

Sport as a Context for Integration: Newly Arrived Immigrant Children in Sweden Drawing Sporting Experiences

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Abstract

Sport is a global phenomenon, which can make sport an important arena for integration into new societies. However, sport is also an expression of national culture and identities. The aim of this study is to explore images and experiences that newly-arrived immigrant children in Sweden have about sport in their country of origin, and challenges that can arise in processes of integration through sport. We asked 20 newly arrived children aged 10 to 13 to make drawings about sporting experiences from their countries of origin. Three themes emerged: sport as feeling joy, where activities were performed with friends during leisure time; sport as acting formally, where activities were carried out in clubs; and sport as a spectator, where children were non-participants. We emphasise that development of sport should be two-way processes, where cultural learning should be mutual processes. Immigrant children's experiences should be foregrounded when utilising and developing sports programmes.

Keywords: sports for all, immigrant children, qualitative methods, phenomenology

1. Introduction

Like many other countries, Sweden has become a multicultural society during the last few decades. Two million out of a population of nine million have immigrant backgrounds that represent more than 200 different cultures. Around 100,000 people immigrate annually from all parts of the world, with different native languages, religions, and cultural backgrounds (Johansson-Heinö, 2011). Immigration policies in Sweden have traditionally been dominated by a multicultural approach but Sweden has moved away from this multicultural discourse. During the 1980s and '90s more emphasis has been put on integration in language and on the labour market. This has, according to Johansson-Heinö (2011), been more pronounced since 2006, when Sweden's government shifted from social democratic to right-wing.

Integration policy in Sweden in 2010 is about helping immigrants with employment and language training, certainly supplemented by a course in social studies but not with room for much else (Johansson-Heinö, 2011, p. 14).

Sweden joined the European Union (EU) in 1995, which also affected immigration in political terms. Spång (2006) contends, however, that supranational political efforts have had only limited effect on the Swedish political landscape. Rizvi (2009) argues that, as members of a local community and a changing global society, we must create meaningful relationships with people from other cultures, histories, religions, and ethnic backgrounds. By enlightening ourselves and learning more about other cultures, we can also learn to meet immigrants in meaningful ways instead of objectifying and trying to control the foreign cultures present in Swedish society. Sport is one arena where these relationships can be created and cultural learning can take place.

Sport is an arena where different cultures meet. Competitive sport is a global phenomenon and, as such, is recognised and used as a place for integrating the minority population, especially children, in majority societies (Peterson, 2000; Walseth & Fasting, 2004; Walseth, 2004; Peterson, 2008; Lundvall, 2009).

Organised sport is highly valued in Sweden and sports for children and adolescents are central to Swedish youth politics. Approximately 650,000 people are voluntarily engaged as leaders in sport in Sweden and approximately 70% of children between seven and fifteen years belong to a sport club (Swedish Sport Confederation [RF], 2012). Swedish policy documents agree that sport is an arena where people with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds meet, get to know, understand, and respect each other on the basis of a shared interest (Peterson, 2008). However, the idea that sports participation should build social capital in terms of intercultural knowledge, democracy, and citizenship is not proven (Walseth, 2008). Fundberg (2012) calls this idea ethnic folklore. There are barriers to integration through sport and the sporting tradition itself is one of those barriers, with its hidden agenda of Swedish sport tradition that has to be internalised by the immigrant (Walseth & Fasting, 2003, 2004; Fundberg, 2012). Consequently, this hidden agenda is often practiced as “a power relation à la Foucault” (Lundvall, 2009). Some of the national effort to integrate immigrant children through sport has a tendency to strengthen the gap between “us”, the integrated, and “them”, who are to be integrated (Peterson, 2008). According to Fundberg (2012), Swedish sports coaches and leaders have a low awareness of ethnicity. Following Rizwi’s (2009) observation, sporting clubs that wish to integrate immigrant children into sports must take the immigrants’ experiences of sports as the point of departure. Kirk (2004) argues that young people’s dispositions towards sports are formed between the ages of 11 and 14. Hence, we found it relevant to examine newly-arrived children within this age range.

1. Aim of the study

Sport is a global movement with a common language. Its global character can make sport an important arena for integration for someone arriving in a new society. At the same time, sport is an expression of national culture and identity. Such things as rules and artefacts, which on first glimpse seem to be similar are in reality locally embedded in the culture where it appears and not similar to other cultures. The dominating society often has difficulties in welcoming children from other cultures and countries, not acknowledging the relevance of understanding which concepts of sport appear between and within cultures, and how these concepts can or should blend. The aim of this study is to provide an understanding of the images and experiences that newly arrived children have about sport and sports activities from their home countries, and what challenges arise when encountering these images in the process of integration through sport.

2. Swedish Competitive Club Sport

The aim of competitive club sports in Sweden is twofold. One is to enable the participants to maintain good health through physical activity, and to foster values such as democracy, respect, equity, and openness despite economic, social, ethnic, or religious backgrounds (Peterson, 2000), called ‘association fostering’ (Peterson, 2008). The other aim is to discover and encourage talented young individuals to become elite athletes, what Peterson (2008) calls ‘competition fostering’.

Historically and culturally, club sports in Sweden developed as a ‘people’s movement’ within Swedish society. Peterson (2000) describes the process:

The social field – the sports club and its practice – is a unique Swedish construction, a room for the Swedish population, with mainly ethnic Swedish parents as leaders and with the history, social, political, and cultural [values of the] entire Swedish society as an assumption (p. 154).

Since sport is a people’s movement, everybody should be welcome to participate. The Swedish Sports Confederation’s [RF] policy programme, Idrotten Vill (2005), states:

Everyone is welcome to take part in club sports at their own level, without reference to nationality, ethnic origin, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, physical and mental disabilities (p. 12).

Club sports for children and youth in Sweden are mainly based on local clubs run by members who voluntarily participate in and organise activities. Club sports are highly valued by the state, and have been financially supported by the state sports ministry since 1912. The large number of young members makes club sports the most important arena for leisure activities among Swedish children and youth (Nilsson, 1995; Peterson, 2000; RF, 2005).

The first contact with sport for a newly arrived child is through the school subject of physical education and health [PEH], which is mandatory at the elementary and upper secondary school levels in Sweden. There are also competitive school sports. Numerous elementary schools have a sport programme in order to attract new pupils. In upper secondary schools there are also nationally recognised specific sport programmes for promising athletes.

Since club sports are seen as a suitable arena for the integration of minority children and youth into Swedish society (Lundvall, 2009; Peterson, 2000; Peterson, 2008) the Swedish government funds special projects – *Handslaget* (handshake) and *Idrottslyftet* (lifting sports) – to involve more children and youth in club sports, especially girls and children with an immigrant background (Lundvall, 2007). RF (2005) welcomed this challenge:

The Swedish sports federation will use these opportunities to contribute to increased understanding for people from other cultures...by actively trying to involve children and youth with immigrant backgrounds in sports clubs (p. 13).

Only a limited number of studies deal with sports and integration in Sweden (Fundberg, 2012; Peterson, 2000). Many are based on the evaluations of *Handslaget* and *Idrottslyftet* (Carlsson, 2007; Fundberg & Pripp, 2007; Larsson & Svender, 2007; Lundvall, 2007). These studies found that immigrant boys participate in sports, especially football, as much as and often more passionately than boys who are ethnic Swedes (Fundberg, 2004, 2010; RF, 2003, 2010). However, immigrant boys do not always feel welcome or visible when attending club sports (RF, 2010). Girls in general, whether with a Swedish or immigrant background, are less involved in sports (Nilsson, 1998; RF, 2003, 2010). Girls from Muslim families are least involved in club sports (RF, 2010), focusing more on school work and ‘spontaneous sports’ like aerobics and walking (Fundberg, 2012).

Some Norwegian studies suggest that the way in which sports activities are organised does not accord with the norms and values of Muslim girls’ culture, religion, or family (Skille, 2006a; Walseth & Fasting, 2003). Mixed-gender groups, dress codes, hesitation in sleeping overnight away from home, identities as women, and domestic work expectations are some of the barriers preventing Muslim girls from participating in Swedish club sports (Cortis, 2009; Fundberg, 2012; RF, 2010; Walseth & Fasting, 2003; Skille, 2006a; Strandbu, 2004). Other barriers include the lack of a sports tradition in the girl’s country of origin and a lack of knowledge as to how to contact sports clubs in Sweden (RF, 2010).

Research on sports as an arena for integration has mainly focused on how immigrants’ cultures and/or religions create barriers to participation in sports (Cortis, 2009; Fundberg, 2012; Handslagsrapport, 2007; Walseth & Fasting, 2003; Skille, 2006a; Strandbu, 2004). However, current research also focuses on how club sports in themselves can be a barrier. Integration needs to be a two-way process. Immigrant voices and visibility are not as present as they should be (Walseth, 2004). Lundvall (2009) suggests that, even if some good examples exist of how sports clubs have integrated minority children, the main impression is that Swedish club sports have problems adapting to new cultures and different ways of thinking. The multicultural dimensions are not represented among leaders and board members, and the leaders on the local level are often not prepared to meet and understand participants with a non-Swedish cultural, ethnic, and/or religious background (Fundberg, 2012). The multicultural dimension in sports is most visible at the player level and most relationships between sports participants with different cultural backgrounds are limited to the actual sports activity (Walseth, 2008). We therefore find it important to study the prerequisites for meetings between Swedish sport culture and children immigrating from other cultures.

3. Corporality and sports

Sport is a bodily activity and the body has different meanings in different cultures, which have to be taken into consideration in the integrating process. As it is the activity itself that brings children and youth together in sports, we here explore corporality, context, and sports. We emphasise that body, contexts, and society must be viewed as interwoven ongoing processes which have consequences for our interpretation of the data in this study. Nilsson (1998) observes that the body is an important medium of expression within the dominant cultural order, and Shilling (2003) sees the body as the source of understanding societies. The body is situated; through the body we both create and are being created by the contexts in our lives. Through our corporality we are included and/or excluded from communities. It is not possible to separate the body from society and through our body’s actions we are simultaneously constituting and being constituted by our society:

...the inner and the outer body do not occupy separate realms; neither is the individual and social body amenable to sensible analysis as distinct entities...it is precisely the interaction of all four of these dimensions of the body in culture and nature that is the specific interest of a sociology of the body (Kirk, 1993, p. 58).

The view of the body and physical activity has historically changed in concert with changes in society. The body can, according to Kirk (1993), be seen from political and historical aspects, and is also, according to Eichberg (1998), an object for cultural and historical understanding. Different ideologies create different views of the body, as in the Swedish history of gymnastics, where the body was disciplined and the soul subordinated (Lindroth, 1993). Competitive sport contributes to a colonisation of the body and a separation from its natural environment, as industrial western society separates work and leisure time (Eichberg, 1998). In our current modern society, when the body can be physically 'reshaped', the body no longer expresses 'who' you are, but rather 'what' you are (Nilsson, 1998).

4. Collection and analysis of data

The methodological basis in this study has two parts: the collection of the empirical material, and the method for analysing that material. The empirical material consists of drawings produced by the children along with their oral comments, and the analysis of the drawings, from the perspective of life-world phenomenology, elucidates the meanings of the experiences presented by the children.

Article no. 12 in the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) stresses the importance and obligation of adopting a child's perspective, which is also emphasised in Swedish sports policies (RF, 2005). We stress here the importance of children's perspectives on sports participation as the starting point in educational research. In this study, we found it vital to emphasise the newly arrived children's voices, to most closely access the children's experiences from their country of origin. One methodological way to approach a child's perspective and experience is to use the phenomenology of the world in which the child lives (life-world) as the point of departure, focusing on lived experiences (van Manen, 1997). Life-world phenomenological research involves comprehending the meaning of lived experiences. Research starts with the lived experience, but understanding requires those experiences to be situated in cultural contexts. Phenomenological literature usually includes four fundamental elements of the life-world – lived time, lived space, lived body, and lived relations (van Manen, 1997). These are by no means ready-made categories – they are more like aspects that form a starting point for analysis and reflection. They can be differentiated but not separated and together they form the net we call the life-world. Together the elements serve as a base and the choice of methods is mirrored to understand the basic elements of the life-world.

Researchers must consider the complexity of the life-world. To understand it in its fullest expression, methodological creativity is required (Bengtsson, 2005). The life-world approach is, however, qualitative, in that closeness to the lived experience is central, and creativity is thus delimited to qualitative methods. Since the focus of this study is children's lived experiences, we find a life-world phenomenological approach appropriate. Since the intention was to study newly arrived children's experiences of sport in their home countries, we designed a study where 20 newly arrived children were invited to make drawings.

The study was conducted at a municipal transition school that introduces newly-arrived immigrant children to Swedish society. Students from preschool to upper secondary school begin their education with a special focus on learning Swedish. The school is often the first point of contact for both parents and children with the Swedish educational system and the norms and values of Swedish society. When the children are considered linguistically mature, they transfer to regular schools in their local communities. The transition school enrolls approximately 120 children who can spend six months to two years there, depending on their age and background. The target group of the study was newly arrived children between 10 and 13 years of age. The time spent in Sweden varied but, because the facility was a transition school, we considered all children as newly arrived. The participating children had attended the school from between three days and one year when we conducted the study.

According to Swedish law concerning ethical conduct code (SFS 2003:460) participation in a research study is voluntary, confidential, must be approved by parents if the participants are under age, and participants are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. Children, teachers, and parents were informed of all this, and all gave consent.

We invited 20 children (two groups with ten in each) to make drawings. These children came from two different classes in the school covering the target age range and were selected in cooperation with the teachers. The children were asked to draw a picture that depicted a sporting experience from their country of origin. While the children drew, we had informal conversations with them, despite the limited ability to communicate, to gain a better understanding of their thoughts. According to Bland (2012), combining the drawings with oral comments enhances understanding of the drawings.

This method was seen as both a way to overcome language barriers and to identify unspoken meanings. According to van Manen (1997), there is an unspoken language beyond verbal language, which he calls epistemological silence, and he argues that painting can speak the language of this dimension. Consequently, a study about experiences using more forms of expression than only verbal or written language is advantageous (Alerby, 2000, 2003; Alerby & Brown, 2008). Van Manen (1997) claims that the products of art can be seen as lived experiences transformed into transcended configurations, so that drawing allows a child to give shape to his or her lived experience. Van Manen (1997) also argues that an object of art can be seen as text. This text does not consist of a verbal language, but is a language with its own grammar; a drawing can tell us something. Alerby (2000, 2003) and Hertting and Alerby (2009) advocate the use of drawings as a methodological tool when attempting to grasp people's experiences concerning different phenomena. It is crucial not to emphasise what you have drawn, but rather what you were thinking when you drew (Alerby, 2000, 2003; Hertting & Alerby, 2009). The thoughts or expressions of the lived experience, not the picture itself, are important to capture. To more closely apprehend the children's artistic expressions, and to avoid adult constructions of meaning, the oral comments were of utmost importance (Bland, 2012).

Following the chosen analytical procedure, all the drawings were analysed repeatedly and thoroughly. In this process the four fundamental elements in the life-world – lived time, lived space, lived body, and lived relations – served as the basis. Each drawing was viewed as a unit where qualitative similarities and differences were noted. The similarities and differences were then combined in different themes, taking the central and common characteristics of the patterns as the point of departure. The themes which gradually emerged consisted of internal variations in different aspects. These aspects reflect the great variety of the children's experience of sport within the respective themes. According to van Manen (1997), it is the different themes which make the phenomenon what it is, in this case *newly arrived children's images and experiences of sports*. During the analysis it was a matter of identifying themes of the children's experiences, but this process should not be regarded as governed by certain predetermined rules. Instead, it involved allowing the phenomenon to appear precisely as it is, a free act of 'seeing' (van Manen, 1997), and not a rule-bound process.

5. Results

What emerged in the analysis of the drawings was that the children's lived experiences expressed three different modes of activities in their countries of origin: *sport as feeling joy*, where sporting activities were performed with friends during leisure time; *sport as acting formally*, where sporting activities were carried out in clubs; and *sport as a spectator*, where children were non-participants. We present and exemplify these themes with drawings and comments from the children. The three themes and their aspects are described in detail below, without any order of precedence.

6.1 Sport as feeling joy

The first theme is characterised by the joyful and informal. The participants' faces are smiling; there is a relationship between the participants and between participants and the sports material, such as balls and goals. There seem to be creative playful moments in their sporting activities. The images depict either a specific activity (such as football), but can also be more local, such as enjoying nature. There is no formal place for these sporting activities, for example a pitch or playing field. The comments on the images describe activity not governed by formal regulations, but by rules agreed to by the participants.



Figure 1 – boy Indonesia

Figure 1. The drawing illustrates how a boy from Indonesia is playing spontaneously with his friends. They are playing football and a game he names jumpering.

I used to play a ballgame with my friends – jumpering [sic]. We made teams and played among the houses and everywhere. You should hit caps with a ball; we made up the rules ourselves. I also played football with my friends; it was funny in the rain. (Boy from Indonesia)

Spontaneous sports, organised by the children themselves, are common in drawings and descriptions.

I played a lot of football, together with my cousin and his friends. We played against other boys, but not in a team, we had no coach. It is fun to score goals. (Boy from Zambia)

The activities described here can be described as spontaneous sport, which is carried out outside school and sports clubs.. One interpretation of the theme of sport as joy is that many newly-arrived children and youths have limited experience with organised sports, so their experience is based on what they do informally, by themselves and with others. Here, corporeality emerges as spontaneous and emanating from the activity created by the children. Boys and girls can often play sports together and the game is shaped by the opportunities that arise for movement, not by rules that have been set by a specific sporting authority or organisation. The body becomes a subject that takes advantage of the opportunities that exist in relation to other children and youths.

6.2 Sport as acting formally

The images showing sport as acting formally are more characterised by seriousness compared with the theme of joy. The faces have neutral or serious expressions; the mouths are unsmiling. The space is presented as a sports arena, delimited by lines and attributes that belong to the sport (for example, goal posts). The people on the playing field are spread out, with a systematic relationship between them, almost like chess pieces on a board. The children's comments reflect a certain amount of pressure in the activities, which are often characterised in major global sports events. When the child enters the playing field, s/he is assigned a certain role to play in that game (for example, a goalkeeper or defender). The child's sporting identity is created by their role on the playing field. Relations between team-mates are more formalised and in several images the children are formally presented. The activity is pre-determined in the images and the child seriously wants to perform the assigned role. One interpretation of this theme, where sports is characterised by seriousness and higher expectations, is that the body appears as an object to overcome a certain movement. The reward lies outside the joy of movement. The children feel pressure but it is fun to score and win.

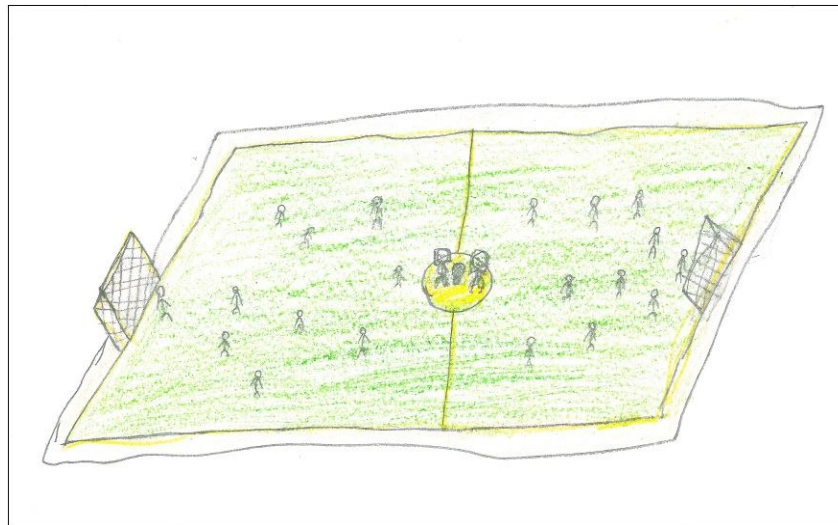


Figure 2 – Girl Thailand

Figure 2. The drawing is showing a football pitch, where the girl from Thailand used to play with her team, in a formal setting.

We played basketball, football and track and field in school. It was quite fun, but too much pressure sometimes. (Girl from Thailand)

I played basketball and ice hockey...we played in a team. It is fun when you win... (Boy from Russia)

Experience of the sport and skills can be useful social capital when entering sports in a new society, since many sports are played internationally with similar rules across countries. However, different contextual circumstances can hinder the entrance to sport, despite experiences of global similarity in the country of origin.

6.3 Sport as a spectator

The theme of *Sport as a spectator* has connections to global sport, but as something that others are doing. This theme was only represented by girls who cannot participate in sports and are aware of that proscription. They cannot present themselves in the limited clothing worn by most girls participating in sports. In these drawings, a girl's opportunities to experience the life-world of sports is limited; to avoid participation, or explain the lack of it, they refer to an injury or sickness.



Figure 3 – Girl Somalia

Figure 3. The drawing is showing a window, imagined or real, where the girl from Somalia is being a spectator.

I am sick. I have never been playing nor doing sports. This is a window. (Girl from Somalia)

These girls have limited possibilities for experiencing the joy of movement, wearing custom sportswear, or experiencing their body as a subject. The mere exposure of the body seems to discourage participation, not just the actual movement or activity.

The girls are not allowed to play football or to participate in sports. We can run 400 meters. It is not good with short shorts, she cannot do that. Here in Sweden we have sports in school. (Girl from Somalia)

These constraints makes girls into spectators, standing by and watching others do sports, underscoring how we are all included or excluded in sporting communities through our corporality. The physical limitation that these girls experience may affect their ability to become part of the sport culture of their new country.

6. Discussion

The aim of this study was to understand images and experiences that newly arrived children have about sport and sports activities from their country of origin, and what challenges can arise when the dominating culture encounters these images in the process of integration through sport.

In the study, three themes emerged – *sport as feeling joy*, *sport as acting formally*, and *sport as a spectator*. The drawings that depict the first theme refer to sport as a joyful and often spontaneous activity, while the second theme appears in drawings about sports in formal settings. The third theme is shown in drawings about non-participation. There are connections between the themes. Internationally well-known sports activities serve as models in many drawings and the activities' attributes, such as goalposts, balls, and sticks, appear in all three themes. The lived experiences differ. For instance, in the first theme the children are playing football, which is also found in the second theme, with the difference that the setting is formalised (i.e. the football pitch), which consequently makes the activity more structured.

It is reasonable to assume that the three themes that emerged from this study would also appear in a similar study of children with a native Swedish background. There are also native Swedish-children who are spectators and/or who are not involved either in spontaneous sports or in club sports. Some Swedish-born children prefer spontaneous sports rather than club sports. The reasons for this can vary, and are not necessarily cultural or religious, but can be social or economic. It may be a matter of bodily ideals, talent, or economic conditions, or simply lack of interest. It appears that the entrance into a sports arena with established boundaries provides the activity its physical nature. The sports arena changes the relationship to the activity, to the other participants, and to the children's own corporality. The body in the sports arena becomes more of a tool for success than a subject giving an opportunity to experience one's body as full of creativity and play, following Eichberg (1998), who contends that the sporting body is a result of western industrial society and changes the room or the sports arena into a mono-functional space. The body may be said to be overexposed in western societies and in sports, while the corporality in many other cultures is more controlled and diffused (Engström, 1999). Other cultural expressions do not need to be a barrier for participation, but it is important to be open-minded when leaders in the dominating culture meet children from other cultures.

Sport as acting formally, through participation in sports clubs, is the most common leisure activity for children and adolescents in Sweden. Clubs should be open to everyone, and the participants should not need high ambitions to participate, though these provisions are not always found (Strandbu, 2006; Peterson 2008; Fundberg 2012). We argue that sport is a valuable arena for integration of children and youth with different backgrounds. Sports as a global phenomenon has rules and norms (e.g., dress codes) that the children seem to be aware of, and it may appear manageable for the children to enter into roles determined by the game and play that role as well as possible. As Walseth (2008) points out, it is on the actual playing field that the multicultural dimension of sports is most visible. Spontaneous sports require other kinds of communication and negotiation of rules, which might sometimes be more challenging to achieve. When turning to the children's lived experiences in this study, it might be a wise idea to start with common and globally well-known sports activities, such as football, tennis and swimming. The consistency with which the same themes emerge, regardless of culture or nationality, is misleading. The underlying bases of each theme vary and individuals need to be engaged in various ways for participation to occur.

These bases must be understood by the dominating culture to meet the new arrivals 'where they are' and make them a part of the national sport culture. Integration through sport, Walseth (2004) argues, needs to be a two-way process between sport and immigrant children and youth. In this mutual process it is important, Rizvi (2009) states, to turn eyes on ourselves. By expanding knowledge about the dominating culture's pre-assumptions, we can also increase awareness of the images and experiences of sport that newly arrived children possess, and let these experiences be of significance in their new cultural surroundings.

Sport is a phenomenon that newly-arrived immigrant children and young people often experience in their countries of origin, and may be an important interface between those children and their new environment. Understanding the obstacles and opportunities which diverse cultural experiences can provide is important in creating a place where all children and young people can participate. Openness and willingness to change what is traditionally seen as the Swedish sport movement can, as Peterson (2000) highlights, enrich Swedish sports clubs and activities. It requires sensitivity from those who represent sports, so that the established power structures described by Lundvall (2009) can be circumvented. One way to avoid immobilisation in those structures is to ensure the immigrant children's images and experiences are foregrounded when utilising sports programmes.

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