms of capital (Palme, 2008; Bunar, 2009).

According to Bourdieu (1986), capital exists in three main forms: economic, social, and cultural. Economic capital can best be explained as assets, money, property, or material objects that an individual or institution has (Vryonides, 2009). In this study, the schools' financial resources, which largely depend on the number of pupils enrolled, are viewed as the main source of their economic capital (cf. Palme, 2008). Cultural capital refers to attributes and skills that are highly valued by those in power in the field (Fulton, 2011). For schools, cultural capital can for example be expressed through the position or reputation they have on

the local school market, and by the material resources and staff available at the school. In this study, the pupils enrolled at the schools are considered a factor that affects the schools' possession of cultural capital. Social capital refers to the networks and connections an individual or institution has. What makes these connections valuable is that they can provide access to valuable social goods or areas (Vryonides, 2009). For schools in this study, social capital will be expressed through the social networks and connections the sports teachers have in important areas of local society (cf. Palme, 2008).

Methods

Data for this article was drawn from a larger research project that examined the prevalence, organisation, and direction of school sports in secondary schools (grades 7–9) in Sweden (Eliasson et al., 2012). In that project, the prevalence of school sports among secondary schools in 77 out of 290 municipalities was examined. In these municipalities, which were distributed all over Sweden, 854 secondary schools existed, and through a review of the schools' official websites, 222 were found to offer school sports.

In addition, telephone interviews were conducted with principals at 50 of the schools offering school sports, across 10 municipalities. The municipalities were selected based on their size and geographical location to ensure a large national distribution, and the selection of the 50 schools was based on the type of ownership (40 municipal, 10 independent) to ensure that as large a variation as possible in the kind of school sports would be represented.

This article focuses on the interviews, which lasted between 13 and 37 minutes each. They were semi-structured and addressed general questions about the local community and the schools; the organisation, objectives, and purpose of school sport; and the reasons behind the choice of offering sports.

After obtaining permission from the principals, the interviews were recorded. To obtain an overview of the content expressed through the interviews, a table was created in

which quotes and memoranda from the interviews were typed to correspond with the themes of the interview guide. In order to identify recurring information related to the purpose of this article, the quotes were reviewed several times and categorised inductively into recurring themes and patterns (Thomas, Nelson, & Silverman, 2005) before being analysed in relation to Bourdieu's concept of capital and then presented in writing. In order to maintain the schools' confidentiality, quotes from principals are presented in relation to ownership, and a unique number is assigned to each school.

Findings

The findings begin with a presentation of the reasons principals provided to offer school sports and what needs sports fill at their schools, followed by why sports are so viable. During the interviews, the principals explained the reasons for launching sports at their schools. Through the review and processing of the principal statements, five general categories for launching school sports emerged (Figure 1).

FIGURE

The Competitive School Market

It has been pointed out that changes to the Swedish school system during the last decades have radically altered school conditions (Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2002). Through the interviews, these conditions were made visible, and a picture of the situation currently prevailing in the Swedish school market was created. For many of the principals, competition in the local school market is constantly present and affects their work—some even described the situation as totally “crazy”. Regarding this thought, one principal stated, “The school is a market; it is important to keep ahead of the game” (Municipal School 16). Some principals emphasised that the school must always be “on its toes” and be “at the forefront in order to survive” (Independent School 7) and that a large part of the school's work is attracting pupils. One principal said, “There is huge competition in the area, especially between the centrally

located schools” (Municipal School 15). These statements are examples of the competition between schools, which is perceived as problematic by the principals and an issue with which their schools must cope.

At the same time, some principals stated that they do not experience the competition quite so keenly and that their schools do not struggle to recruit pupils. A closer examination of this reveals that the reasons why the competitive situation is perceived differently depend on the geographical location of the school. The highest competition is experienced by schools in areas where schools are located very close to one another, or where communication opportunities are good. Competition is reduced at schools that are far away from other schools, or where communication possibilities are poorer.

Enhanced competitiveness. In line with Bunar’s (2010) conclusions, some principals expressed the importance of schools distinguishing themselves in order to become attractive to pupils. According to some principals, this is crucial for the survival of the school and a problem with which they constantly struggle. In order to distinguish themselves from other schools in the local area, the principals in this study have chosen to offer school sports, and by doing so, they have found a way to specialise their schools. One of the principals said, “Through school sports, we can stand out in the crowd” (Municipal School 17).

In the interviews, half of the principals provided reasons for offering school sports, associated with increased competition on the local school market. As one principal stated, the reason for launching school sports is simply “to recruit pupils because of the declining economy and the declining number of pupils” (Municipal School 30). Another principal expressed that the reason behind school sports was “to meet the independent schools and compete for pupils” (Municipal School 4).

Judging by the principals’ ways of reasoning, school sports can be seen as a solution to problems connected to the increased competition on the school market. By offering school

sports, the interviewed principals have found a way to increase their schools' competitiveness—something that, according to Johansson and Lindgren (2010), is crucial for the schools. However, what kinds of valuable and important assets do school sports bring to schools?

School Sports as a Means to Create Capital

School sports and economic capital. By offering school sports, the schools have found a way to enhance their attractiveness in order to recruit pupils, which is of utmost importance to the schools. The Swedish voucher system implies that the allocation of financial grants to a school depends on the number of pupils enrolled at the school. This means that school sports offerings may influence the financial condition of the school and thereby increase its available economic resources. These resources can later be translated into pedagogical strategies, new and better facilities, more marketing, or the specialisation of the school (Palme, 2008). Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of capital, this can be interpreted as school sports bringing economic capital to the school, which is crucial to survival in the competitive school market.

School sports pupils and cultural capital. In addition to the potential of school sports to attract pupils, thereby bringing economic capital to the schools, sports pupils *as such* are perceived as a valuable asset for the schools. The principals usually describe sports pupils as “well-functioning in school” (Municipal School 12), and “academically well-performing” (Municipal School 30), characteristics that are valuable to the school. Thus, by offering school sports, the principals and schools have found a way to recruit “able” pupils, which may improve the school's official ranking, in turn influencing the school's reputation and position in the school market. This is explicitly stated in the following quotes: “Pupils' and parents' view of the school is important for the school's ability to recruit pupils” (Independent School 9); and, “It is important how the school is viewed in the local

community” (Municipal School 1). In a similar vein, and following Bunar’s (2010) argument that schools, by strengthening their position on the quasi-market, can reinforce their appeal to the most valuable parents and children, one of the principals pointed to this linkage when saying that “school sports attract pupils who have good parents” (Municipal School 32).

Since a school’s cultural capital, expressed through its reputation and position on the local school market, is a highly valued asset among many parents and pupils in their choice of school (cf. Blomquist & Rothstein, 2000; Bunar, 2009), my interpretation is that the value that sports pupils bring is a possible way to enhance the schools’ position and reputation in the local quasi-market. This means that the assets sports pupils bring to school is in the form of cultural capital. The possession of cultural capital also influences the school’s competitiveness on the school market, and can thus be converted into economic capital for the school.

School sports teachers and social capital. From the interviews with the principals, it is clear that the teachers in school sports are perceived as valuable. Their primary value lies in their simultaneous involvement in the local voluntary sports movement, an involvement that implies good connections, which in turn can affect the school’s available network. One principal explicitly stated that the teachers are valuable for the schools because “they have a good network in sports” (Municipal School 29). Thus, the value the teachers, through their connections and good knowledge of sports, bring to the schools an enhanced social network, something that is an important asset for schools (Palme, 2008), and can be interpreted as an expression of social capital.

Some of the principals also pointed out that school sports teachers are valuable in a different way because they can be used to enhance a school’s attractiveness among pupils and parents. More specifically, some of the teachers are former athletes and well known in the local community. One principal said, “The teacher is a former soccer player, almost

legendary in society” (Municipal School 16). Taking advantage of this, some of the schools use the teachers to market themselves. According to one respondent, “The teacher has good soccer merits, which can be used to market the school” (Independent School 7), and another principal said, “The teacher is a highly qualified coach used in the marketing of the schools” (Municipal School 35). Since teachers can influence their school’s attractiveness and reputation, they are part of the school’s cultural capital. This means that the teachers influence the school’s competitiveness, something that by extension can be converted into economic capital because more pupils increase the available economic resources allocated to the school.

In sum, school sports, as well as school sports pupils and school sports teachers, are viewed by principals as a valuable asset for schools. By offering sports, schools have found a way to link important forms of capital by recruiting more pupils (economic capital), simultaneously recruiting the right kind of pupils (cultural capital), and employing teachers with good knowledge and connections (social capital). This leads to the question of why, specifically, school sports are so viable for schools.

Why School Sports?

Sports popularity. Previous studies (cf. Palme, 2008) have shown that the kind of special or optional subjects a school offers influences the pupils’ and parents’ school choice. Simultaneously, some studies show a large interest in sports among Swedish children and youth (Trondman, 2005; Thedin Jakobsson et al., 2012). This means that a school, by offering school sports, expands the potential recruitment base and by offering an activity pupils attend during their leisure time, can appeal to the interests of many pupils and parents.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1978) explanation of the mechanism of the supply and demand of sports in society, the findings described by Eliasson et al. (2012)—that only some selected sports, mostly team sports and especially soccer, are provided by secondary schools

in Sweden—can be seen as an indication that schools have chosen to customise the supply of school sports to appeal to certain pupils and their parents. That soccer is so common, available in half of the schools (Eliasson et al., 2012), can largely be explained by the fact that it is the most popular sport in Sweden and therefore appeals to many pupils, parents, and teachers. It may also be explained by the fact that, unlike many other sports that require special facilities (e.g., alpine skiing, ice hockey), soccer is a relatively cheap and easy sport to organise for schools.

That the interest of parents and pupils in sports directly affects the schools' specialisation is something that some of the principals expressed when referring to their decision to offer sports. During the interviews, some principals also emphasised the popularity of sports among the pupils as the main reason for providing sports. By doing so, the school could meet the pupils' interest and provide a more interesting and fun school day. For example, one principal stated that sports “make school a little more fun, a kind of silver lining to the school day” (Municipal School 1), and another said that “by making use of the pupils' interest in sport, the quality of the school day raises” (Municipal School 20). This could be interpreted as that principals have recognised that sports have intrinsic values for pupils, however the principals mainly use this insight as a part of their recruitment strategy.

Positive outcomes. As argued above, sports participation is highly valued in Swedish society due both to its intrinsic values (Engström, 1999) and its contribution to a variety of positive outcomes (Eriksson, 2008; Österlind & Wright, 2012). During the interviews, some principals referred to the positive impact of sports participation on pupils when explaining the reasons to offer school sports. Some principals stated that their schools had selected to offer sports because of the current health discourse in society. One principal said that “the pupils will develop a healthy and active lifestyle” through sports (Municipal School 36).

Other principals mentioned reasons connected to other positive outcomes, such as the

possibility to enhance the pupils' academic performance. One principal explicitly said that the school started offering sports because of "Ingegerd Ericsson's reports [about the POP study, cf. Ericsson, 2008] that movement supports learning" (Independent School 8). Another principal said, "It is good [for pupils] to get involved in sports for the school work—they stay away from other things" (Independent School 3), and, "School sports give [pupils] higher school achievements" (Independent School 2). The explanation for why these types of reasons exist among principals can be understood as an expression of the dominant meaning connected to sports in society at the moment (cf. Bourdieu, 1988). This could be interpreted as the message that "sports evangelists" preach (Coakley, 2011b) has reached a larger audience in society. Importantly, virtually all of the stated reasons for offering school sports were related to (extrinsic) positive outcomes. Apart from emphasising "talent development", a theme I will come back to below, no principal acknowledged the intrinsic values that are ascribed to sports by many young people (cf. Thedin Jakobsson, 2012). This indicates that doing sport for sport's sake is not considered valuable to the principals' endeavour to recruit students.

Practical reasons. Some principals also gave more "practical" explanations for their choice of offering school sports. These principals usually work at schools with premises particularly suitable for sports, with good access to sports equipment, or with staff who are very knowledgeable regarding sports. In two cases, the reasons are even more obvious: the schools are in fact partly owned by one of the local sports clubs, and the clubs had started the school with the aim to offer pupils school sports.

Talent development. Finally, a few principals explained the main reasons for offering school sports by making reference to the pupils' opportunity to develop into elite athletes. In fact, this is the only way in which the principals ascribe value to sport for its own sake. However, it is important to note that this is a particular form of sport—elite sport—that

is not viable for a lot of pupils. The principals who emphasised talent development all worked at schools that have a close relationship with elite sport clubs or at one of the schools that were partly owned by the local sport clubs.

In summary, my interpretation of why school sports are seen as such a viable product for schools to offer is because of sports' status in society, both in terms of popularity and positive effects connected to sports participation.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to elucidate the reasons why schools choose to specialise in school sports, and what makes sports such a viable option for schools to do so. Previous studies show that the supply of school sports has increased both in upper secondary (Lund, 2010) and in compulsory schools (Eliasson et al., 2012). Ferry et al. (2013) concluded that this is mainly one outcome of the neoliberalisation of the Swedish school system. At the same time, it is clear that competition has increased among schools (Johnsson & Lindgren, 2010). Throughout the interviews, it became apparent that most of the principals are affected by the increased competition on the quasi-market and perceive this as problematic. For the principals in this study, the most apparent problem that school sports are supposed to solve is the problem that has arisen as a result of the increased competition on the local school market. Sports have thus become a survival strategy for secondary schools in Sweden. Therefore, the main need that school sports fill for upper-secondary schools in Sweden is the need to increase their competitiveness. In line with this, the results of this study show that one side effect of the market adaptation of the Swedish school system has been that school sports have evolved into a marketing product for recruiting pupils to secondary schools.

The findings also show that school sports are highly appreciated and valued by principals, in addition to the pupils and teachers involved in the venture. The article shows that sports are seen as a method by which Swedish secondary schools can recruit more pupils

(economic capital), especially the “right” kind of pupils (cultural capital), and can employ teachers with valuable qualities (social capital). In other words, by offering sports, schools can accumulate different forms of necessary and important capital that may ultimately influence their competitiveness. This implies that the role of sports has changed in Swedish secondary schools, from being the content in one specific school subject, mainly aiming to promote the health of all pupils (Sandahl, 2005), to becoming a way for schools to recruit pupils. Sports in Sweden have thus become a commodity in the secondary school market, similar to what Kårhus (2010) found for higher education in Norway, or, as Lund (2010) put it, a tool for schools to recruit pupils. In this process of commodification, the intrinsic values that are often ascribed to sport by children and young people (Thedin Jakobsson, 2012) seem to be lost from sight. Principals value sports because of positive outcomes that are connected to sport participation, but not because sport in itself, apart from elite sport, is worth pursuing.

The answer to why specifically sports have emerged as a solution and are seen as so valuable can be explained by the diverse motivations for offering school sports, as presented by the principals in this study. These purposes reflect the various meanings and values associated with sports in society. School sports have therefore become relatively easy to convert into different forms of capital for schools. The main value of school sports thus lies in their diversity and in the fact that they appeal to many different tastes and habits.

Final Thoughts

Eliasson et al. (2012) found that schools offering sports enrol pupils of diverse backgrounds with lower credit values compared to pupils at “regular” schools. This result may seem contradictory in relation to the presented result, which demonstrates that according to the principals interviewed here, one purpose of sports is to enhance the pupils’ academic achievements and to strengthen the schools’ position in the local market. At the moment, there is no good explanation for this discrepancy, so future research should examine on an

individual level the types of students participating in school sports, their demographics and social characteristics, and the mechanisms underlying their decision to participate in school sports. It would also be interesting to examine in detail the process behind the introduction of school sports and to analyse its effects on a school's development.

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Figure 1. Reasons for providing school sports, according to principals, per cent.¹

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¹ Principals may have given several reasons for offering sports, and those reasons have been divided into several categories.