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# Searching for Talent

## The Construction of Legitimate Selection in Sports

**Magnus Kilger**

Stockholm University

<magnus.kilger@buv.su.se>

**Mats Börjesson**

Stockholm University

<mats.borjesson@buv.su.se>

### Abstract

This article analyzes talent selection within Swedish Sports. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which this process of legitimacy is produced in the case of children and adolescents. The article involves a discourse analytical approach where organizational policy documents, annuals for operation, educational coach literature constitute the corpus of data. The aim is to document how problems of legitimizing talent selection are handled within the organization through the use of different discursive repertoires. The purpose is to deconstruct explicit statements and underlying suppositions through with the current process of selection is legitimized.

The research material allows us access into how the process for talent selection constitutes a significant part of a discursive apparatus of selection. In order to make the process of selection appear neutral, discursive work is played out in order to make the process appear fair and unbiased. Furthermore, this article shows how the production of the legitimate selection works in two directions, both individually and politically. The process of selection is being rhetorically displayed as legitimate to those within the system, as well as a Swedish egalitarian welfare politic at large.

*Key words:* talent selection, apparatus, constructing legitimacy, policy analysis, technicization

## Introduction

An ongoing debate in Scandinavian sports research deals with societal legitimacy, and more specifically, an organizational transformation where a voluntary sports movement becomes increasingly professionalized (Ronglan, 2015). This becomes particularly interesting in relation to practices of selecting talented children, and this is what we intend to study here. Creating systems for talent screening and selection requires extensive work, but critics of attempts to select talents at a young age are not lacking. Moral doubts have been raised, as well as questions about the accuracy of such systems to screen, identify and select children for elite sport. All this has been a subject of intense debate in large parts of the world (Anshell and Lindor, 2012; Clark, 2012; Epstein, 2014). In this article, we will take a closer look at the process of legitimizing talent selection in a Swedish context. In Sweden, the discussions have been stimulated by publications such as internal reviews and reports with questions targeting principles for screening and the building of systems for talent development (Fahlström, 2011; Peterson, 2011). Many studies suggest that the selection process is based on premises other than talent such as maturity, the amount of previous training, and differences in training conditions. Moreover, the quality of social support services is determinant in the selection process rather than individual potential alone (Krogh Christensen et al., 2011; Meylan, et al., 2010). Other scholars emphasize the importance of an early engagement and targeted training from a young age (Starkes, Deakin, Allard, Hodges, Hayes, 1996). Regardless of positions on criteria for selection, talent selection is a reality in Sweden as well as globally. Therefore, a number of issues are at stake here and this has to be discursively handled by the Swedish Sports Confederation. A specific type of rhetorical work needs to be produced in order to gain trust and legitimacy, both within the organization and its members, and more widely from sources of political authority.

## Scandinavian sports organizations in transition

In Scandinavia, the model for organizing sports accommodates child and youth sports on all levels, including grassroots sports as well as elite competitions – organized within non-profit clubs primarily based on non-salaried work. However, over the last decades, the professionalized

elite sports have extended, adding new discussion to the arena of sports politics and most definitely in the field of sports policy research (Houlihan & Zheng, 2015; Ronglan, 2015). Traditionally, the sports organizational model in Scandinavia is characterized by a bottom-up-system in which member governance is a fundamental principle, and in Sweden it is organized under the umbrella of the Swedish Sports Confederation (2010). Still, state and local government grants are by far the largest contributors and securing this type of funding remains a prerequisite for the activity to be carried out in its present form (Norberg, 2011). The Swedish Sports Confederation has a long history of economic collaboration with the government and a majority of the sport federations is dependent on these governmental contributions. This implicit contract between the state and sports was established for the purpose of enabling the sports movement to be an independent actor, as part of the comprehensive welfare state (SOU, 2008:59). This position as an autonomous actor and simultaneously economically dependent, has for decades been a debated democratic dilemma (Lindroth, 2011; SOU 2008:59). However, this has resulted in delegated responsibility for the financial resources where the distribution of funding is not controlled by the government in detail. Yet, in recent years there has been an increased governmental focus on instrumental goals for funding, to accompany the general funding (Fahlén & Stenling, 2015). For example, in 2002, a large directional government program was launched, *The handshake*, later on extended under the name *The lift for sports*, which lasted until 2011. The initiatives were initiated by the government in order to target certain priority areas so as to encourage sports organizations to increase cooperation with schools, reduce fees for participation and increase girl's attendance (Fahlén & Stenling, 2015). Even so, the independent status and the all-embracing approach to sports, aiming to combine all levels of competition and recreational sports, distinguishes the Scandinavian systems from several other sporting organizations in other countries (Helle-Valle, 2008; Riksidrottsförbundet, 2009). Those dual aims, (i) not only to nurture good citizens and contribute to public health, but (ii) also to foster elite adult athletes, involve, as we will show here, an ideological dilemma that has to be handled.

## Theoretical considerations

The term *apparatus* is used in the writings of Foucault to describe a constellation of elements and is deployed in order to understand how different discourses, laws, scientific statements and moral values act within a specific field in order to determine what can be said and what are to remain unsaid (Foucault, 1977). Of particular interest are the practices of justification and rationalization that are part of the responses issued in relation to an urgent need. Analogously, we argue that the social construction of “the talented youth” can be added to this list. Here, as in all types of categorizing politics, an apparatus serves a societal function by way of its practices of legitimizing and problem solving. Within the apparatus, Foucault argues, we can see how discursive practices – speaking, writing, and communicating – are linked to the non-discursive elements. The non-discursive character comprises elements such as selection camps, sports centers, committees, employees, forms, records, stopwatches, etc. All these elements are, of course, also dependent on discursive accounts (Foucault 1984; Miller and Rose, 2008). For the purposes of this study, however, policy documents and other organizational text material constitute one discursive part of the apparatus.

This text is based on a discourse analytical approach where policy documents, annuals, magazines and educational literature constitute the corpus of data. It explores the concept of talent selection in child and youth sports; more specifically it analyzes how problems of legitimizing selection are handled within the organization through the use of different discursive repertoires. At least a couple of basic issues are at stake here. First, there is the issue surrounding the difficulties of predicting a young person’s capacity for elite level sports as an adult. Second, there is the issue of legitimization, namely the need to ensure a fair process for those involved and to politically legitimize selection in a publicly funded organization with an assignment also to make sports accessible to all. Bacchi (2009) claims that a policy formulation, implicitly or explicitly, contains a diagnosis of a problem, and the organization’s efforts to achieve legitimacy becomes a central issue, according to which the need to be seen as rational both in action and behavior is crucial for credibility. The principal implication here is that institutional interaction by and within the organization becomes self-evident and thus not subject to questioning (Brunsson, 2006). Analytically, importance must therefore be given to the analysis of how a problem arises. The approach attempts

to understand in what ways organizational problems are resolved within policy documents. For example, Rose (1999) analyzes different ways in which government usurp power by making use of science, in order to justify and legitimize governmental power and actions. With the use of statistics, for example, an organization can manage the distrust that may otherwise exist against its way of governing; an organization can present itself as acting both with rationality and reliability. The presentation of tables and charts makes the act of political deliberations and decisions appear as if it were a technical mechanism. Numbers become a political tool within the technology of government at the same time as *the technicization of politics* is used in order to gain trust and relevance (Rose, 1999). Furthermore, *vague accounts* can be used as a strategy to defend a statement against refutation. Edwards and Potter (1992) underline that the use of vague accounts does not offer an argument and therefore does not easily lend itself to criticism.

The purpose of this article is not to debate or discuss the essence of talent – whether, for example, talent identification and talent detection systems are adequate or useful – but to study the construction of talent as the basis for selection and the ways in which legitimacy is constructed by the Swedish Sports Confederation. The principal contribution of this text is to deconstruct the explicit statements and underlying suppositions through which the process of talent selection is legitimized. It is not to replace one image of reality with another – or, indeed, make an alternative moral positioning available.

## Previous research

Research inspired by Foucault is often interested in examining relations of power and how policy problems are handled. Foucault explained that his goal was to criticize the working of institutions that on the surface might appear to be both neutral and independent (Foucault, 1974). Many foucauldian studies concern the dark sides of society. In many ways, this has been a strategy for understanding the logics of society as a whole. By focusing on the maladjusted, we can also understand discipline and normalization among the well adapted. This has been a successful strategy for understanding, for example, the logics of normalization. In sport studies, Foucauldian research is at times directed towards the construction of gender and the gendering of social practices in sports, which

is often regarded as a masculinizing arena (Birrell & Therberge, 1994; Grahn, 2015; Thorpe, 2008). This is helpful for analyzing the building blocks and logics that constitute the disciplinary society and how the docile individual is produced via the procedures of hierarchical observation, normalizing judgments and examination (Deacon 2003; Foucault 1974; Grahn 2015). These processes are equally important whether they concern troublesome or successful citizens; in the latter category we may place the talented young athletes. In an inverted manner, we argue, it is possible to look at how the construction of the mediocre individual or the unwanted can be captured with the help of studies into the adjusted side of the population. These are different sides of the same coin, and the issue here is not whether these normalizing procedures are humane or not, but rather about studying how power operates to solve potential problems with individuals in society.

Previous research within this field of analysis has been carried out by, among others, Lang (2010), Piggin, et al., (2009), Skille (2008), Grahn (2008) and Helle-Valle (2008). Lang's (2010) study of elite swimmers, grounded in the Foucauldian use of the concept of panopticon, focuses on the disciplining strategies of elite swimmers and how these strategies create different forms of self-surveillance through physiological testing, weigh-in practices and coaches observing training from the poolside. Disciplining through this open arena, the goldfish bowl, in which every move can be seen, brings with it an increased interest in the process as well as the symbolic actions outside the purely sporting achievement, which thereby creating a panoptic gaze of self-surveillance (Lang, 2010). Piggin, et al (2009) focus on how sport and recreation policy is influenced by different kinds of knowledge. Drawing on the Foucauldian conception of governmentality, their study analyzes how policies are presented as scientific evidence. Grahn (2008) documents how gender is constructed in sport teaching material and Skille (2008) analyses the implementation of sport policy as conducted by voluntary sport clubs at a grassroots level in Norway. Relatedly, Helle-Valle (2008) examines a media debate around the values of grassroots sports versus elite sports. On the basis of these previous studies, our research examines relations of power and the rhetorical tools that are at work by the apparatus of sports in order to appear neutral, independent and certified by and through scientific evidence.

## Research method and data corpus

This paper draws on discourse analysis of organizational policies and other written material. The purpose is to document the repertoires used to legitimize talent selection, and to deconstruct and analyze the logics and rationalities in legitimizing the selection of talent in sports. By identifying recurrent patterns or repertoires in the material, this enables us to analyze how such repertoires are part of an apparatus of selection in order to construct legitimacy (Potter, 1996). The texts were read through in their entirety, and sections concerning selection, screening, identification or similar topics were selected and themed. Additionally, reports containing narratives on young talents under development, or the elite athlete glancing back at their journey to success were extracted and included in the analysis. The individual stories, structural organizational recommendations, as well as concrete advice to trainers on talent detection were incorporated in the analyzed material. The different text sections were then themed based on content and/or the logic of explanation (e.g. talent as nature/nurture). These thematic areas were merged with similar themes and clustered into the five practices presented in the results section: (i) The fair selection; (ii) Searching for “bio-talent”; (iii) Searching for “character-talent”; (iv) The technicization of sport selection: safeguarding ideal choice; and (v) The ethical and fair selection: safeguarding the Swedish model. These analyses explore how the representation of the system for selection is produced and defended within the literature, and they document the ways in which the representations of a fair selection plays an important role in the governing of operations. The research process can be described as iterative, characterized by a tandem movement between the empirical material and theory (Taylor, 2001).

The empirical material comprises educational literature included in mandatory coach development courses (seven textbooks), policy documents within the Swedish Sports Confederation (three documents: “Sport wills – aims and guidelines for the sports movement”; “Report of Operation, Swedish Sports Confederation 2012-2013”; and “Sports in Sweden”), as well as the magazine Swedish Sports (12 issues, 2012-2013). All texts are published or utilized by the Swedish Sports Confederation. The magazine primarily addresses active trainers, operating at different levels on issues concerning leadership, organization matters and training advice. The official policy documents can be seen to detail both activity-content and the values that are supposed to guide and permeate the

organization, as well as constituting an information material. This array of documents presents and discusses the role and commission of the organization, describing the prioritized areas for the coming years, but it also covers current debates. Quotes are used in order to illustrate typical rhetorical work within the empirical material. Key issues to be addressed include ways in which particular claims are represented and are given legitimacy in the documents and how these statements of fairness are handled. From these starting points, the aim is to explore the following questions:

- i. What kinds of discursive figures does the selection apparatus claim to screen with precision and high veracity in order to identify and select talent?
- ii. What discursive resources are mobilized and displayed when trying to legitimate talent selection?

## The fair selection

In this section, we will describe the results of the analysis – how the production of the fair and unbiased selection is legitimized. Our material, as one limited part of the apparatus as a whole, documents how the process of selection is legitimized, not only on an individual and group level, but also connected to a sociopolitical level. In our second investigation, we will present how knowledge, expertise and scientific references are used in documents, textbooks and magazines in order to produce the legitimate talent selection.

The selection process is based on three principles or claims. First of all, a central starting point can be couched in terms of an epistemic claim, namely that the concept of talent exists as common knowledge within a mundane parlance, and those talented children exist within the population, and second that they can be detected. Billig (1996) argues that such instances of knowledge, which pass as common sense, are difficult to question and are simply taken to be universally true. The question of interest here is how such universal truths or expressions of common sense are handled in talk by experts on talent, selection and development in order to legitimize the apparatus of screening and selection.

The most talented sporting youngsters shall be inspired and given the opportunities to make the total investment that is required to reach an international elite level. (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2009, pp. 25).

In Sweden, youth professionals constitute a debated issue, but Kristoffer believes that it is necessary to for his further development [...] “Then there are totally different resources. They are filming our matches and checking what we need to improve, which is very rewarding” (Eklund, 2012 pp. 16).

These texts emphasize the third principle, the talented person’s right to special treatment. The talented young person has a right to gain access to special conditions and facilities in order to process his/her particular potential. As we will draw attention to later on in this text, this can be a potential problem in relation to the Swedish model of sports. This right, however, must be guided by expertise and alongside with organizational support in order to succeed. The next step for the selection process is defining who has the knowledge to make the appropriate selection. The factors and problems that often recur in the material show how the selection of children is based on physical maturity and structural anthropometric measurements (body measurements), that is, non-trainable factors. With a selection process on these premises, selection will take its starting point in an incorrect foundation, which thereby has to be handled and mitigated by the organization. Nevertheless, the texts often imply that talent detection programs are commonly based on physical maturity and body composition as central prerequisites for the chance to be chosen in a number of specific talent sports programs. A number of problems due to identification are re-occurring features in selection and have to be managed, and indeed the relative age effect (RAE) is the most frequently described challenge. The RAE identifies the issue, crucial for legitimacy, that children born early in the year tend to be overrepresented in elite selection from an early age and this continues up to the adult national teams in both male and female sports (Romann & Fuchslocher, 2013; Van der Honert, 2012). This problem has to be dealt with by the selection apparatus in order to safeguard the legitimacy of the selection process.

How and when can you as a coach identify children who are talented, in other words, to see who has the potential to become good at a particular sport? From a physiological perspective, they have to pass puberty with a couple of years. Before that, it is hard to identify if success in

sport depends on development (biological age) or on pure skill. (Eklom, Engström, Hinic, Johnson, Ohlsson, Redelius, Ryberg, 2007, pp. 102).

Young people must be treated individually and given time to test their ability before they themselves, or through good advice from coaches and responsible leaders, decide if they want to make an elite investment or not (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2009, pp. 25).

These quotes exemplify the need to emphasize the difficulty in identifying and picking out “real talent”. Implicit here is the need for the specific skills of an expert to make the right selection. The problem here is the difficulty relating to making the adequate selection. The effect that is displayed is the need for expertise and scientific truth in order to secure correct screening and a fair selection. The expert and the expertise is where politics (apparatus of selection) and science (the correct selection) meet (Rose, 1999). The experts will give adequate advice, make an unbiased selection and promote the right for special treatment. Furthermore, it illustrates the rhetoric of rights to which those talented youth are said to be entitled.

## Searching for “bio-talent”

A recurring metaphor in the texts is that of the natural talent. In previous studies on identifying and developing talent in sports, the genetic heritage is conceived as vital in determining whether the person has the capability of becoming exceptional as an adult athlete; talent can be represented, therefore, in terms of a genetic predisposition ((Ford, Ward, Hodges & Williams, 2009), 2009; MacNamara & Collins, 2011). These studies underline the importance of genetic–environmental interaction or the combinatorial relation between biology and psychology. This, moreover, seems to be the mainstream view on talent, namely a synthesis of both the character definition and the natural talent definition. Such an understanding highlights the interplay between a genetic explanation and recognition of the role of secondary factors, such as cultural context, population, and date of birth as well as motor development and access to training facilities structure refinement of training (Ford, et al., 2009). The process of legitimization however, also has to address the reasonableness of a system in which particular children are selected and offered

special access to sports provisions based on expected ability. The legitimation work is twofold, addressing both those who are directly participating and, on a general political level, the public at large. The models used for explaining talent contains an inherent dilemma: while one system of explanation emphasizes biological determinants of talent, another stresses its psychological basis. So how does talent relate to biological and/or psychological factors and what is there to look for in order to identify talent? The biological explanatory model stresses that the physiological conditions are fundamental, therefore the possibility of identifying biological markers have a primary role in talent screening. Conversely, the psychological idea of talent screening emphasizes personal traits and motivation as indicators of talent. This psychological ability is more vaguely described and does not seem to be linked to any actual skill in performing a given sport. Talent screening can be about finding the right characters, not the best performers at that moment. What you choose to focus on, bio-talent or character-talent, can be potentially dilemmatic in the selection process. This potential ambiguity must be addressed in the identification process.

This method [the KEI-method] gives each coach the opportunity to produce, within minutes, a good estimation of true biological age of an adept, only by using a vernier caliper, measuring tapes, scales and a calculator. (Tonkonogi and Bellardini, 2012, pp. 26).

Talent identification can be an extremely difficult task. And it is further complicated by several factors. Many of the inborn talent characteristics are such that they one cannot be discovered until later in life (Riis and Jørgensen, 2006, pp. 22)

Here, talent is described in terms of a natural trait. Not all young people are privileged enough to be born with such qualities, and indeed, they are not possible to conquer merely through training. On the other hand, talent is about biomarkers as indications of talent, accentuated by physiological testing of maturation. These empirically verifiable measures serve as representations of legitimacy. It also emphasizes the importance of expertise, someone who can identify talent and, as Rose (1999) state: legitimacy is produced by using measurements as indicators of expert knowledge. The gradual (natural) rise is here used as a rhetorical tool in order to legitimize selection based on motivation or ambition. On an individual level, legitimacy is tied to biology and psychology, and it is thus based on scientific facts about child and youth development, rather

than on other random factors or incorrect aspects such as maturity. At the same time, on a political level, legitimacy is linked to having obtained a professional accurate sample, but also to the right of the talented person to special treatment. In both cases, there is only a vague description regarding of what talent really consists. Maturity measurement and maturity identification become central instruments in the selection process, technological safeguards of legitimacy.

## Searching for “character-talent”

In the preceding section, we have shown in what way talent is understood as closely linked to biology. There is, however, more to the screening process than that. There are psychological aspects of talent that need to be addressed and be taken into account. In the texts analyzed in this study, talent is described as not primarily having to do with skills, or abilities, but rather with other variables such as, for example, individual character and personality traits which are emphasized within research on talent identification and talent development (MacNamara & Collins, 2011; Meylan et al., 2010). This description of talent links to ambition and the will to work hard and to the claim that some young people have these specific characteristics. Youngsters, seen as talented, supposedly have an ability to work harder and with greater determination than others. *The power of hard work*, expounds the principle that it is the amount of training that is the crucial point (Ford et al., 2009). Furthermore, talent equated with ability, meaning that the best performer is the most talented, is questioned in the material. In the educational literature, it is primarily in the case of psychological factors where talent is emphasized and given greater prominence.

But after all, there are some traits that are common among people who have achieved success. As mentioned previously, they all worked very long and hard to achieve their high level (Riis and Jörgensen, 2006, pp. 21).

Gradually, a natural differentiation between various sporting ambitions occurs. Most people may abandon their childhood dreams of a pro career and World Championship medals, while others have both the talent and the ambition to invest wholeheartedly in their sport (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2009, pp. 25).

In this context the pro-categorization is based on the idea that talent is connected to ambition and motivation, and that it is irreducible to skills or inborn qualities. It is therefore personal traits rather than sporting skills that have to be identified, for instance, children showing signs of ambition. There is also a political dimension to the legitimate selection of children and young persons connected to the measure of maturity. It is, in terms of the apparatus of sports, “not about exclusion, but about adaptation”, so that the children who are on the same maturity level are given the opportunity to develop together. A system for separation, based on capacity and motivation (e.g. talent), is put forward as the best way for children to develop and for their wellbeing in general. The representation of the basic idea is thus to avoid groups with different levels of maturity; children prefer to attend groups where “everyone is equivalent in competence”. The claim for a legitimate, maturity based screening also underlines selection on the basis of ambition. This form of legitimation, however, implies that selection is a natural process rather than an effect of an external decision made by an outside coach. This natural course of selection is vaguely described and assigned to a level of ambition and special conditions, separating the talented from the non-talents. As Edwards and Potter (1992) emphasize, using vague accounts impedes criticism and enables expert knowledge to be invisible. One way to organize the selection process, then, is to handle it as if it were a matter of will, of levels of ambition, not as part of an external person’s selection of those children who are deemed to be particularly talented or suitable. A key issue is therefore to identify motivated children with the right character rather than the best performer. This emphasis on gradual change and on natural differentiation constitutes a rhetorical building block, so that the selection process is recognized as both natural and apolitical.

### The technicization of sport selection: safeguarding ideal choice

The difficulties in identifying talent require the acquisition of special skills and the development of technical devices. The nature of these skills are not explicitly elaborated, but a key element for making screening reliable is to link the individual choice sample to physiological and psychological testing, often in order to determine maturity. The time for selection seems to be an important legitimating practice, particularly in the

context of not making selections too early. A gradual increase of training is used as a guarantor that the freedom of the individual is respected in such a way that decisions are not made on someone else's terms. Rose (1999) has stressed *the technicization of politics*; indeed one might wish to add *the technicization of talent selection* to the list, as a way of exercising power and to depoliticize the selection process. Instead of a process of individuals doing the selection arbitrarily, the selection process is a technological process, based on tests and not on the discretion or hunch of an individual. As Piggitt et al (2009) and Brunsson (2006) show, when the process is made to appear as if it is based on scientific evidence, it is harder to question it. Like Helle-Valle (2008), the policy documents and the operational directions become documents of mediation, a way of dealing with a potential dilemma of investing in all children and at the same time giving the talented children special conditions. The solution is not to focus on one part, but to select both ways. They are constructed as being mutually dependent; there would be no elite athletes without grassroots sports and no widespread grassroots sport were it not for an elite that has created an interest.

This can be seen as an ethical selection, rhetorically at times displayed as for instance the Swedish model, and the ideal selection is displayed through expert knowledge and maturity testing, where fairness is safeguarded through an objective selection.

## The ethical and fair selection: safeguarding the Swedish model

The processing of talent selection as a whole has to be recognized as legitimate by the participants. Moreover, it also requires political legitimacy. The organization needs to handle inclusion and exclusion, due to the principle of special treatment for some talented children and, at the same time, sports should be accessible for all. Child and youth sports in Sweden is based on, and linked to, a large organizational apparatus, financed by the state. It is therefore important that the sporting activities (including the selection apparatus) should appear valid and adequate, alongside the presentation of the organization as both rational and trustworthy. The building blocks deployed in order to make the processes appear as if they are independent from arbitrariness and fortuity are predicated on scientific studies that investigate the essence of talent, testing, and expert

knowledge of talent detection, as well as best practice for refining talent. Furthermore, in order to create political legitimacy, the organizational history of autonomy and independent management of government funding or the structure of being a cohesive sports movement are highlighted. In talk about selecting and screening children based on talent, this process often relates to the rhetorical figure *the Swedish model*, where grassroots sports and elite sports are organized under the same roof. Accordingly, discursive work is carried out in order to fend off ideologically unwanted accusations of exclusion. In principle, so the rhetoric goes, there is a place available for everyone to have an opportunity to participate. Importance is primarily given to the robustness and trustworthiness of selection, whereupon only selectors with specific competence carry out the screening process.

The sports movement is part of our heritage and an important part of our national identity. Millions of citizens have learned democracy, respect for rules and fair play, developed their leadership skills and gained knowledge about diet, exercise, health and wellbeing (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2010, pp. 6).

A model that Peter Mattsson, Head of Elite sports at Swedish sports confederation, think we shall uphold. – We should be extremely protective of the Swedish model, with sport as a social movement (Söderberg, 2012, pp. 31).

In order to legitimize selection, a range of rhetorical devices is utilized and linked to a unique Swedish or Scandinavian model. The organization's democratic structure, alongside the well-established historical partnership with the state, are all factors that are highlighted and used to distinguish this from other types of (unfair) selections implemented in other political systems. The coherence of the organization structure, as well as its history of self-determination in relation to the state, is central in the process of legitimation. The state's trust is taken as a guarantee and as an argument for the legitimacy of its activities. It is therefore necessary for the organization to emphasize both the historical cooperation and the consensus that exists today, in order to build a picture of professionalism and transparency. At the same time, ambivalence exists between the liberated youngster, free to make her own decision, on the one hand, and, on the other, the need for the organization to contribute in the upbringing of good citizens. A key element that still needs to be addressed is related to the accusation that the selection process is judged to be un-

just, improper and arbitrary. Such objections are raised not least in media reports, which have emphasized how individual sports clubs are selecting children unjustly (Mannerheim, 2012; Peterson, 2011). These reports are often supported by stories or examples of what is referred to as incorrect and a non-scientific selection. The concept of fair selection is replaced with a practice of unfair exclusion.

It is a model where the different parts are interrelated and enrich each other. A model that has proven successful despite comparatively little social funds focused on elite operation. Owing to the base of sports open to everyone, based on a non-profit leadership, a Swedish medal costs less than in most other countries (Mattsson, 2012, pp. 43).

The issue of inclusion and exclusion is at stake here; everyone has the right to participate, while some will be given the right to a particularly advantageous development. The Swedish model thus serves as a rhetorical resource for constructing political legitimacy and not only for the selection process. It also constitutes an argument for why the sports movement is part of civil society and the welfare state. It is not only a fair process for those who participate, it is also regarded as financially advantageous for both state and local government. Legitimate exclusion or selection is connected to age, but most of all to maturity. The key issue is to be able to demonstrate maturity, as well as the construction of a subject position that can arbitrate over levels of maturity. It is linked, moreover, to the (presumed) unique organizational expert knowledge of how to identify talent. This highlights a repertoire used by the organization in order to respond to an urgent need, i.e., expert knowledge on selection; in other words, doing what others cannot – making fair and unbiased selections.

## Discussion

The aim of this article has been to problematize talent selection and investigate how legitimacy is constructed in an apparatus of sports selection. Related to this intention has been to investigate how this apparatus for selection in official documents claims to identify talent, both with respect to high veracity and precision. What is highlighted is the process of legitimacy, both politically, in relation to the egalitarian welfare state at large, and as a display of expert knowledge, in managing talent selec-

tions with high accuracy. Legitimate selection needs to be seen as fair, not only by the participating individuals, but also by society as a whole. This process of legitimization is supported by a discursive apparatus in order to produce legitimacy. Or to put it in a foucauldian framework (1977), the organization has to define an urgent problem as well as present its solutions.

Our study shows an apparatus of child and youth selection, a system that has to appear objective and fair. Talent selection is therefore dependent on two kinds of rhetorical resources, the ethical selection and the unbiased, scientific selection. This requires active work in constructing legitimacy and credibility. The empirical material shows that the premises for identifying talent can be found within these documents as one part of an apparatus of selection operative in Swedish sports as a whole. These premises are, however, based on three claims. The first is that talent is pre-existing and possible to trace within the population. The basis for this assumption is that there are children with special abilities and that they should be given better opportunities than the average child to become successful elite athletes. Second, these abilities are possible to identify, but such identification demands expertise and specific knowledge. It is assumed that talent is available and can be identified and measured even if a number of problems must be satisfactorily dealt with, such as children's differences in physical maturity and the relative age effect. Third, the selection process assumes that the talented child has a right to get access to elite conditions and special provisions in order to fulfill his/her talent potential. The empirical material showcases a systematic vagueness surrounding talent where both biological and psychological factors are highlighted and come into play. This imprecision makes it hard, from an outside perspective, to identify and criticize the process, while at the same time it is also an asset in order to create legitimacy within the apparatus. Edwards and Potter (1992) have emphasized that vagueness can be used as a rhetorical resource in order to create legitimacy, by making it difficult to question expert decisions. The rhetorical work that needs to be done politically emphasizes accepting the sports organization as capable of carrying out talent selections and to legitimize child selection as legitimate and fair. To screen and select children on the basis of talent is a sensitive issue for an organization that explicitly emphasizes the right of everyone to participate. Therefore it becomes important that the selections that are made are credible, and legitimate, and that the best interest of the child remains a primary concern. To do this, a number

of discursive repertoires are used in order to create legitimate selection. This work is emphasized by the historical heritage of the organization; the extensive cooperation, which has existed and exists between the state, municipalities and the sports movement, has an important justificatory role to play. Furthermore, the image of a unified sports movement is expounded; according to which both recreational sport and elite sport coexist under the same organizational umbrella. Additionally, arguments based on the tradition of democratic governance and a member-driven bottom-up approach is used in order to create legitimacy. The Swedish model becomes a guarantor for an ethical and fair selection.

## Conclusion

In summary, this text has been an attempt to deconstruct the discursive practices used to construct legitimacy for talent selection in textual material produced by the Swedish Sports Confederation and used throughout Swedish sports. In order to make the system appear neutral, discursive work has to be done to make the process appear fair and unbiased. The article shows how the production of the legitimate selection works both individually and politically. This problem of forecasting talent may be viewed as a general challenge for the process of selection in sports worldwide, but also as a part of research on the mechanisms for screening and selecting children on a general level. The interplay between the processes of legitimation within written material on a macro level, and how this can be carried out in social practices on a micro level, would be interesting areas to explore. Texts and policy documents are central practices of legitimation and they produce ideological effects and they help to constitute subjects of the talent youth. The question is what effects the legitimation practices, highlighted in this study, entail in situated social practices – on the pitch, in the gym or on the football field – when selection of the talented child is a prominent part of the social action.

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