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Conflicting rationalities of participation: constructing and resisting ‘Midnight football’ as an instrument of social policy

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ABSTRACT
Today, sport activities are performed as instruments for social objectives. In this article, we examine Midnight Football, a sports-based intervention promoting social inclusion and crime-prevention. Based on interviews with participants and on-site observations, we examine how young participants understand their participation in relation to the overarching ambitions of the intervention. Participants emphasize that football is fun, enables social relationships, and opportunities of development, and not primarily the instrumental utility of the practices noted to underpin the intervention. In the tensions between the different discourses, the hegemony of instrumentality which conditions the activities can be challenged. At the same time, the instrumentality of sport utilized on the explicit premise of social objectives challenges the traditional and competitive notions of sport practices. This dual resistance is principally discussed with respect to sport provided as a right or premised as an instrument of specific policy objectives.

Introduction

In contemporary social policy, social inclusion has in many locations become a central objective in order to combat societal inequalities, in Sweden and other countries (e.g. Schierup, Krifors, and Slavnic 2015). In this regard, sport has been attributed the potential of contributing to social inclusion (e.g. Collins and Haudenhuyse 2015; Spaaij 2011). Still, social inclusion could have quite different meanings, regarding social policy, as well as sport (e.g. Schaillé, Haudenhuyse, and Bradt 2019). Notably, when it comes to sport, a distinction between inclusion in sport and inclusion (in society) through sport has been made (Collins and Haudenhuyse 2015).

In the context of urban segregation and social exclusion in Sweden, young people’s participation in organized club sports is considerably lower in areas located in the urban peripheries (Blomdahl et al. 2019). Furthermore, associations in these areas face considerable challenges, making them less durable than associations in other areas (MUCF 2016). In this context, sport activities are performed not only by sport associations for competition,
but also as a compensatory provision of sport activities underpinned by instrumental notions of sport as a means of social objectives, such as social inclusion (Dahlstedt and Ekholm 2021).

In the Scandinavian context, sport activities for young people have gone through processes of increased organization and administration, limiting opportunities for spontaneous activities (Trondman 2005). Following this development, federations and other agencies have strived for creating opportunities for local and spontaneous sport activities (Stenling 2015)—challenging the traditional sport club and competitive sport dominance. From a policy-making point of view, the value of spontaneous sports has paradoxically been spotlighted for their potential social benefits (Stenling 2015). In this context, organized spontaneity has been used as a concept to describe new and innovative ways of creating opportunities for inclusion of young people in sports (Högman 2014). Accordingly, organized spontaneous sport can be viewed as an instrument of certain policy objectives such as social inclusion (Blomdahl, Elofsson, and Åkesson 2012).

Accordingly, there seems to be present a political discourse of instrumentality underpinning the provision of sport activities for youth in socio-economically disadvantaged suburban areas, articulated both by policy-makers on different levels and by representatives of the sport movement—in Sweden (Dahlstedt and Ekholm 2021; Norberg 2011), as well as internationally (Collins and Haudenhuyse 2015; Hartmann 2016). For instance, in Sweden and Scandinavia, there is a long tradition of supporting sport activities on the basis of implicit expectations that sport participation fosters social inclusion and integration (Bergsgard and Norberg 2010; Norberg 2011). Though, following in the trends of transforming roles of civil society organisations for the purposes of providing welfare services underpinned by social policy objectives (Arvidson, Johansson, and Scaramuzzino 2018), the presumed autonomy of sport associations has been challenged (Stenling and Sam 2017). Expectations concerning the contributions to such objectives have been made more and more explicit, and conditioning funding and support in the last decades (Fahlén and Stenling 2016).

Often such sports-based interventions are carried out in cooperation between municipalities, entrepreneurs and associations. In this article, we direct attention towards one such sports-based intervention, Midnight football. This intervention aims to facilitate social inclusion by means of providing football for young people in the ages 12–25, and is carried out in disadvantaged suburban peripheries in two Swedish cities exposed to advanced social exclusion. In the examinations presented here, we direct our attention towards the participants’ experiences and discourse, in order to gain insight into their position as subjects in relation to the objectives of social inclusion of the interventions and their desires of participation.

Examinations of sports-based interventions are usually based on descriptions of decision makers, managers, organizers and coaches, though there are studies based on the voices of participant young people (e.g. Sabbe et al. 2019). In order to understand the dynamics of the intervention, a focus on the experiences and discourses of young people participating and how they relate to the ambitions of the activities is of great importance. Interrogating the voices of young people participating, makes it possible to further explore tensions and possible pockets of resistance, in order to problematize emerging common-sense discourses of the instrumental utility of sport.
Accordingly, the aim of this article is to examine how the young people who participate in Midnight football understand the activities and their participation in them. We explore how they view themselves in relation to their participation, how the participants create meaning around the activities and how they talk about their participation in the activities. How do the participants talk about their participation and how does this talk relate to the ambitions of the intervention? Based on interviews with participants and on-site observations, we approach the aim and questions from a discourse analysis and governmentality approach, focusing on the subject positions constructed in particular discourses. In the examination, particular dynamics and contradictions between hegemonies and resistance become visible.

Empirical setting, context and material

Carried out as an intervention promoting social inclusion and combating social exclusion, providing sport activities underpinned by instrumental rationalities, as a compensatory provision to those lacking opportunities, is the premise of the design. Accordingly, Midnight football can only be promoted in a particular segregated urban landscape, in relation to particular targets of social inclusion (Ekholm and Dahlstedt 2020b).

The intervention: on the field

Midnight football is a form of organized and spontaneous football activity. It is organized in the sense that there are regular activities managed by clubs and a national foundation conducted at certain hours and at certain places, with coaches engaged and present. It is spontaneous in the sense that participants do not need to be members of the clubs and they do not announce participation before the activities are held. Accordingly, there may be different youth present and participating from time to time. We have examined the operations in two cities and suburban areas, referred to as Västerort and Österort.

To illustrate how the activity is carried out, let us provide the following account, taken from a field note taken at the activities in one of the locations, Västerort:

Midnight football starts at 9 pm on Saturday night. I’m coming to [Västerort] and to the sports arena at 8:45 pm. None of the leaders are in place, but the doors are open and there are already about 30 children and young people present. They play basketball and football in small groups—that are constantly dissolved and regrouped. Some of the participants speak Swedish, while others speak other languages with each other. […] Just before 9 pm the leader [Mustafa] shows up. We greet and chat for a little while. The children and young people are between about 12 and 25 years old, but most in the range 12–20. The sports hall has an almost full-size handball/futsal court, but no stands or other spectator facilities. However, there are two smaller spaces along one side where material can be set up and stored, and where spectators and public can hang out. It is soon crowded with children and young people. At 9 pm the leader [Martin] also arrives. He walks around the hall and talks to the children and young people. At the same time, the spontaneous game in the hall continues in different constellations, with different sports. The time is approaching 9:30 pm and [Martin] has prepared a couple of sets of vests in different colors to be distributed in the group. […] After a few minutes, everyone who is to participate on the pitch sits in front of [Martin] and [Mustafa]. Those who are in place but who are not going to play sit on benches or along the front long side. [Martin] hands out vests, forming the different teams for the night. The teams consist of players with very different skills and habits to play. […] Many participants are equipped with
sports gear, shorts and a t-shirt, while others play in their everyday clothes, with jeans and a hoodie and with sneakers. However, some young people have no particular sports equipment at all, wearing their usual outerwear. […] The structure and order of play is clear for the first hour, but gradually the rules become more relaxed. The players in the losing team have a tendency to linger. Some players exchange vests with each other. As the structure begins to dissolve, several of the older players stay on the field. At 11 pm, there are still formally seven teams in rotation, but fewer players and some prominent older boys are now playing with more teams. It's a playful jargon. The game is not taken too seriously, but at the same time everyone is fighting to win. Some children go home during the evening, but many stay until closing at 23.45. (Field note by Ekholm, from Västerort)

The activities are performed as five-a-side football, indoors Saturday nights. When the activity begins, coaches divide participants into teams. Matches are played on the basis of the first goal wins and the winner remains on field. For the losing side, there is a rotation chart structuring the order in which teams come back into play. Non-playing teams are present in the sports center, waiting on benches or stands next to the court.

Sometimes, there are over a hundred young people present at the Midnight football activities during a Saturday night, in the two cities respectively. Many are mainly there to watch and hang out with friends. In this respect, Midnight football appears to be a local and social gathering point. The intervention primarily reaches out to young people residing in the suburban areas where the activities are carried out (Ekholm and Dahlstedt 2020b). This means that participants have a variety of backgrounds, however more or less exclusively with a first- or second-generation migrant background. Notably, almost all participants are boys, even though some girls are present, although not very often active on-field (Ekholm et al. 2019).

**The organisation and objectives of the intervention**

The activities are organised in cross-sector cooperation, designed by a national foundation and carried out by sport clubs in collaboration with municipalities and a range of other agencies, such as sponsors and charitable contributors (Ekholm and Holmlid 2020).

As we have examined in previous publications, these stakeholders have different approaches to their respective contributions: broadly, the national foundation alongside the sport clubs involved express ambitions to aid and support the young to be included in society, promote integration and prevent crime (Ekholm and Holmlid 2020). The municipalities supporting the activities express different motives, however, clearly articulating how activities align with local social policy ambitions that may promote integration, or at least provide opportunities for leisure activities in areas otherwise lacking association activities (Ekholm 2019). Sponsors and the charitable agencies motivate their involvement as wanting to contribute to society where there are particular needs for support and to make a change for the better (Ekholm and Dahlstedt 2018). Still, such ambitions are underpinned by certain political notions, of how problems could be conceived and towards what objectives change are to be directed (Ekholm and Dahlstedt 2018). Importantly, these rationalities all centre around a conceptual understanding of utilizing sport as an instrument for various purposes of social change. Such change can be associated with integration, crime-prevention, fostering or diversion—forming a discourse of instrumentality enabling the intervention and the activities carried out.
Empirical material

The empirical material analyzed in this article is composed of observations of the activities carried out on the two sites investigated as well as interviews with participants. Interviews and observations were conducted by the authors and two research assistants.

Observations were conducted on five occasions on each site, where field notes were taken and transcribed. During observations, researchers were active in participating in the activities and in interaction with the participants. The observations were essential to gain insight into how the activities were performed, but they were not least important in order to observe dynamics in the activities that were later on picked up and talked about in the interviews. In the article, field notes, not least, provides a context for the interpretations and analysis made (McSweeney and van Luijk 2019).

When following the activities on site, we came into contact with a large number of young people. On the basis of these contacts, interviews with 21 participants were conducted. Interviews were semi-structured and followed an interview guide, with a few open-ended questions where the participants were asked to describe their experiences of taking part in the activities. It was the respondents’ narratives and perspectives that directed the interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The young people interviewed are between 15 and 21 years old (with the exception of one participant who is 26 years old). Of these, nine have attended the activities arranged in Västerort, while 12 have attended the activities in Österort. Two of the young people are girls (both from Västerort), the others are boys. All respondents have a foreign background, i.e. they are either themselves or at least one of their parents born abroad. Six of the respondents were born in Sweden. Two of the respondents have come to Sweden as unaccompanied minors. Several of the respondents were born themselves or have parents born in a country in East Africa. One of the respondents was born in a country in West Africa. Additionally, some of the respondents are born in or have parents who were born in Syria and Iraq. A few of the interviewees were born and raised in south-eastern Europe. Among those born abroad, there is a great variety in terms of how long they have resided in Sweden. Some have largely grown up in Sweden, while others at the time of the interview have lived in Sweden for a few years. All but a few of the interviewees live in either Västerort or Österort, or in a nearby area, with similar socio-economic conditions. The young people who do not live in Västerort or Österort live in homes for unaccompanied minors located just outside these respective areas. Conclusively, the group of participants interviewed constitute a diverse group, living in disadvantaged suburban areas, and with a migrant background.

Research context

In recent years, public debate in Sweden has drawn attention to the effects of growing social and economic inequality, not least in the form of crime and insecurity in the urban peripheries (e.g. Schclarek-Mulinari 2020). This inequality is expressed in spatial, ethnocultural and socio-economic segregation (Dahlstedt and Ekholm 2019), where socio-economically underprivileged households with a foreign background, are concentrated in certain areas, often located on the outskirts of the cities (e.g. Stigendal 2016). These areas are most often stigmatized (e.g. Backvall 2019). In these areas, several mechanisms of exclusion intersect in the shaping of young people’s living conditions. Not least, socio-economic vulnerability
contributes to limiting young people’s confidence, in the present as well as in the future, and their feelings of belonging to society (Alm and Brännström 2011).

In Sweden, studies have shown that young people’s participation in organized club sports is considerably lower in areas characterized by socio-economic vulnerability (Blomdahl et al. 2019; CIF 2019). Such differences have increased significantly over the past three decades, which can be seen against the background of the general increase in inequality in society at large (Blomdahl et al. 2019; MUCF 2020).

In relation to these conditions, young people develop a broad repertoire of strategies. When it comes to the importance of football for children and young people in an area of socio-economic vulnerability, León Rosales (2010) highlights the cultural power of football, in the sense that football becomes a way to form community with others as well as a potential to direct future dreams. Accordingly, for many young people, football becomes not only a meaningful and fun activity, but also an activity that shapes young people’s lives and dreams.

Young people’s participation in sports activities has been examined with a focus on club sports aiming at education and socialization (e.g. Wagnsson 2009) as well as on sports activities with social purposes (e.g. Eriksson and Nylander 2014). Further, young people’s voices about participation in club sports have been examined, for instance highlighting how young people of migrant background describe sport as fun and expressing a will to participate, while experiencing difficulties concerning the organization of club sports (Wagnsson et al. 2019).

In recent years, the scientific literature about sport for development, social inclusion and sports-based interventions in broader terms have increased notably. Empirically, the analyzes are mainly based on either surveys or the voices of organizers, while the voices of the participating young people are relatively absent.

However, from existing literature some important notes can be spotlighted. A study based on interviews with young people who have participated in organized spontaneous sports activities similar to those studied here, shows how the participants experience a lesser demanding participation than in traditional sports (Högman and Augustsson 2017). Sabbe et al. (2019) interviewed young participants in sports-based interventions in Flandern, accounting for the practices as an opportunity to meet other young people, and as more accessible and unconditional than traditional sport club activities. In addition, based on interviews with young participants in sports-based interventions targeting ‘at risk youth’ in the UK, Parker et al. (2019) suggests that participation can lead to active citizenship and community engagement. In Australia, Cunningham et al. (2020) examined the experiences of young people who have participated in a sport for social change intervention. When the participants look back on their lives as adults, they describe participation in positive terms, as contributing to their life trajectories and educational careers as well as a sense of community.

As illustrated in these studies, there may be tensions between articulating motivation on the premises of young people’s own will and articulating the meaning of participation in relation to the objectives underpinning the interventions promoted. Still, there seems to be a general lack of research focusing on the voices of the participants’ in sports-based interventions provided as a compensation for a lack of opportunities to participate in traditional competitive club sport. Consequently, there is a need for more research based on how young people describe participation in sports with other premises than the traditional club sports.
Theoretical and methodological framework

In this article we take a constructionist conceptual framework as our point of departure. We highlight the interplay between governing technologies, rationalities and the discourse articulated by the subjects governed. Thus, the meaning making of participant youth is in the analytical spotlight. Approaching the articulations of participant young people as part of a governmental rationality, provides a contribution to existing literature that have paid attention to either policy articulations guiding interventions or experiences of participation among young people.

Discourse refers to a particular way of talking about something, rendering the world accessible in specific ways (Foucault 1971). By talking about certain things and events in definite ways, meaning is created for those who speak (Foucault 1971). Articulations have effects in terms of certain things becoming visible, while other things are excluded (Foucault 1971), as well as in terms of how certain ways to speak shapes the speaker. In this sense, discourse may be seen as part of modern forms of governing (Dean 2010). Governing activities consist in forming behavior, not least in shaping particular ways of thinking, forming people’s subjectivity (Foucault 1982). Governing the conduct of individuals and populations imbues a certain rationality, how the discourse of problems is interlinked with how the intervention and its objectives are understood (Dean 2010).

In practice, governing includes all measures ranging from the police to social work, education or rehabilitative therapy of individual subjects (Foucault 2003, 2009). What is important in these various forms of governing, is that they are relational and taking place between active subjects. Governing, from this point of view, does not take shape by unilateral domination or subjugation, but through a dynamic interplay, where not least the governed themselves play an active part in the (re)formation of their conduct (Foucault 1982). Thus, governing is relational and cannot be examined solely on the basis of the ambitions of leaders and politicians. Governing needs to be interrogated in the specific contexts where technologies operate, in relation to the subjects that are the targets of intervention (and whose conduct is to be governed), in this case the young people who participate in the activities organized. Such a starting point allows us to direct analytical attention to how young people are positioned as subjects, in relation to the ways in which it becomes possible to talk (Bacchi 2009), for instance about participation in sports.

In practical terms, the conceptual framework is put to work through discourse analysis of the meaning making articulated by the young people participating in the activities examined. By investigating the statements and articulations the participants make, we can analyze how certain positions and subjectivities become possible in relation to the varieties of ways to speak about participation that are accessible for the participants. This approach makes it possible to interrogate how the young people conceive of the activities and their participation in them, and how they see themselves and create meaning in relation to their participation, particularly with respect to the ambitions guiding the intervention.

Analysis

The following analysis highlights the meaning making of participants. The discourse articulated is formed in the tensions between the social utility of sport and football participation and the will to develop and compete in sport on the terms of the participants themselves.
An activity of fun and for development

According to a recurring theme in the discourse articulated by the participants, the activities are described as fun and as providing opportunities to play football and to develop as players. In the second instance, that means that the activities appear as a training session, just like other occasions when they get the chance to play.

In an interview, Saman, who is 15 years old and participates in Midnight football in Västerort, is asked the reason why he participates in the activity. After a long reasoning about Midnight football as a recurring activity where he knows many others who participate, he states: ‘I come there to have fun.’ When asked what it is that makes it fun to participate, he says: ‘I really don’t care who is there or not … as long as we have fun.’ The focus on participation as fun as the main reason for participation is illustrative. Similar reasoning appears in the articulations of young people concerning participation in the activities. It may seem obvious, but it is an important starting point, that the young people primarily participate in the activities because they are considered to be fun.

That Midnight football is described as fun can be seen in the light of the fact that the activities seems to provide an important opportunity to play football and to develop as a football player. Some of the young people point out that they participate mainly because it is fun to play football, as such. For example, Tarik, 19 years from Västerort, states that Midnight football is fun and that it is ‘probably for that reason I come there, and also because I enjoy football’.

Taisir, 16 years old, living in Söderort, close to Österort, describes Midnight football as an opportunity to see other, talented young people play football, and learn from them. When Taisir is not playing himself, he says he is trying to follow the game and learn:

When I cannot play, I use to go there and watch. Still, you get to learn something. How to play, and everything around. How people play the game. You develop just by going there. There are a lot of players who are better than you. Perhaps you can learn how they play, by looking and practicing. (Taisir, Österort)

Like many other participants, Taisir describes participation in Midnight football as an opportunity to play football. In this sense, football becomes an end in itself, not primarily a means of diversion, prevention or other social objectives.

When young people meet both on and off the field, they learn different things according to the discourse articulated, made visible for instance in the description of Taisir above.

Boban in Västerort also takes note of a learning taking place, when he says that: ‘you develop more as a football player,’ particularly emphasizing that those who participate learn to play football together with participants from different parts of the world: ‘there are usually five or six cultures present, so you get to learn how like Somalis play … or Bosniacs.’

Some of the participants talk about how they also train and play games with competitive football teams. In some cases, in junior and senior teams in other areas of the cities, at a higher level. Ali, who is 17 years old and lives in Västerort, says that he otherwise plays football for a team in another, more affluent, area with the club’s senior amateur team. He describes his dreams and ambitions in the following way:

I want to play football on a high level, as high as possible. Of course, I want to become a professional, but as you know, this is harder than you might think. But I practice every day, to reach this goal. [...] I see it as an opportunity to just go out and practice. Try to improve, to
perform on the field. I don’t know how to become a professional. There are many ways. I’ll just wait for my chance. […]

Interviewer: Why do you participate in Midnight football?

It started with … everybody is there. The mates, everybody, all the people you know. So, you definitely want to be there and play football. […]

Interviewer: What is it that makes you go there?

Football is the main reason. And then everything all around, the social. I enjoy talking to people, and so. (Ali, Västerort)

The first priority of participating in Midnight football for Ali is to get the chance to practice football, and he sees this as a way to develop as a player. In addition to this rationality, he highlights the social gatherings that he describes as enjoyable. According to these and many other ways of reasoning, Midnight football emerges as any football activity: an activity through which the dream of success and development can be realized.

A site of social relations

One of the keys to understanding how the participant youth see the activities as fun, developmental and important is the facilitation of social relations. When young people talk about social relations, there are mainly two articulations that come forth. On the one hand, young people talk about Midnight football as an activity where they can meet friends they already know. On the other hand, young people talk about the fact that in the activities they can meet new friends, whom they did not know before. Participants describe meetings with young people from other yet similar areas in the city. Meetings with young people from more socio-economically well-to-do areas are less often noticed. The participants describe that meetings that take place partly strengthen relationships that already exist and partly make it possible to develop new relationships.

The young people describe the activities as occasions where a wide group of young people meet. ‘Usually, everybody comes’ says Tarik, when describing the activities arranged in Västerort. He says, ‘there are many people who don’t know how to play, but who are there anyway, playing and running … almost everyone, anyone’. When asked specifically where most of the participants live, he answers that they ‘live mostly in [Västerort], but some live in [Närort] and [Innerort]’. two close by areas with a similar socio-economic situation as Västerort.

Such discourse is repeated among most of the participants interviewed. The participants describe that young people from different parts of the city attend the activities. But it is mainly young people from other socio-economically disadvantaged parts of the city that are mentioned. When Tarik in Västerort reflects on this matter, he says that it may be because those who participate, who also live in the area, know each other: ‘I think they know each other … You know people who live in [Västerort], so…’

When Elvir, 17 years old from Österort, discusses why it is mainly young people from Österort who participate, while there are hardly any participants from the nearby, more affluent area, he says: ‘Maybe they don’t know that Midnight football exists […] Or perhaps there are many people who don’t play football’. This reasoning can be seen against the
backdrop of the nearby area residing one of the largest, well-known sport associations in the district. Another possible explanation emerges when Ali reflects on the question of who is participating in the activities in Västerort: ‘I believe that in the other areas, they have a Midnight football of their own’. In this statement, at least, Ali does not concern that the intervention has a particular target and is not at all performed in other areas in the city.

While participation makes it possible to hang out with friends, it also makes it possible to get to know new people, something that not least Saman in Västerort emphasizes: ‘it is fun to be there and get to know new people’. He describes that he knows many of those who come, but also that he learns to make new friends: ‘there are new people arriving all the time … so you get to know them as well’.

For Taisir, who quite recently before the interview moved from Söderort to Österort in Österstad, describes how important the Midnight football activities have been for him to form new social relationships.

*Interviewer: Have you got to know new friends in Midnight football?*

Yes, a lot. You know, when teams meet, you greet one another. You’ll talk about everything, and then you’ll get to know each other… So the next time you meet, you always say hello, you are friends. […]

*Interviewer: Do you also meet on other occasions?*

Well, some of them, we use to go to the café [sw: fika] together and everything… Some of us go to the same school. We never talked to each other, but then we started talking. We kind of became best friends. (Taisir, Österort)

Here, Taisir makes clear that the social relations created on site can indeed be sustained also in everyday life and thus transferred to other contexts. Still, most notably, the fact that young people locally describe the Midnight football activities as a place to gather and make friends lay ground for utilizing the activities as an intervention of spatial diversion of the young people.

**A means of spatial diversion**

By describing the activities as a meeting place for young people in the area, the activities are formed as an alternative place to be on late weekend nights. In this description, the football activities appear as a means of diversion from undesirable forms of conduct, not least crime. In line with how Midnight football is characterized as a meeting place, the young people we met describe this meeting place in contrast to how young people otherwise gather in the city center, mall or just hang out in the areas.

According to the discourse articulated, different places appear in opposition to each other—inside Midnight football, where there is safety and order, and outside, where there is risk and problems. This dichotomy is based on distinctions between *inside* and *outside*, *then* and *now*. When Tarik in Västerort talks about the activity as a meeting place, a contrast emerges between Midnight football and the area outside. Tarik describes that Midnight football 'became like an arena for meetings […] all people came there … literally everyone'. In his description, *now* is contrasted to *before*, before the start of Midnight football in the area: ‘before … perhaps we were out, just out in the city center … we hung out in the park and so’.
A similar distinction emerges in the way Midnight football is described by Liban. He is 16 years old and lives in Söderort but participates in the activities organized in Österort. According to his articulation, the condition of social segregation and disorder in Österort, and nearby Söderort, provides the context. He says that ‘sometimes, there are some problems, burning cars and such’. He continues by describing that there are ‘some disturbances when I’m out, kind of’. But ‘since they arranged Midnight football, the area is healthier […] it is not as much happening as it used to do’.

Saman in Västerort, as well as many of the other participants, says that when young people gather, ‘there is a decrease of cri … what is it called … criminality’, as ‘people are more drawn to [Midnight football] rather than hanging out doing mischief … well, burning cars, like what happened the other week’. In similar terms, Ayub, who is 15 years old and lives in Österort, describes Midnight football as a site of diversion:

So, it's fun, really. It's fun. You know … at night if [Midnight football] didn't exist then you would be somewhere else. Maybe going out and doing mischief. You understand? Now when Midnight football is, you just come here and play. Also, you get to know many new people … all the time, and it's fun. That's good, really. (Ayub, Österort)

Here, Ayub's statement aligns with the discourse underpinning the rationality promoted by coaches and managers of the intervention (Ekholm and Dahlstedt 2021, 2020a). According to this rationality, the local surroundings provide opportunities to conduct delinquent behavior, and as a reflection, the sport arena provides a place to reside during the hours of risk and danger. Emphasized in this discourse, still, is how it is the social relations that make this dichotomy possible.

Through the discourse on sport as a means of spatial diversion, we can see a dichotomy take shape: between football and crime, between being inside the arena and being outside in the area and potentially being involved in delinquent conduct. Such a discourse is also reasonably noted by the participating youth, and thus becomes something they position themselves in relation to. The young people seem to be quite well acquainted with this way of emphasizing the significance of the activity and in different ways they also relate to it. However, it is not primarily such an instrumentality that motivates them to participate. Rather, the young people’s participation seems to have other grounds, where football is more of a goal in itself, a fun activity, where social relationships can take shape, where it becomes possible to play football and develop as a player.

_A means of social formation_

Articulated as a site and means of diversion from delinquency, the activities are furthermore associated with learning. According to the discourse articulated, the structure of play can enable social change. In the capacity of role-models, the leaders are attributed an educational position as facilitators of social change—very much in line with the discourse promoted by coaches and managers (Ekholm and Dahlstedt 2021, 2020a). The leaders, furthermore, are seen as creators of order.

Regardless of the underpinnings of the talk about football as a means of social objectives, there are common thoughts concerning football activities as a site of diversion. Not least concerning structure and education, with a focus on the leaders, as representing structure and education. This means that the place for the activities can be created as places for order and security.
When Waleed, 15 years old, living in Österort, describes the learning he believes that participation makes possible, he emphasizes cooperation and respecting the rules and order of the activities: ‘you shouldn’t make fuss’ and ‘you learn from each other’, resulting in ‘it becomes calm … so, kids shouldn’t be out and causing problems’. Given that the participants learn from each other, Waleed believes that participation can contribute to it being calmer in the area. But such learning requires efforts by the coaches and managers conducting the proper behavior.

Coaches and managers are repeatedly described in positive terms. Further, the leaders appear as role models. Abdulkader in Västerort emphasizes the leaders’ importance in creating discipline and order by describing how they ‘tell us off, when someone does wrong or something bad … like’. He refers to ‘if a person is fighting and doing stuff, then they will be suspended’, displaying how discipline can be formed.

In similar terms, Taisir in Österort describes the routines for how one of the leaders manages to start the games by making the rules and structure explicit:

When they make teams, those who are going to play … they enter the field, the others who are not going to play, they should sit on the bench … So [the coach] usually writes on the board … kind of … the blue and green teams begin. And then you usually have rules like this. The one who fights, gets kicked out right away. The ones who make trouble … all that. […] To make trouble and all … it is only kids who do that. Now we are like sixteen or fifteen years … so, you should not be like this. You learn that you should be so disturbing and all that. So, the rules, I think they are good actually. (Taisir, Österort)

Here, Taisir reflects on the role of the leaders for demonstrating and embodying the rules and ensuring that they are complied with. The authority of the leaders is appreciated, not least because the rules help to guide the young people and shape their conduct.

At the same time, relations between participants and leaders are described as based on mutual communication, where young people listen to the leaders, and vice versa. Ali in Västerort is one of those emphasizing the latter dimension: ‘the coaches go around and talk to people […] they want to be as close as possible’. This, accordingly, makes it possible for Ali and other participants ‘to feel accepted’. Even, being accepted is something that is stressed by the coaches, as a means of gaining legitimacy among the young people, to become part of the community they are guiding (Ekholm and Dahlstedt 2021, 2020a). From Ali’s point of view, the relations formed make him feel as part of the community.

Another related description of Midnight football concerns the forms of the game of football itself. One of the participants describing the game of football as a means of making young people cooperating with each other is Dheere in Västerort. While he says that the team that loses and gets to rest can be disappointed and upset, the leaders still make sure that the games are performed ‘the same way: five minutes, first to score wins’ and ‘independent of if the losing side gets angry, they will come back … and all is fine’. The rotation between teams is part of rules (re)presented by leaders. Those who participate also learn, Dheere says, to respect both teammates and opponents.

Another example of the learning potential of the game of football is provided by Taisir, when he describes the kind of respect facilitated in the games. ‘You learn a little respect from this’, he says, and elaborates further: ‘when someone misses a shot, like over the goal … then, others will laugh’. But coaches or other participants can say ‘everyone makes mistakes’, and so, ‘it is also respect, not to laugh at each other’. Here, not laughing if someone...
shoots and misses the goal becomes the equivalent of respect, an objective formed through the guidance of the conduct of the participants. In this way, the venue where activities are arranged is animated as a place for order and structure, and thus learning, where there are rules, leaders and certain values to follow.

**Articulating reservations**

The analysis of how Midnight football is described as a means of diversion and learning highlights a discourse of instrumentality, where sport is articulated as an instrument, for social change, fostering, diversion or inclusion. Interestingly, participants seem to be quite aware of such discourse and from which positions it is articulated, thus making certain reflections and even reservations possible. In addition, the participants reflect upon the causes of exclusion as well as the discourse of the areas associating the places with risk and danger.

When Ali is asked whether Midnight football is an important activity for society, he highlights that it is fun with football, yet answers the question by relating to how others talk about the activity:

Yeah … like they say, it has reduced crime … but … I don't know. But instead of going out and stuff, they come into the venue, maybe have a chat or so … chilling out. […] Because when you are out there, they are just bored anyway, so maybe they just do something … whatever. But instead, they are in there. (Ali, Västerort)

The brief reflection ‘yeah … like they say, it has reduced crime … but … I don't know’ illustrates how the talk about the instrumental utility of football is articulated through another discourse and from a different position than Ali’s. In this articulation, different discourses appear, confronting each other, enabling new positions formed between the discourses available. Ali’s account illustrates the interplay between different discourses and motives of participation, constituting a frame for different forms of conduct. Here, it is illustrated how such talk constitutes something to relate to, despite the fact that there are doubts concerning the instrumental benefit of football. Young people do talk about Midnight football in terms of diversion (from delinquency and risk), the instrumental importance of sport for this purpose, and sport as a means rather than an end. However, imagining sport as a means provides a different way of talking, which is articulated by others in the social environment, not primarily by the young people themselves.

In addition, many of the participants talk about risk and crime attributed to the area. However, they mainly do so with certain reservations towards the discourse of instrumentality underpinning the rationality of the intervention. For instance, Saladin directs attention to the structural causes of risk, crime and social exclusion, suggesting that the roots of such problems may be too overwhelming to be combated by sports alone.

We have an upper class, middle class and underclass. […] Some areas that look like [Västerort], or become like this because of the circumstances, that’s where crime is high, where exclusion is even higher, where those who have more resources choose to move away […]. Crime and all have increased, because many feel this exclusion. […] If you have no hope […] then you fall. There is a high probability that you will end up in the crime. (Saladin, Västerort)

Saladin articulates Västerort as a place where people live under different conditions as compared to in more affluent parts of the city. Not least, Västerort is more distressed in
socio-economic terms, than other parts of the city, which in turn has a range of negative effects. According to this discourse of exclusion, the living conditions in Västerort create feelings of hopelessness, which are described as a breeding ground for crime, spreading in the place.

However, in many interviews with participants, these conditions are described not only as a matter of material conditions, but also of stigmatizing discourses about the area and its inhabitants. The participants’ descriptions of the areas and sites of intervention often take shape more or less in direct relation or rather opposition to stigmatizing discourses from the outside. Such reflections create a discourse of resistance—towards descriptions of Västerort and Österort as places of risk, crime and danger, underpinning the rationality of Midnight football. Ali mentions that ‘what is said and written about the area, Västerort, I don’t believe so much in it’. He says ‘of course, there are bad people here [and] stuff is happening that are not really good and so … but otherwise, I think it’s a great place to live’. On a similar note, Besar points out that ‘I don’t think it’s bad at all … it’s really quiet’, and ‘stuff happens from time to time, but when you were young you heard bad things about Österort all the time’. Both statements distance themselves from overly simplified problem descriptions. In relation to such descriptions, it is a diametrically different description made. In these ways, the two participants navigate between different ways of talking about the area, about participating in football and the premises of the rationality of diversion, constituting a discourse of resistance towards the instrumental utility of football.

Discussion

To conclude, when young people describe their participation, they primarily express that participation is fun, enables meetings and social relationships, as well as the opportunity to play football and develop as football players. In this discourse, participation is hardly articulated as an instrument with any purpose other than participation itself. Still, given that the activities are described as a gathering point for young people, it becomes possible to imagine the activities as an alternative to being in other places on late weekend nights, as well as a site of social formation. It is between these discourses the young people form their rationality of participation.

The notion of the instrumental utility of the activities—enabled by the stigmatization and discourses of risk attributed to the places targeted—comes primarily as a discourse articulated from others in the surroundings, such as managers and coaches. Such *discourse of instrumentality* provides an understanding to which the young people can relate—though, with some distance. Primarily, the young people stress that participation is fun, enables meetings and social relationships, and provides an opportunity to play football and develop as a football player. According to such rationality, participation is hardly articulated as an instrument with any purpose other than participation itself. We may refer to such conception as a *discourse of an end in itself*. Though these are two distinct rationalities, the articulations of the subjects are often quite ambivalent in relation to them. Both rationalities structure the experiences of the young people, and in their talk the rationalities interweave. In this sense, our analysis reaffirms results of previous studies indicating that young people consider activities as accessible and open spaces for participation, on their own terms (Högman and Augustsson 2017; Sabbe et al. 2019).

Our examination provides possibilities to problematize a discourse of instrumentality, sketching out an alternative understanding of sport, as an end in itself. What we want to
An outline is a discourse of young people's sport participation in socio-economically underprivileged areas, that are based on the conditions for participation formulated first and foremost by the participants' own wishes and right to a meaningful leisure. In order for sport to become a political possibility as a goal in itself, it is necessary, however, that current problems of social exclusion are met by structural reforms targeting the causes of inequality and segregation (cf. Schierup, Krifors, and Slavnic 2015).

Here, it is important to see inclusion in sports activities that are described as meaningful by those who participate as an end in itself. Conditioning such a contribution based on how inclusion in sport should function as a means of inclusion in society, through sport, forms the instrumental understanding of sport and the power of sport. The compensatory value of offering opportunities for sports in a way that is seen as meaningful for the participants, that creates joy and a sense of community, which otherwise would not have been possible, is a sufficiently important contribution to society.

When the subjects of instrumental provision (i.e. provided sport as a means of diversion) become targeted on the basis of risk and need of (re)formation, it is the assessment of need that conditions access to sport (and not the right to sport as such). When the conditions for traditional association sports are weak in the areas and the young people to whom the efforts are directed, the opportunities to participate in sports are limited to particularly needs-oriented activities: i.e. sports-based interventions. In such a discourse, participation in sports becomes a need, rather than a right. However, the notion of risk and need—and thus, sport provided on basis of a discourse of instrumentality—is not valid for all young people, in all urban areas, with respect to conditions for participation in sports. Instead of conditioning participation in sports for young people with less access to sports activities than young people in more privileged parts of the cities (cf. Blomdahl et al. 2019), as a need or as an instrument for social change, access to sports activities could rather be seen as a right for young people who want to participate (cf. Hartmann 2016)—regardless of residence or background.

Accordingly, the discourse on participation articulated by the young people challenges a discourse of instrumentality, offering new horizons for participation on the participants' own terms and as an end in itself. Even though these discourses intertwine, different positions are enabled which rebel against the hegemony of the interventionist approach to sport and the instrumental utility of sport as a means of social inclusion. Such rationality, incidentally, coincides with the traditional club sport model, where—at least principally—young people participate on equal terms.

When sport is utilized as an explicit means of social objectives, such activities are differentiated from traditional voluntary and competitive sports of the Swedish and Scandinavian sports model (Bergsgard and Norberg 2010). Thus, sports-based interventions such as Midnight football challenges notions of implicit benefits expected from sport: sport becomes an explicit instrument of social policy (Norberg 2011). The form of activity is a consequence of patterns of segregation, created both as a compensation for the lack of sport activities provided and as a means of intervention for those deemed in need of social change and inclusion. In that sense, the very participation and provision of the practices questions the traditional Swedish sport club model. In this sense, the discourse of instrumentality challenges the hegemony of the sports model based on implicit notions of social goods provided by the sport movement to social policy objectives (Norberg 2011).

What becomes visible from this examination of the discourse of young people participating in sports-based interventions in urban areas of exclusion, is how two lines of
resistance against different hegemonies intersect and creates particular—limited and conditioned—conditions for participation in sport activities.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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