A sport for all programme in school: girls’ experiences

Peter Carlman & Maria Hjalmarsson

To cite this article: Peter Carlman & Maria Hjalmarsson (2019) A sport for all programme in school: girls’ experiences, Sport in Society, 22:3, 416-431, DOI: 10.1080/17430437.2018.1490268

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2018.1490268

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 09 Aug 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 626

View Crossmark data
A sport for all programme in school: girls’ experiences

Peter Carlman\textsuperscript{a} and Maria Hjalmarssson\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Department of Sport Sciences, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden; \textsuperscript{b}Department of Educational Studies, Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden

\textbf{ABSTRACT}

This article examines a Swedish Sport for All Programme (SAP) in school. We use a case study to discuss girls’ debut in alternative sports programme organized in collaboration between school and the sports movement. The empirical data are derived from repeated focus group interviews with one group of seven 10-year-old girls participating in one SAP. The analyses focus on their subjective experiences and how broader gender structures influence these experiences. Drawing on the results of this study, we argue that certain sports can be interpreted as oppressive activities that produce asymmetric power relationships between different groups of children. Simultaneously, the girls see the idea of sports as joyful activities, without male abuse and oppression or hierarchical gender relationships. Based on the girls’ accounts, we claim that both the leaders and the children actively reproduce gender stereotypes in the SAP.

\textbf{KEYWORDS}

Extra-curricular sport; leisure-time centres; gender equality; childhood; alternative sport

\textbf{Introduction}

During the last decades, more actors have entered the policy arena, which has entailed increased diversity of narratives on what counts as ‘good’ education (Ball 2008). The Swedish Sport for All Programme (SAP) in school can be regarded as an example of an external actor’s entrance into education. The SAP is built upon collaboration between schools and the sports movement, with the purpose of providing pupils under the age of 12 with an opportunity to try various sports, with the focus being on play and motor learning rather than organized competition. The activities mostly take place during the pupils’ time in the leisure-time centre, an educational setting governed by the \textit{Education Act} (SFS 2010:800) and the curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool and leisure-time centre (Skolverket 2016). Pupils between 6 and 13 years of age typically attend these leisure-time centres. As many as 86\% of pupils in the lower grades are enrolled in leisure-time centres, which are heavily subsidized by the state and located in the school building. The SAP must also be accessible and provided locally, preferably in or close to the school facilities, as

\textbf{CONTACT} Peter Carlman \textsuperscript{a} peter.carlman@kau.se

\textsuperscript{©} 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.
suggested in the Swedish Sports Federation’s pamphlet entitled ‘Sportis idrottsskola med barn i centrum’ (Child-Centred After-School Sports).

Since the 1970s, organized sports have held a strong position as a leisure activity among youngsters in Sweden. However, the national sports movement’s ability to offer sports for all children has come into question. The tendency today is that fewer children participate in traditional organized sports and a large number drop out of organized sports during their adolescence (Carlman, Wagnsson, and Patriksson 2013; Blomdahl et al. 2014; Norberg 2014). The Swedish Sports Federation has acknowledged the importance of new strategies to ensure that sport remains an attractive leisure activity for youngsters. Further, the federation has argued that the Swedish sports movement must be prepared to question and challenge its own structures and attitudes. According to the Swedish Sports Federation (RF 2013), the SAP can provide children with guidance in sports and provide sports activities for physically inactive children. The idea is that through the SAP, children can find ‘their(s) sport(s)’ and create a lifelong interest in sports and physical activity.

The Swedish Sports Federation’s gender equality policy (rf.se/jamstalldhet/Jamstalldhet/ Sida/12811, 26 August 2013) states that men and women should have the same chance to participate in sport and that gender-equal sport is a necessary condition for successful sport development. This goal might be understood in relation to the strong connection between sports and masculinity, holding notions of gender differences, which has affected women’s conditions in sport contexts (e.g. Connell 2008). De Meester et al. (2014) argue that girls are a target group that requires special attention because they have lower participation rates in extracurricular school-based sports than boys. We must take girls’ views into account if the SAP is to truly provide sport for all.

The aim of this article is to discuss by means of a case study girls’ debut in alternative sports programme organized in collaboration between school and the sports movement. We focus on the following question: How are the girls’ experiences related to gender structures?

Studies on sport for children and youngsters

In order to discuss valuable research that is of interest and related to this aim, we start with a review of previous research on the gendered nature of sport. Thereafter, we proceed to relate to studies on alternative sport contexts in general and Swedish collaboration projects between school and the sports movement more specifically.

In addition to the challenges for the sports movement described in the previous section, research has shown that, traditionally, institutionalized sport has been a social arena especially accessible to males, while females have been marginalized and gender stereotypes have been reproduced. Historically, women’s participation in sports has been seen as inappropriate and immoral and viewed as having the potential to lead to an injuriously masculine impact on the body and senses. Sports that require aggressiveness and physical contact or that require a great deal of strength and endurance have traditionally been considered unsuitable for women (Tolvhed 2015). Coakley and Pike (2014) state that the sports movement has often been organized so as to be dominated by men, which has entailed that male-coded skills and
characteristics are used as standards for evaluating qualifications. Further, Coakley and Pike claim that the sports movement is male-centred, implying that men and men’s lives are focused in staking out sports, in sport-related narratives and in media reports. Hence, women’s sports tend to be marginalized, because they are not considered as interesting as men’s sports. The authors argue that in Great Britain as well as in several other countries, the amount of participation by girls and women in sports has increased but that this tendency will not manifest automatically without working actively to enhance gender equality. According to Meier (2015), the historical connection between sports and masculinity has strengthened the dominance of sports role models, which has negatively contributed to a lack of female role models.

The Swedish SAP might not have an equivalent in other countries. Yet, within ‘the UK and internationally, schools are increasingly being encouraged to call on external agencies and draw on the services of individuals, including sport coaches, to ‘help teach or lead sports within the school setting and out of school time’ (Wilkinson and Penney 2016, 1). Research has shown that alternative sports activities based on an ‘open door’ or ‘low-threshold’ policy tend to reproduce the gender structures that are present in traditional sports settings. Flintoff (2008) discusses the School Sport Partnership Programme (SSPP) in England, which aims to connect school physical education (PE) and out-of-school participation. More specifically, the SSPP focuses on raising the participation rate of certain underrepresented groups. Girls and young women are recognized as one such group. Flintoff claims that the partnership supported the participants’ opportunities to be physically active, both within and beyond the curriculum. ‘However, it has shown how the scope and range of opportunities developed was limited by a competitive discourse, with many activities revolving around inter-school competitions in a narrow range of traditional sports’ (497). Further, she argues that sometimes the girls were targeted as a distinct group without inherent variations and as different from the group of boys. It happened that some activities were selected because they were suitable for girls. One way for the staff to approach the problem of girls underrepresentation was ‘offering “more of the same” PE and sport’ (406). An ‘open door policy’ was viewed as the best way to meet the children’s need, which entailed that only a limited number of the planned PE and sports activities were explicitly directed at the group of pupils that were underrepresented in traditional extracurricular programmes. Flintoff’s conclusion is that such initiatives have done little to involve the vast majority of the girls who had not already self-identified as ‘sporty’. As Szto (2015) claims, it is crucial to question which girls and women benefit from sports projects aiming at boosting girls and enhancing gender equality. When sport is used as a tool to meet these ambitions, one might forget that ‘sport, itself is a product of power relations’ (905). Based on results from a study on ‘alternative’ sport and physical activities offered by the Sports City Programme (SCP) in Norway with the aim of attracting (mainly inactive) youngsters to participate in physical activities, Skille and Waddington (2006) argue that the SCP has attracted working-class youngsters to a larger extent than traditional sports. Further, the SCP has been partly successful, especially among working-class girls, with regard to breaking down gender barriers. Nonetheless, it was also shown that in the context of the ‘open hall’ activities, which was one aspect of the SCP, even more
inequality between boys and girls was created than in traditional sports. According to Skille and Waddington, a distinct masculine culture developed that marginalized the female youngsters and was allowed to grow in the absence of adult control. The authors conclude that the ‘so-called’ “alternative” sports may not always offer alternatives to the power relations associated with more conventional sports’ (17).

In a report on ‘Idrottslyftet’ (sports initiative), a Swedish state-funded collaboration between school and the sports movement, Granh and Berggren Torell (2014) analyze how discourses on childhood and gender are shaped in a keep-fit activity project and a soccer project. The goal of Idrottslyftet is to support children’s and youth’s engagement in physical activities and sports, as well as encouraging them to remain engaged for longer periods of their lives. The results regarding the keep-fit activity project showed that the leaders worked to support ‘happiness and fellowship’ but that the activities did not always connect with this common base of values. Fostering democratic children – here understood as listening to everyone’s opinions and considering various suggestions about how to handle situations – was not often a manifest aspect of the activities. Moreover, Granh and Berggren Torell (2015) explore how children understand gender in government-financed sports initiatives and in sports activities that take place during the children’s leisure time. They found that the children reasoned about leisure-time soccer and soccer players within a discourse of difference and described boys and men as better and tougher soccer players. At the same time, the gendered notions shown in Granh and Berggren Torell (2015) were challenged when both boys and girls disagreed with statements that presented boys as being better and tougher. The observations of the activities showed somewhat different gender patterns than the children described. ‘The Handshake Project’ is another Swedish state-funded collaboration project between school and the sports movement, aimed at reaching out to pupils who are not engaged in sports. This support should contribute to increased opportunities to activate children and youngsters who are not physically active on a regular basis and to create an interest for being involved in sports during leisure time. Peterson’s (2007) evaluation shows that this support has provided valuable efforts that have probably increased some participants’ interest in sports. Yet, Peterson questions if it would not have been more reasonable to prioritize and strengthen PE as a subject to meet the overall problem: ‘that our children and youngsters are not physically active enough’ (97, author’s translation). He claims that by the means of increased education in PE, qualified teachers and suitable premises, teachers would hold a powerful position from which they could establish thorough collaborations with sports associations based on own preferences and needs. Peterson raises the general question of consequences to the overall society, to the school, to the sports movement and to pupils that arise from collaboration, implying that non-profit associations shoulder responsibility for activities within the school setting. Drawing on results from a study on the involvement of external agencies in extracurricular PE, Wilkinson and Penney (2016) emphasize the need to reveal the pedagogical consequences of the hidden curricula that impact sports collaboration projects between school and sports associations, by means of including the children’s and youngsters’ own voices on their experiences. Our study contributes to filling the void
by exploring the perspectives of a group of girls who participate in an SAP in Sweden.

Theoretical strands

In order to discuss the girls’ experiences in relation to gender structures, we draw upon a gender perspective requiring that we regard gender as a considerable principal of organization in various contexts, often working together with other social orders, such as age, social background and ethnic background (Lykke 2003). According to our understanding, the concept of gender can be used to describe and understand tendencies and structures, for example, the proportions of girls and boys in various sports activities. Still, the distribution of boys and girls, as well as men and women, in various societal practices is only one of many ways in which the gender order manifests. Gender is also about beliefs about gender differences. Gender-related ideas and norms vary with the specific cultural, historical and social contexts. Meanings of gender are negotiated in everyday practices, and masculine and feminine identities are shaped during negotiations about gender differences. As Connell (2008) claims, ‘Gender is actively made by people in relationships’ (136), both in children’s and adults’ lives.

Guided by Connell (1987, 183), we acknowledge the hierarchical order of men as a group and women as a group: ‘Their interrelation is centred on a single structural fact, the global dominance of men over women’. At the same time, Connell (2008) argues that both on a large-scale and small-scale situations, there is diversity of masculinities. Yet, within a certain culture or institution, there is a specific dominant pattern of masculinity. This hegemonic masculinity ‘which is most honoured, which is most associated with authority and power, and which—in the long run—guarantees the collective privilege of men’ (Connell 2008, 133) is superior to other masculinity positions. The way that gender relations are arranged within a given organization could be discussed in terms of gender regime. These are heterogeneous and ‘parts of school’s life where gender is strongly marked, and other parts where gender is very muted’ (Connell 2008, 137).

Connell (2002) discusses the relationship between gender and bodies, as well as the common-sense definition of gender as an expression of the natural bodily difference between men and women, and criticizes the idea that cultural patterns simply indicate bodily differences. Furthermore, Connell argues that ‘society addresses bodies and puts reproductive difference into play (10)’. In that sense, gender is an issue of the ways in which society handles human bodies and the consequences of that handling in both the individual’s life and the collective fate. Connell (2008) reflects on aspects as embodiment, of various kinds of masculinity and questions of reproduction and change. Connell stresses the importance of the school’s PE curriculum in relation to these questions. This argumentation rejects categorical thinking about gender, for example, that boys are expected to develop along a fixed pathway and that all boys require conventionally male role models. Instead, Connell suggests that children’s development, regardless of gender, involves a significant amount of learning through and about human relations. She also criticizes the idea of boys as disadvantaged because of the assumed disharmony between their learning style and what schools
offer the boys and argues that boys – as well as girls – learn by means of various strategies or styles. Another issue discussed is the variety of marginalized curricula in the contemporary secondary education system, which is, to a large extent, practice-based. These marginalized curricula embrace fairly different ways of ‘doing’ masculinity. On the basis of this argumentation, Connell (2008) emphasizes the importance of considering values and goals inherent in curriculum related to gender, guided by ‘the idea of education for democracy’. She argues that gender relations per se are not problematic, but become problematic when being ‘undemocratic, that is, marked by power imbalances, exclusion, exploitation, violence, oppression and inequality (142). Drawing from this reasoning, Connell suggests that the central goal of gender education ‘is to equip boys and girls with the resources, skills, knowledges and values they will need to create democratic gender relations in their own lives and in the culture at large’ (142).

The SAP that is the focus of this study is not defined in terms of formal gender education. Still, the children participate during their time at the leisure-time centres. These centres are part of the school system and therefore the activities they offer shall be carried out in a way that corresponds to the gender quality values expressed in the Education Act (SFS 2010:800), which emphasizes aspects such as inclusion, security and comfort and gender equality. In this sense, the SAP can be regarded as an educational arena in which gender relations are negotiated and constructed.

**Methodological approach**

This article is based on a case study, implying a detailed analysis of one certain case. The empirical data used were gathered within a research project with the overall aim of investigating children’s views on and experiences with the SAP and the meanings of these activities in children’s ‘sports childhood’ (Carlman 2015). The empirical data in the overall project consist of interviews with children, teachers and sports club leaders representing three different SAP settings. In the present article, we direct our attention towards a limited part of the data conducted in the overall project: the two focus group interview sessions with one group of seven 10-year-old girls in one of these settings.

**The SAP setting**

The selected SAP started in 2003, in a town in the western part of Sweden (and it is still running). Sport activities were provided after school in conjunction with after-school care services. Participation in the programme was voluntary, which meant that the activities were not compulsory for all pupils. It was also possible to join the programme even if one was not enrolled at the leisure-time centre. The design of the activities involved inviting various sports clubs to present their sports to the children. Each club visited the programme four times during a term. The activities were provided in the school facilities. However, some sports (e.g. sailing and alpine skiing) required transportation to other locations. In these cases, the school programme arranged for transportation by bus.
The programme was organized through a school sports club, which was governed by the School Sports Federation, a specialized sports federation for children and youth sports in secondary and upper secondary school. The federation was then, as now, part of the Swedish Sport Confederation (SSC) and therefore eligible to receive state funds in order to run sports activities for children.

The interviews

The overall project did not include a gender perspective, but some of the girls shared their experiences of the SAP, which made us curious to explicitly study these experiences from the perspective of gender theory. Of the empirical data gathered throughout the overall project, we concentrate on the data derived from two focus group interview sessions with one group of seven 10-year-old girls participating in one SAP. In the overall project, they were randomly selected from the SAP participation list at the local school, and the selection resulted in a gender-homogeneous focus group. In the analysis of the entire data material, it was found that the group with only girls expressed more and stronger views about gender aspects than groups involving both boys and girls. This may be because the girls in the group were allowed to make their voices heard without the influence of certain boys. One methodological issue arising was the number of children in the group. It was difficult for some girls to participate in the discussion, because some of the girls talked extensively. The more salient girls nodded and agreed concerning the central topics in the interviews, but they were involved only to a limited extent in the discussions. Perhaps it would have been advantageous to divide the group into two groups in order to include everyone in the discussions.

The girls had limited or no experience of organized sports during their leisure time. None of the girls were participating in organized sport when the interviews were carried out. One of them had previously participated in floorball but had chosen to drop out, and another was taking dance lessons. These girls described that they spent their leisure time mostly at home, with friends or using the computer. The girls live in a multicultural area with low socio-economic status and where there are few sports clubs. The girls in the group normally took part in the SAP together.

All the steps in the research process were carried out in accordance with the Swedish Research Council ( Vetenskapsrådet 2011), emphasizing confidentiality and the subjects’ understanding of consent. The local Ethics Committee granted approval for the overall project. This means that the children were verbally informed about the study and were allowed to provide a preliminary response regarding their participation. Letters describing the study and inviting participation were then sent to both the parents and children. The parents and the child were asked to jointly sign the consent form and return it. Upon arriving at the first interview session, the study and the ethical considerations involved were explained to the children again.

The group was interviewed twice during their involvement in the SAP, with a time interval of approximately three to four weeks. Fielden, Silience, and Little (2011) argue that it is hard for young children to be still and focus one’s attention on the interview for as long as adults. herefore, it was considered better to divide the interview into
two parts, and in the second interview, the purpose was to follow up and elaborate on what emerged during the first interview. The interviews took place in a classroom at the girls’ school during their time in the leisure-time centre, and each interview lasted between 25 and 40 min. An interview guide with a series of open-ended questions was used to explore the children’s views and expectations regarding the SAP and their experiences of being part of the SAP in relation to the activities, the other children and the leaders. The first interview session had an explorative approach. The girls were given the opportunity to express what SAP was for them and how they experienced their participation (e.g. why they started, what was fun). In the second interview session, the answers given by the girls in the first interview were elaborated upon. The questions became more specific about, for example, the leaders and other children in the SAP. Consequently, in the second interview, the children were given the opportunity to develop and deepen matters they discussed in the first interview session. Given that children’s views and experiences were in focus, it was important that, despite the pre-prepared interview guide, they had the opportunity to express what they considered to be the important aspects of the SAP. Guided by Barbour (2007), during the interview, the interviewer followed up on some of the key points and kept the discussion on track, asked additional questions, rephrased or elaborated on questions, encouraged participants to ‘problematize’ concepts and embedded short-term summaries to provide clarification and to further explore any distinctions or qualifications being made.

**Analysis**

In the analysis, the girls’ shared experiences were in focus, but even individual experiences were of interest. The analyses focused on the children’s subjective experiences and how broader gender structures, actualizing the valuation of their skills and performances in sport, influence these experiences. Hence, the analyses focused both on the children’s own understanding and on a theoretical understanding of practice (Kvale and Brinkmann 2014). This enabled an analysis of the relationship between the children’s understanding of the SAP and its broader social and cultural contexts.

After the interviews, word-for-word transcriptions were performed; the transcribed text was read and reread; the recording was listened to several times. Following this initial phase, the analysis continued in search of utterances describing aspects of gender as practised in the SAP. This phase involved the creation of initial codes. In the next step, the codes were grouped into overarching themes by combining different codes that were equal to or mirrored the same aspects. These initial themes were checked for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. This resulted in some data being moved to other themes, and new themes being created. Conversely, themes that were interesting but unrelated to the study were removed. Finally, each theme was defined for clarity and consistency and finally named. Inspired by Barbour (2007) and Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis was based on a process involving continuous shifts back and forth between the data, the units of analysis and the interpretations. The following themes were identified: ‘Disparaged by the boys’, ‘The absent leadership’ and ‘Different sports, different experiences’.
Criticisms could be raised against qualitative research findings because of the hard-
ship of generalizing beyond the context in which these were produced. Yet, such
results should be generalized to theories instead of populations (Bryman 2011).
Drawing on this reasoning, our case study does not constitute a spot test from a
known population. The girls interviewed cannot be considered as representing girls as
a group. Such a perspective rejects the notion of static criteria as crucial to the possi-
bility of generalizing results based on qualitative data. Following this reasoning, the
study takes a pragmatic approach to the knowledge produced through the interviews.
Following Kvale and Brinkmann (2014), this implies that the validity of the study can
be judged only when the knowledge is translated into practice. In that sense, research
results should be considered as perspectives rather than ‘the truth’. Cronbach (1975)
suggests in a similar manner that social phenomena are too changeable, varying and
related to context to be generalized in any way. At a certain moment in a specific
context, a particular result might describe an existing environment in a truly thor-
ough way, but without being valid in other contexts or at a later moment. In this
case, the results can illustrate new aspects of the gender regime in the SAP, which
can contribute to the discussion and organization of the SAP in the future.

Results and discussion

The presentation of the results is based on the themes that appeared during the ana-
lysis: The following themes were identified: ‘Disparaged by the boys’, ‘The absent
leadership’ and ‘Different sports, different experiences’.

To illustrate the empirical basis for our analysis, we provide the most expositive
quotations from the interviews, which are presented in italics. The focus group
method means having a common understanding based on a jointly constructed text.
It is not a compilation of the statements of the different participants, but a compre-
hensive picture of a common understanding, a perspective that is more than an indi-
vidual statement (Dahlin-Ivanoff and Holmgren 2017). Therefore, following Fielden,
Sillence, and Little (2011), when several girls are quoted in the same extract, a new
voice are denominated as ‘ and starts on a new line and while ‘I’ refers to the
interviewer.

Disparaged by the boys

The girls in the study had limited to no experience with traditional organized sports,
but during the interviews, they stated that they enjoyed being physically active, which
was their motivation to participate in the SAP. They appreciated having something to
do and trying various sports. The girls sometimes found it fun to join the SAP.
However, they dwelled on repeated situations in which they had felt disparaged, vio-
lated and offended by the boys. Primarily, the boys disparaged theirs sports compe-
tence. The girls reported that the boys verbally reduced the value of girls’ sports
ability by denouncing them as ‘slow’ or stating that they ‘suck’, which the girls
found frustrating:
One thing is very weird. When we have fun, the boys come and say strange things –
all the boys, even from two other classes.

They [the boys] were very annoying when we did the activities. They [the boys]
always say that girls are slow and weak. That was why they said, ‘Let the girls win. They
suck anyway’.

The girls provided several examples of boys denigrating girls, as in the quotation
above. One of the girls described a situation at the SAP in which the boys ‘… were
not so nice. Do you know how it was? They said that the girls were cowards and stuff
like that’.

According to the girls, the boys described girls’ and boys’ bodies as having distinct-
ive characteristics and abilities, which reproduces well-known gender stereotypes.
This serves as an illustration of how gender is negotiated in the SAP and how femin-
ine and masculine identities are created by means of these negotiations. The con-
sequence of the boys’ behaviour, according to all the girls in the group, was that the
boys spoiled the girls’ pleasure in participating in the SAP. One girl said, ‘It’s really
hard. It’s no fun to be with them [some boys] because they are not very nice’.
According to the girls, the boys have the power to dominate the practice and influence
the girls’ experiences of the SAP. Sometimes, the boys take over and control the
practice in such a way that the girls find it difficult to participate in the SAP.

During the interviews, the girls maintained that it was the boys, not the leaders, who
cau sed the unequal practices in the SAP. One girl clearly emphasized that it was her
participating peers, not the leaders, who were the ‘problem’. When asked about the
leaders’ attitudes and actions regarding the situation described, one of the girls said,
‘What leaders? I talk about other children, not leaders’. The interviewees expressed that
some of the girls started crying during practice due to the boys’ behaviour. One girl
said, ‘And the worst was that some of the girls cried several times. There were some
girls in my class who cried very much’. In line with this result, Stafford, Alexander,
and Fry (2015) find that children experience more emotional harm from their peers
than from adults in sports settings. Therefore, to attain equality in sports activities, it
may be important to pay attention to children’s agency in the organization of the SAP.
In line with Alalen’s (2014) thinking, the girls in our sample experienced that the boys
in the SAP had specific social and cultural resources due to their gender that gave
them the power to control and influence the practice in the SAP.

Likewise, previous research, which has mostly focused on football, has shown that
girls who participate in informal sports are excluded from sports activities because
the boys consider them to be weak and lack ability (Swain 2000). The girls’ accounts
actualize the tendencies of the boys towards bullying, excluding and violating the
girls, just as Hickey (2008) found in his study. This may be linked to a point made
by Coakley and Pike (2014): it is difficult for females to become included in alterna-
tive sports activities because males generally control who plays and who is defined as
a ‘fellow athlete’. Similar processes were shown in Skille and Waddington’s (2006)
study of ‘open hall’ activities. They argue that there is the lack of adult control, which
enables the boys to create a masculine culture, excluding the girls from the activities.
Notably, the SAP is a more adult-controlled sports activity than the ‘open hall’ and
other forms of informal player-controlled sports (e.g. playground sports).
Nevertheless, the SAP reproduces long-standing male domination in sport, which marginalizes girls. However, we must acknowledge the variations within the groups of boys and girls, and therefore, we must be aware that some of the masculinities that Connell elaborates may be subordinated in SAP practice as well, even if the girls describe the boys as a homogeneous group.

The absent leadership

The girls expressed that they received poor support from the adult sports leaders in the SAP. They felt that the leaders should lead the activities in such a way that the boys stop disparaging the girls. Instead of doing that, the girls found that some leaders encouraged practices that excluded girls. In the following quotation, the girls describe an example of how one leader acted on one occasion in the SAP:

- I almost broke my leg today
- I: What did the leaders say?
- They do not care. They only say quit a thousand times, and it doesn’t stop, but, hello, the leader should say, ‘Stop it. Go and sit on the bench. They are going to have some fun while you are sitting here. You must behave if you want to participate next time’.

In the quotation above, the girls discuss the fact that the leaders should do something to stop the boys’ bad behaviour. They wish the leaders would organize the activities in such a way as to prevent the boys from dominating the practice. However, according to the girls, the leaders do not do anything to challenge the gender regime in the SAP activities. On the contrary, by acting in the same way as the participating boys, the leaders sometimes uphold the gender regime. Because the analysis shows that it was not only the sports leaders’ passive and insufficient coaching style that allowed the boys to exclude the girls, but also that the leaders actively depreciated and marginalized the girls in the SAP. The girls experienced that some leaders patronized the girls. Furthermore, it is male leaders who the girls talked about in these cases. For example, the following was expressed during the interviews:

- Also, the leaders can say stupid things. When I ask something, they say stupid things or something like that.
- I: Do the leaders do that?
- It was the leaders in floorball and football.

Consequently, the practice in the SAP was created through the leaders’, the boys’ and the girls’ verbal and bodily activities. In contrast with previous research, the leaders do not seem to contribute to equal sports practice. Grahn and Berggren Torell (2015) showed that when the activities were structured by the coach, frequent interactions occurred between girls and boys. In these activities, gender was not salient to the children’s interactions. However, when activities were not structured by the coach, gender segregation appeared more frequently, and gendered behaviour was more explicit.

The girls interviewed in the present study experienced that the leaders did not listen to them and that the girls had no power to influence activities in the SAP. One
girl compared the SAP with class football, in which school classes compete with other classes during leisure time and which is led by the children’s parents:

The leaders in the SAP decide all the time, but in class football [another sports activity in school], the leaders are very nice. They say, ‘You are good at football’. It is very fun, but the SAP leaders say, ‘It is me deciding what to do’.

The interviews suggested that the girls felt lonely and left out without support from the adults in the SAP. The data obtained in this study cannot determine whether the leaders’ notions of gender relations differed from the girls’ notions. Moreover, based on the empirical data, we cannot say anything about whether the leaders regard gender relations as stereotyped and problematic or, in accordance with the ideas of boys and girls, as two distinctive gender groups. In any event, based on the girls’ accounts, the male leaders contribute to the SAP sometimes becoming a sports practice that is only for males. Still, it is impossible to say whether the situation described has to do with gender or with the leaders and certain male pupils holding a similar sport habitus. Relating to Alonen’s (2014) reasoning about children’s agency given their cultural, material and social capital/resources, we believe that the girls’ experiences may be related to the fact that they do not have the socio-cultural resources of the leaders in terms of sports capital.

**Different sports, different experiences**

The SAP is a mixed-sports programme, in which the children have the opportunity to try various sports. In the light of this, it is notable that the girls in the study describe how their experiences with the boys’ behaviour varied depending on the sport on the schedule in the SAP. The quotation below is an episode from a discussion about various sports the girls have tried in the SAP:

I: Have you tried something in the SAP that you have not tried before?
   - Yes, judo.
   - We have been dancing, too.
   - Dance was fun.
   - Dance, it was fun when we dance.
   - Not football.
   - Football was the most boring.
   - I really like football, but football was not fun anyway.
   - I did not even get to take part.
   - That was when the boys started.
   - ... sit on the bench or play better [rendering what the boys said].
   - That was when the boys started to talk about that girls suck and so on.

In the quotation above, the girls discuss the fact that the boys’ annoying behaviour is most common when football is on the schedule. Therefore, football is the sport they
least prefer in the SAP. It is important to emphasize that the girls express that they usually like football but, in the SAP, football has become an unpleasant activity.

According to the girls’ accounts, the boys’ behaviour during the football sessions made the girls less keen to participate in the SAP. One girl said, ‘There was a boy who was crazy in football; I do not want to be involved in the SAP anymore’. Connell (2008) argues that competitive team sports are significant symbols of masculinity.

This is in line with Flintoff (2008), whose study shows that it is not enough to merely organize a sports activity where all children are welcome. This risks old structures being reproduced in practice. Guided by Connell’s (2002) reasoning about masculinities that are actively produced through people’s actions and affected by the existing strategies and resources in a certain situation, we argue that male domination is not present all the time in the SAP but depends on the specific sports activity being practised. The children and the leaders incorporated into the SAP embody historically shaped ideas about men’s and women’s differing positions in sport based on their previous experiences, especially with organized club sports.

**Conclusions**

The aim of this article was, by means of a case study, to discuss girls’ debut in alternative sports programme organized in collaboration between school and the sports movement. Our research question dealt with how the girls’ experiences related to gender structures. Indeed, the girls themselves related their negative experiences to gender differences. Drawing from the girls’ retold experiences, we claim that both the leaders and the children are actively producing gender stereotypes. According to the girls, the leaders normalize gender oppression and thereby uphold gender stereotypes. The boys are described as acting as if they are superior in relation to the girls and ascribing certain physical and personality characteristics to the girls. The girls, on the other hand, view boys and girls as two gender-distinctive groups, without inherent variations. Yet, while the girls seem to understand their negative experiences solely as an issue of gender, we open up for the possibility that these experiences might relate to the fact that the girls had limited or no experience of organized sports during their leisure time. As already mentioned, none of them were participating in organized sport when the interviews were carried out. Due to their lack of sports capital, they may have had a harder time than peers holding such capital to relate to the SAP context and the activities offered. This in turn generates a call for sensitivity towards groups of children who are unfamiliar with organized sports.

Nonetheless, based on the results of this study, we believe that if the SAP is not adjusted in gender-conscious ways, it may marginalize and exclude girls, as well as boys who do not live up to norms for boys, such as being athletic and interested and skilled in sports. The girls in the study felt that they had been disparaged and excluded from some SAP activities due to the boys’ behaviour. Hence, it is necessary that the organizers of the SAP pay attention to gender issues and work out gender-conscious guidelines and strategies so that both girls and boys feel included in all SAP activities. Otherwise, SSC will risk failing in their ambition to use the SAP as a
true sports for all alternative and as a strategy with which to challenge persistent structures and attitudes in traditional organized sports.

The girls claim that they like to play sports and that they participate in the SAP for just this reason. This is important for SAP organizers to bear in mind, because there is a risk that the girls’ negative approach gives the impression that girls do not like to play sports in the SAP. The consequence of this could be, as Coakley and Pike (2014) argue, that the boys will receive priority access to sports facilities and resources because people think that girls are not interested in sports.

In light of the results of our study, the SAP could be a true sports activity for girls with limited experience with traditional organized sport. This requires that the organizers be aware of how the activities are organized and led. As has been shown in the article, previous research has shown aspects of male hegemony in sports. We suggest that it takes more than simply starting sports activities and hoping that more alternatives will boost participation. Without knowledge about gender-related norms and gender-conscious leadership, there is a risk that male hegemony, which previous research has repeatedly shown (e.g. Flintoff 2008; Tolverh 2015), will be reproduced in new and alternative sport settings, such as the SAP.

We are aware of the risk that we, as researchers, reproduce stereotypical notions of gender by sharing these results. Still, in relation to gender equality in society in general and in educational settings for children more specifically, we believe in presenting results that show that traditional gender patterns still exist, and thereby identify areas of improvement in order to safeguard equal conditions for all children in sport settings. However, we argue that because the results reflect the experiences of girls with limited or no experience with organized sports, one should be careful in viewing the results as indicating a fixed relationship between boys and girls. The result might have been different if the study had included girls with sports capital. In this study, it is difficult to determine how much the girls’ negative experience of the boys’ behaviour depends on the fact that they are boys or the fact that the boys have more experience with organized sport and sports competence. Likewise, the study included only girls’ experiences of the SAP. It is important to consider that the SAP may also exclude boys with limited experience in sport (especially football). In that sense, the results of our study confirm previous research that draws attention to the codes of entitlement, privilege and unity that can be created among groups of boys whose identities have a strong connection to sporting forms of hyper-masculinity. In such a context, the ability to reduce or hide weakness and exploit vulnerabilities is viewed as desirable (Hickey 2008). With the aim of avoiding results that reproduce ‘a drastically simplified view of men, boys and masculinity’, to use Connell’s words (2008, 132), there is a need for further studies on children’s sports activities that take sports capital into account.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).
Funding

This study was funded by Swedish Research Council for Sport Science.

ORCID

Peter Carlman  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8717-8519
Maria Hjalmarsson  http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7438-0232

References

Grahn, Karin, and Viveka Berggren Torell. 2014. Barndom och Genus i Idrottslyftsprojekt på Skoltid [Childhood and Gender in Physical Education Project During the School Day]. Stockholm: Riksidrott@bundet.


