

Organized Leisure Activities and Well-being: Children Getting it Just Right!

Krister Hertting, Ph.D., Luleå University of Technology, Sweden;
Catrine Kostenius, Luleå University of Technology, Sweden

Abstract

This article explores how the levels of participation in organized leisure activities relate to children's psychosocial well-being. Data collection occurred in a school district with 7 schools in the northern part of Sweden. Children ages 12-14 were invited to complete the World Health Organizations' Health Behavior in School-Aged Children self-completion questionnaire (n=391). An independent variable was constructed to measure children's participation in organized leisure activities at three levels: low level (LL), medium level (ML), and high level (HL). Ten out of 13 correlations were significant at the $p < .05$ level). Results indicated that the ML group scored high on life satisfaction, had a lot of friends, and felt less pressure in school than the other two groups, while the LL and HL groups had fewer friends and felt more pressure. The conclusion drawn is that a medium level of participation in organized leisure activities was most favorable for children's health and well-being. Discussions include possibilities for finding the right balance between organized leisure activities and children's well-being.

Key Words: Organized activities, leisure, well-being, children

Authors: Please direct correspondence to Krister Hertting, Ph.D., Department of Arts, Communication and Education, Luleå University of Technology 971 87 Luleå, Sweden.

Email: Krister.Hertting@ltu.se

Introduction and Review of Literature

Studies imply that organized leisure is important in terms of feeling a sense of social belonging and increasing well-being (e.g., Brooks & Magnusson, 2007; Han & Patterson, 2007; Trainor, Delfabbro, Anderson & Winefield, 2010). Han and Patterson (2007) introduced a model based on several leisure studies suggesting that leisure activities improve health and well-being in human beings in two main ways. First, it can provide a direct contribution to psychological well-being and health which is based on experiencing positive moods and emotions, establishing positive relationships with others and a strengthening of the immune system. Second, leisure activities have a moderating effect on stress and the effects of stress. After studying Canadian youths and adults, Iwasaki (2006) pinpointed the importance of giving greater attention to the role of leisure activities as a means of coping with stress and increasing well-being. Fletcher, Nickerson and Wright (2003) linked higher levels of children's participation in organized leisure activities with higher academic grades and more positive academic competence. Further, they noted children who were involved in sport-related leisure activities displayed psychosocial maturity and social competence. Given these connections between well-being and academic achievement it is valuable to understand the extent to which children's participation in leisure activities may serve as a means for improving both their grades and well-being (Ericsson, 2003).

According to Han and Patterson (2007), persons who engage in leisure activities which they find pleasant strengthen their personal resources and resilience. This facilitates improvement of psychological, social, intellectual, and physical health and well-being. This can be compared to the World Health Organization's definition of well-being which includes physical, mental, and social dimensions (WHO,

1946). One can also refer the experience of well-being to a subjective, self-evaluation of well-being (Finnäs, Nyqvist & Saarela, 2008; van Manen, 1998). Lundberg and Manderbacka (1996) concluded that the overall reliability of self-rated health found in their study was in line with previous results concerning the validity of people's general health assessments and the basis on which they made the judgments. Further, Konu, Lintonen and Rimpelä (2002) have been successful in measuring schoolchildren's subjective well-being in school and also considered it a useful method.

Psychosocial well-being, as described by Ahonen (2010), is a concept which includes social factors, such as close relationships, and psychological factors, like emotional and cognitive development. Psychosocial well-being is connected to the ability to learn, understand, and memorize, as well as the ability to associate with other human beings by following social and cultural codes (Ahonen, 2010). According to Samdal, Dur, and Freeman (2004) there is a connection between children in school enjoying school and their self-reported high scores on well-being. Leisure activities, including their social dimensions such as friendship, play an important role in terms of children's feeling of self-worth (de Bruyn & Cillessen, 2008). According to a study giving voice to 10-12 year old children's experiences of health and well-being, friendship was found to be a crucial factor (Kostenius & Öhrling, 2008a).

The aforementioned studies not only illustrate a positive connection between leisure activities and psychosocial well-being, but they suggest relationships between participation in leisure activities and improved self-worth, and positive friendships and increased academic achievements. Ellaway and Macintyre (2000), however, argued, that participation in organized leisure activities leads to broader positive effects in society as a whole, but not

necessarily on an individual level. According to Ziersch and Baum (2004) participation can, on an individual level, be harmful to the positive development of well-being due to participation in organized leisure activities which may increase one's level of stress. Melman, Little and Akin-Little (2007) asked adolescents to report on the level of anxiety experienced and its connection to the amount of time that they spent doing leisure activities. Findings indicated that high levels of participation in leisure activities resulted in an increased feeling of anxiety which, over a prolonged period could lead to poor well-being (Melman, Little & Akin-Little, 2007). As Kostenius and Öhring (2008b) noted, participating in too many activities can both negatively affect children's well-being and cause stress in connection with time pressures when there is too much to do.

Nilsson (2000), identified a clear division between public organized leisure and self-initiated leisure activities by youth. The division was increasingly blurred when the demands to 'create' oneself as a response to pressures in the postmodern society emerged. The creation of lifestyles is central in our postmodern society (Bauman, 2002; Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone, 1995). Nilsson (2000) argued that leisure activities play an important role as a social marker and for the creation of identity, which is a complex project of both belonging to a certain culture and at the same time separating oneself from the masses. This could noticeably increase tension in a period of life when a number of stress factors are already present (Clausson, Petersson & Berg, 2003).

According to Featherstone (1995) and Bauman (2002) there is a clear tendency for narcissism to increase in 'the culture of consumption'. There is a displacement from the creation of a good character to the creation of personalities. It is not only about performing in particular contexts; but it is also about showing a winning image (Featherstone, 1995; Bauman,

2002). This, in turn, puts high demands on the child participating in leisure activities to make the right choices in order to fit in (Featherstone, 1995); all of which can lead to pressure and decreasing psychosocial well-being (Ellaway & Macintyre, 2000).

In synthesizing the reviewed literature presented above, tension exists between notions of leisure activities having positive effects and evidence suggesting that leisure activities can be harmful to the well-being of human beings in general, specifically for children and youths. Assuming that organized leisure activities can have positive and/or negative effects on both the personal and community level, what more can be said about organized leisure activities in connection to children's well being? Can the levels of participation in organized leisure activities provide an indication about when participation in these activities offers possibilities to increase psychosocial well being and when they do not? Melman, Little and Akin-Little (2007) indicated that little systematic research has been done on how the levels of participation in leisure activities affect children and youth.

The overall aim of this study, therefore, was to explore how the levels of participation in organized leisure activities relate to children's psychosocial well-being. The specific aims were to explore how the levels of participation in organized leisure activities relate to: (a) experience of well-being; (b) experience of school work; (c) experience of friendship; and (d) socioeconomic factors.

Following are the definitions of variables used: Organized leisure activities was measured by the question: How many days a week do you participate in an organized leisure time activity, (i.e. dance, swimming, soccer, sports, choir, guitar, youth club)? Activities with leaders and scheduled times and places are considered organized (Hertting, 2007). Well-being in this study was a subjective notion (van Manen, 1998) measured by two items: self-reported

experience of well-being and experience of life. School work was defined as students working with assignments in school to reach educational goals as described by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2010). Friendship was defined by number of friends, popularity among friends and talking to best friends about difficult things (Gibbs & Angelides, 2008; Tillmann-Healy, 2003). Socioeconomic factors, in this study, was measured aspects of one's living situation including: (a) did the participant live in one or two homes; (b) what type of dwelling (apartment or house); (c) were parents employed or unemployed?

Method

The empirical data was based on a survey in a school district with seven schools located in the northern part of Sweden. The survey was conducted within the Arctic Children Project; an EU-financed research and development project in cooperation with Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia. The focus of the project was on children's well-being and learning in the arctic regions of the participating countries (Ahonen et. al. 2008). The survey was based on the World Health Organizations' Health Behavior in School-Aged Children self-completion questionnaire (HBSC). For more details about the questionnaire see <http://www.hbsc.org>. The overall aim of the HBSC questionnaire was to increase the understanding of well-being, behavior, lifestyles and conditions among young people in different contexts in the European countries, Canada and in the US (Williams & Currie, 2000).

Participants and Data Collection

The 400 participants were children aged 12-14, in grades 6, 7 and 8. There were 211 boys and 189 girls. Regarding ethnicity, it was a relatively homogenous group of children with the majority (383) from Sweden, seven from a country outside Europe, and ten from other

European countries. The area where the school district was located contained both rural and suburban areas. Nearly 88% of the children lived in either houses or row houses, and 12% lived in rented apartments. Opportunities for after-school activities were available at a youth centre and in sport clubs. The suburban area, located nearly four kilometers from the city centre, provided good access to leisure activities including soccer, ice-hockey, music, and dance activities.

The survey was distributed by the teachers and filled out anonymously by the children during regular school hours. Upon completion, the teachers collected and forwarded the surveys to the researchers. Four-hundred of 440 children invited to complete the survey did so. Among the respondents was a degree of internal non-response as not all children answered all questions. The number of responses is indicated in each table in the results section.

Ethics

A Swedish law (SFS, 2003) states that informed consent must be collected from children participating in a research project. Parental permission, required for children under the age of 18, was obtained through written information to the parents as well as oral information to the children. Both groups were informed participation was completely voluntary and that answers would remain confidential. Before the research project began, approval was granted to the researchers by the ethics committee at Luleå University of Technology (Dnr2003075).

Data Analysis

The HBSC survey contains questions in four different areas; background factors, individual and social resources, health behavior, and health outcomes (http://www.hbsc.org/overview_studydesign.html). Although the study survey included 74 questions, the data

analysis was based on a selection of 15 questions covering the aforementioned areas. To refine the picture of the children's statements various aspects of children's experiences were measured both subjectively and objectively. For example, questions about positive friendships, pressures in school, and support from parents used a subjective format. Questions about height, weight, amount of smoking or drinking alcohol used an objective format. Objective measures were also used for socioeconomic factors including one's living situation and presence of parental employment. The data were analyzed using SPSS with a Pearson χ^2 test on a 5% confidence level to examine statistical relationships between the variables.

An independent variable was constructed based on health behavior and was measured by how often children were involved in organized leisure activities. As noted earlier, while studies have shown that organized leisure time activities can have positive effects on psychosocial well-being (see for example Brooks & Magnusson, 2007; Han & Patterson, 2007; Trainor, Delfabbro, Anderson & Winefield, 2010), they may also lead to increased anxiety for the individual (Ellaway & Macintyre, 2000; Ziersch & Baum, 2004). To refine these somewhat contradictory images it was decided to investigate the variables of well-being, friendship, and school work in relation to levels of involvement in or-

ganized leisure time activities. Of the 400 participating children, 391 (207 boys and 184 girls) answered this question and it was therefore used in data analyses. In the original question there were six alternatives from which to choose, however for data analysis purposes, they were reduced to 3 categories of participation: high level - 5-7 seven days a week (HL), medium level - 1-4 days a week (ML), and low level - less than once a week (LL) (see Table 1). Data were also analyzed in relation to individual and social resources (family support, peers, school achievement), health outcomes (life satisfaction, self-reported health), and background/socioeconomic factors (family structure, socio-economic status) in order to determine whether there were connections between the aforementioned factors and the level of participation in organized leisure activities. The survey items were based on an ordinal scale, providing *greater than* or *less than* responses. The ordinal nature of those items did not make possible the determination of differences in magnitude (Blalock, 1979). Because of this the original responses were condensed into fewer categories, as described above, to gain a clearer view of the findings. This categorization in connection to each cluster of questions is described in the results section.

Results

Table 1: Involvement in Organized Leisure Activity by Level and Gender

How often involved in leisure activity	High Level (HL)	Medium Level (ML)	Low Level (LL)
Boys n=207	52%	49%	62%
Girls n=184	48%	51%	38%
Total n=391	n=87	n=206	n=98

The results are divided into three areas: the experience of well-being, the experience of school work, and the experience of friendship between boys and girls, respectively. The last section presents a socio-economic comparison between the genders.

Level of organized leisure and the experience of well-being

Table 2 contains two statements. In the first, children self-reported their experience of well-being. In the second, more holistic or existential statement, children self-reported whether they had a good life. The statements originally had four alternatives, but were condensed into two, one positive and one negative, to gain a clearer view of the tendencies. Regarding the statement of well-being, the HL category contained

the most positive experiences of well-being (95%, n=86, p < .05) Eighty-eight percent (n=205, p< .05) were in the ML category, and 75% (n=97, p<.05) were in the LL reporting the least positive experiences of well-being. In the second statement, a higher percentage indicated the ML category as having a more positive experience than the HL. One interpretation is that the first statement may have been interpreted as an experience of physical well-being while the second may have been interpreted as being more holistic or existential.

These two statements indicate, however, that the LL category (n=98) included the lowest degree of well-being. There is a gender difference in the LL category in the second statement (boys n=202, p=.15; girls n=181,

Table 2: Level of Organized Leisure Time and Positive Experiences of Well-being by Level and Gender

How often involved in leisure activity	HL	ML	LL	p	df
<i>Self-reported experience of well-being</i>					
Total Good Well-being (n=388)	95%	88%	75%	< .05	
Boys Good Well-being (n=205)	96%	90%	75%	< .05	2
Girls Good Well-being (n=183)	95%	86%	76%	< .05	2
	(n = 86)	(n = 205)	(n = 97)		
<i>I have a good life</i>					
Total Agree % (n=383)	87	89	72	< .05	
Boys Agree % (n=202)	86	90	79	= .15	2
Girls Agree % (n=181)	88	87	62	< .05	2
	(n = 84)	(n = 201)	(n = 98)		

Note. Pearson χ^2 : .05

$p < .05$) whereby 79% of the boys agreed that they have a good life while only 62% of the girls were in agreement. In the HL category ($n=84$) and ML category ($n=201$) there was a marginal difference between boys and girls.

To summarize, the LL category contained the lowest level of well-being experienced by the children, and within this category girls reported a more negative experience than boys.

Level of organized leisure and the experience of school work

The statements presented in Table 3 addressed the experience of being in school and the nature of parental support. The statements *I find school difficult* and *I feel pressured by school work* originally had four responses: two positive and two negative, however, they were condensed into one positive and one negative response for analysis purposes. The question about future plans for work and/or education (*What will you do after compulsory school?*) had five responses for children who knew what they wished to do after compulsory school and an "I don't know" response option. The responses were condensed into: *know* and *don't know*. The statement about the parental support (*My parents encourage me to do well in school*) had five responses; two positive, two negative, and one neutral. For data analysis purposes, the responses were condensed into one positive, one neutral, and one negative.

The HL category indicated the experience of school as being most difficult (36%, $n=87$, $p < .05$), with the LL category in the middle (32%, $n=98$, $p < .05$), and the ML category as least difficult (20%, $n=206$, $p < .05$). There were slight differences between boys and girls which were not statistically significant (boys $n=207$, $p=.30$, girls $n=184$, $p=.08$); 8% more boys in the ML category consider school difficult.

The statement about the pressure of school-work indicated that the children in the ML category felt the least amount of pressure (29%, $n=199$, $p=.11$). Children in the HL category expe-

rienced the greatest degree of pressure from school (42%, $n=85$, $p=.11$). Although this relationship was not statistically significant, it shows the same pattern as the previous question. Girls reported the most pressure in all categories (boys $n=201$, $p=.51$; girls $n=180$, $p=.16$), 7% more in the HL category, 9% more in the LL category, and 1% more in the ML category. Although not significant, it is suggested that students in the HL and the LL categories experienced school as most difficult and experienced most pressure in their school work, and within these categories, the girls may experience more difficulties and pressures in school.

Statistically significant findings confirmed that those in the HL category had the clearest image of what they wanted to do after compulsory school (81%, $n=84$, $p < .05$). In every category boys had a clearer image of what they wanted to do after compulsory school, compared to the girls, although not statistically significant. In the HL category ($n=84$) there was a 13% difference between boys and girls, in the ML category ($n=194$) the difference is 7%, and in the LL category ($n=93$) the difference is 10%.

The last two statements indicate that more children from the HL category know what they want to do after compulsory school, and they experience more support from parents to do well in school compared to the ML category and the LL category.

To summarize, those in the HL category felt school was more difficult, felt more pressure in school, experienced more support from parents, and had a clear image of what they want to do after compulsory school, in comparison to those in LL and ML categories. Those in the LL category reported the lowest support from parents and reported the least clear image of what they want to do after compulsory school. While the ML category indicated good support from parents, there was less reported pressure in school and a less clear image of what they wanted to do after compulsory school.

Table 3: Level of Organized Leisure Time and School Experience by Gender and Categories

How often involved in leisure activity	HL	ML	LL	P	df
<i>I find school difficult</i>					
Total Agree (n=391)	36%	20%	32%	< .05	
Boys Agree (n=207)	36%	24%	31%	= .30	4
Girls Agree (n=184)	36%	16%	32%	= .08	4
	(n = 87)	(n = 206)	(n = 98)		
<i>I feel pressured by school work</i>					
Total Agree (n=381)	42%	29%	35%	< .11	
Boys Agree (n=201)	39%	29%	32%	= .51	2
Girls Agree (n=180)	46%	30%	41%	= .16	2
	(n = 85)	(n = 199)	(n = 97)		
<i>I know what to do after compulsory school</i>					
Total Know (n=371)	81%	68%	63%	< .05	
Boys Know (n=196)	87%	71%	67%	= .06	2
Girls Know (n=175)	74%	64%	57%	= .29	2
	(n = 84)	(n = 194)	(n = 93)		
<i>My parents encourage me to do well in school</i>					
Total Agree (n=380)	81%	78%	63%	< .05	
Boys Agree (n=198)	80%	76%	67%	= .33	4
Girls Agree (n=182)	83%	80%	57%	< .05	4
	(n = 86)	(n = 197)	(n = 97)		

Note: Pearson χ^2 : .05

Level of organized leisure and experience of friendship

Table 4 contains three statements about friends: the number of friends (*I have many friends*) and two questions about the quality of friendship (*I am popular among others my age* and *It is easy to talk to my best friend about difficult things*). The first two statements originally had four responses, two positive and two negative. These were condensed into one positive and one negative response. The third statement had five responses, two positive, two negative, and an option for children without a friend. Responses were condensed into three

categories: one positive, one negative, and an option for children without a friend.

Those in the ML category reported the highest number of friends (96%, n=204, p < .05), while those in the LL category reported the lowest number of friends (83%, n=94, p < .05). One gender difference (boys n=202, p<.05; girls n=179, p=.12) is that 19% of the boys in the LL category (n=94) reported having low number of friends, whereas only 4% of the boys and 5% of the girls in the ML category (n=204) reported having low number of friends.

It was statistically significant that those in the ML category described themselves as being

Table 4: Level of Organized Leisure Time and Friendship Experience by Gender and Categories

How often involved in leisure activity	HL	ML	LL	p	df
<i>I have many friends</i>					
Total Agree (n=381)	88%	96%	83%	< .05	
Boys Agree (n=202)	89%	96%	81%	< .05	2
Girls Agree (n=179)	87%	95%	86%	= .12	2
	(n = 83)	(n = 204)	(n = 94)		
<i>I am popular among others my age</i>					
Total Agree (n=371)	66%	69%	53%	< .05	
Boys Agree (n=195)	73%	73%	58%	= .11	2
Girls Agree (n=176)	58%	66%	44%	= .08	2
	(n = 79)	(n = 199)	(n = 93)		
<i>It is easy to talk to my best friend about difficult things</i>					
Total Easy (n=378)	83%	91%	77%	< .05	
Boys Easy (n=198)	80%	88%	69%	< .05	4
Girls Easy (n=180)	88%	93%	89%	= .83	4
	(n = 84)	(n = 199)	(n = 95)		

Note. Pearson χ^2 : .05

most popular among others of the same age (69%, n=199, p < .05)., while those in the LL category reported the lowest incidence of popularity (53%, n=93, p < .05). In this question the HL category reports were almost identical with the ML category. In general, the boys reported being more popular among others of the same age than the girls as noted in every category but not statistically significant. Only 44% of the girls in the LL category (n=93) reported being popular, compared to the boys in the ML category (n=199) and the HL category (n=79), where 73% in each category reported themselves as popular. Within the girls category, there were differences when compared to the boys as the girls scored lower in every category, however, the comparisons were not statistically significant.

Those in the ML category reported finding it most easy to talk to their best friend about difficult things (91%, n=199, p < .05), while those LL category reported it as being most difficult (77%, n=95, p < .05). This is a statistically significant relationship. The girls, in general, reported it was easier to talk to their best friend compared to the boys, which was statistically significant for the boys but not the girls (boys n=198, p<.05; girls n=180, p=.83).

Among the boys in the LL category (n=95), 31% reported that they did not have a best friend or reported difficulties in talking to their best friend, compared to the girls in the ML category (n=199) where 7% reported the same problems. Among the boys, those in the ML category reported finding it most easy to talk about difficult things with their best friend.

To summarize, the ML category reported the best relationships to friends, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The LL category was predominant negative in all three friendship statements.

Socioeconomic factors

Although the study sample was largely homogenous, socioeconomic indicators were examined and are presented in Table 5. Four questions addressed socioeconomic background: living in one or two homes, the type of living, mother's job situation, and father's job situation. In two of the questions statistically significant factors were found, The question about two homes showed that 20% of the chil-

Table 5: Socioeconomic Factors by Categories

How often involved in leisure activities	HL	ML	LL	
<i>Living in two homes (n=382)</i>	20% (n = 83)	19% (n = 203)	32% (n = 96)	p < .05
<i>Living in rental apartment (n=378)</i>	11% (n = 85)	10% (n = 199)	19% (n = 94)	p = .06
<i>Mother has no job (n=389)</i>	8% (n = 87)	10% (n = 205)	20% (n = 97)	p < .05
<i>Father has no job (n=387)</i>	4% (n = 86)	5% (n = 204)	7% (n = 97)	p = .51

Note. Pearson χ^2 : .05

dren in the HL category (n=83, $p < .05$) and 19% of the ML category (n=203, $p < .05$) lived in two homes, while 32% of the LL category (n=96, $p < .05$) lived in two homes. The second question that showed a statistically significant relationship was the one about the mothers job situation; 20% of the LL category (n=97, $p < .05$) stated that the mother had no job, while 10 % of the ML category (n=205, $p < .05$), and 8 % of the HL category (n=87, $p < .05$) made the same statement. The last two questions revealed some differences, but these were not statistically significant. Close to statistical significance was the question about the type of living, and it showed that 11 % of the HL category (n=85, $p = .06$), and 10 % of the ML category (n=199, $p = .06$), lived in rented apartments, while the equivalent number for the LL category (n=94, $p = .06$), was 19 %. The fathers' job situation followed the same pattern as the mothers but was not so noticeable (HL 4 %, n=86; ML 5 %, n=204; LL 7 %, n=97, $p = .51$). In other words, the statements related to socioeconomic conditions show that there are some differences between the categories and the statements indicate that the those in the LL category were most vulnerable from a socioeconomic perspective.

Discussion

The overall aim of this study was to explore how the levels of participation in organized leisure activities relate to children's psychosocial well-being. The results revealed a pattern of three groups based on their involvement in organized leisure activities as it related to the indicators of well-being. The High Level category was labeled *The Goal-oriented*, the Medium Level category was labeled *The Socials*, and the Low Level category was labeled *The Seekers*.

The *Goal-oriented* had a high level of participation in organized leisure activities and the highest scores in all questions concerning school. While they felt most pressured and experienced the highest degree of difficulty,

they also felt the most support from parents and had the clearest goals regarding what they wanted to do after compulsory school. They had the highest score in the self-reported experience of well-being. In the holistic question (*I have a good life*) their score was high, but not as high as *The Socials*.

The Socials had a medium level of participation in organized leisure activities and rated their well-being as relatively good. Regarding the holistic question (*I have a good life*) they had the highest scores. They did not experience as much pressure in school nor did they experience as high degree of difficulty as reported by the other groups. The support they received from parents was slightly less than *The Goal-oriented* and their plans after compulsory school were similar to those reported by *The Seekers*. *The Socials* distinguish themselves in terms of friendships. They have the largest number of friends and the most positive experience of these friendships.

The Seekers had a low level of participation in organized leisure activities, and had the lowest scores both concerning well-being and friends. They also had the lowest scores regarding parental support in school as well as future plans after compulsory school. Even though *The Seekers* indicated high levels of difficulty and pressure in school, theirs were lower than in *The Goal-oriented* group. *The Seekers* were the most vulnerable from a socioeconomic perspective.

The question for discussion is how the groups' participation in organized leisure activities related to their psychosocial well-being. *The Socials* scored their well-being as relatively good, and had the highest scores on the holistic health question (*I have a good life*). Moreover, they did not feel as much pressure in school as the other groups. One can assume that *The Socials*, compared to *The Goal-oriented*, had more time for informal social activities after school. Connections can be made to research which suggests that free time, not in an organized sense, but having time to play and the ability to decide

what to do, increases children's well-being (cf. Huizinga, 1938; Kostenius & Öhring, 2006). *The Goal-oriented*, who had high levels of participation in organized leisure activities, felt most pressured and experienced the highest degree of difficulty in school. They had the clearest goals and plans after compulsory school. High levels of participation in organized leisure activities and high goals to achieve can be connected to stress and the feeling of not being good enough (Kostenius & Öhring, 2008a). Melman, Little and Akin-Little (2007), as well as Ziersch and Baum (2004) found that high involvement in organized leisure activities can lead to increased anxiety. Based on the findings in this study it is suggested that the level of participation may contribute to stress and anxiety; however the level of stress as a continuum from low to high involvement cannot be seen. For example, when it comes to feeling pressure in school and finding school difficult *The Socials*, who have a medium amount of organized leisure activities, have the lowest score, while both the other groups scored higher. This could be an indication that the feeling of stress is not compliant with the concept that more involvement necessarily means more stress.

The level of participation in organized leisure activities can be an indicator of psychosocial well-being, but what affect do socioeconomic aspects have? U.S. Census data shows that participation in organized sports is lower among children and youth in low income families compared to other families, 3% compared to 26% (Policy Studies Associates, 2006). One aspect of participation in particular may be the result of socioeconomic aspects. Bourdieu (1984) and Featherstone (1995) argue that construction of different lifestyles is central in our society, and the growing middle class is the driving force in the development of diverse lifestyles. Bourdieu (1984) illuminates the concept of habitus, which could be seen as the stock of experiences, culture and knowledge a

person carries within him or her. Different kinds of leisure activities can be seen as different expressions of habitus. According to Bourdieu (1984) People from the same class show a similar habitus, as their cultural background is similar. This study reveals existing socioeconomic differences, and how such differences could possibly explain the lower participation in organized leisure activities that *The Seekers* have.

The analysis included gender comparison, which revealed similarities, but also differences. The boys experienced better well-being than the girls and were more goal-oriented concerning future plans after compulsory school than the girls were. The girls felt more pressure from school-work while the boys considered themselves more popular among others in their own age group. However, the girls found it easier to talk to their best friend about difficult things. What is noticeable is that the largest gender differences presented above are present in the Seeker group. It is a group with low participation in organized leisure activities, fewer friends and less support from parents. The social support that according to Hartup (1996) is being provided in a relationship between friends may not be present to the same extent in the Seeker group. On all accounts considering gender differences, it is important to note that only a few of these findings are statistically significant. Although just nuances, it may be relevant to ask if organized leisure activities can be considered as building friendships and in a prolonged sense strengthening the social support, increasing psychosocial well-being in children and youth. Friendships are, according to children 10-12 years old, one important aspect of well-being (Kostenius & Öhring, 2008b). The girls may be, according to this study, more vulnerable to ill health, especially those not involved in organized leisure activities. With research showing a decrease in the health and well-being of teenage girls (cf. Lindgren & Lindblad, 2009), this finding should get

the attention of leisure professionals.

The children we call *The Socials* seem to have found a balance as they reported the highest well-being combined with a medium amount of organized leisure activities. When reflecting on these findings, participation in organized leisure activities seems to be ideal from a well-being perspective, at least on an individual level and on a medium level (1-4 days per week). Nevertheless, it is not to say that these suggestions on an individual level are coherent with social outcomes brought forth by Ellaway and Macintyre (2000). In their illumination of leisure in connection to societal benefits a dilemma was found. From a societal point of view the characteristics of *The Goal-oriented* group would perhaps be preferable as they are goal-oriented, seem engaged with an inner-drive both in school and during leisure time, preparing them for the future labor market. *The Seekers* seemed to be not fully part of the society, which is evident in their negative experience of health, school and friends. The level of participation in organized leisure activities at a medium level, based on this study, needs to be further examined in connection to societal benefits.

Limitations of the study

There were several limitations of this study. The first limitation was the sample selection. It was derived from a research and development project that was located in a homogenous school area (in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic status) which may have distorted the socioeconomic interpretations.

The second limitation was the sole use of self-reporting as the method of gathering data, although research has shown that it is a reliable source (Lundberg & Manderbacka, 1996). The comprehensive nature of the survey with 74 questions may have affected the children's concentration when completing the survey as well as the reliability of the results (Babbie, 1998).

A third limitation was related to the variable chosen to investigate: the level of participation in organized leisure activities. The variable did not measure seasonal changes even though many organized leisure activities occur year round. The variable similarly did not include a measure of the duration of each occasion, nor did it measure the type of activity (i.e. active or passive activity). In summary, it is argued that the level of participation in organized leisure activities provided a rough measurement of the variable. Future studies should include more specified questions about the actual involvement in organized leisure time activities.

Finally, the study was limited in the analytic phase by asking respondents to indicate their level of participation in leisure activities in terms of high, medium, or low. The limitation of this approach is that what one person may consider to be a medium level of participation may be considered a high level participation for someone else, and so on. Nevertheless, the original choice to analyze the scale of participation and at the same time have an adequate sample for each category led us to this decision.

Conclusion

When it comes to well-being, it is vital to consider the influence of organized leisure activities. However, it is suggested that postulating a link between the level of organized leisure activities and the degree of well-being is problematic. Other variables such as socioeconomic situation must also be considered, as mentioned previously. Another possible variable, not included in this study, is the quality inherent in the experience of the organized leisure activities. People-centered activities, such as team sports or other group activities have been associated with increased quality of life (Brajsa-Zganec, Merkas & Sverko, 2011). Some social, people-centered, activities including partying and substance abuse can, according to Trainor, et al. (2010) be connected with behav-

ior which can have a have negative effect on health and well-being. Quantitative measures of organized leisure activities seem to be insufficient, just as the qualitative measures are not an encompassing determinant for the effects of organized leisure activities. Fletcher, Nickerson and Wright (2003) linked children's participation in organized leisure sports to psychosocial maturity and social competence. On the other hand, Melman, Little and Akin-Little (2007) found higher levels of anxiety to be connected with the amount of time children were dedicated to organized leisure activities. With these studies in mind, one can wonder whether persistent organized leisure activities, consisting of, for example, a highly competitive sport, could be adding to the child's stress level thereby decreasing children's psychosocial well-being? Conversely, it may be possible that organized leisure activities engaged in with the same frequency, such as attending art classes may increase their sense of well-being.

According to Engström and Redelius (2002) the inner logic of a physical activity relates to the experience of participating in an activity, which has consequences both pedagogically and in terms of health. For example, while competitive sports are common leisure activities among children and youth, they are based on subordination and the ethos of winning. It can be stressful for a child to live up to these values. Other physical leisure activities are based on play which may be characterized by having fun while moving but not necessarily trying to achieve something (Engström & Redelius). The inner logic of play could then be considered a health promoting choice in line with Iwasaki's (2006) argument that leisure activities have a counteractive effect on stress. Perhaps it is a question of balance, as we found with *The Socials*, between friends, school, and organized leisure activities. In addition to this they scored high on experienced well-being.

The results from this study suggest a positive connection between levels of participation

in organized leisure activities and well-being. However, there is a need for a healthy balance in terms of organized leisure time. In this study we have no way of knowing who made the choice for the medium level of participation in organized leisure activities reported by *The Socials*. Was it a decision made by their parents, teachers, coaches, or the children themselves? Melman, Little and Akin-Little (2007) suggest that support should be given to parents who want to limit their children's engagement in organized leisure activities. Brooks and Magnusson (2007) underscore the empowering affects experienced by youths when choosing to be involved in physical activity as leisure. According to Kostenius & Öhrling (2008b) children who are invited to be a part of decision making processes in matters affecting them are not only empowered, but report an increase in well-being. Our suggestion is that children themselves need to be involved when it comes to finding a balance suitable for the child on an individual level with respect to participating in organized leisure activities, in hopes that their involvement may increase their sense of well-being.

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