Chapter 6
School sports in different cultural contexts

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Introduction

School sports have been a significant topic of interest among sport scholars (Hartmann, 2008). In these studies, participation in school sports has been correlated with a reduction in deviant behaviour and school dropouts, an increase in popularity with peers, improved self-esteem, exercise behaviour, school grades, increased educational aspirations, stronger school bonding and sport identity formation (e.g., Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Broh, 2002; Curtis, et al., 1999; Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 1999; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Goldberg & Chandler, 1989; Hartmann & Massoglia, 2007; Holland & Andre, 1987; Lipscomb, 2007; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002, 2003; McNeal, 1995; Melnick, Vanfossen, & Sabo, 1988; Miller, Melnick, Barnes, Farrell, & Sabo, 2005). Across many school sport settings, stakeholders (politicians, organisations in the field of physical education (PE), sport programme developers and scientists) have posed and conserved the image of the beneficial effects of school sports as being applicable to every participant (Coakley, 2009). In other words, there is a tendency to universalise and ‘over generalise’ the results of school sport studies. For instance, in the Netherlands, the term school sports is uncritically used as an umbrella for all kinds of different sports activities that have something to do with school.

Converging interests have strengthened the alliance between influential institutes in sport, PE and the government. Sport-related effect studies are in the interest of both sport organisations and ministries of education. A positive image of school sport is of interest for sport organisations, because they can impose their sport-related goals on PE. The broadly interpreted concept and positive image of school sport is in the interest of the ministry of education as well, because they can transfer more responsibilities to both sport (especially with regard to the more efficient use of sport infrastructure) and the schools. The ‘imported evidence’ is, for example, used to underline and reinforce the policy in which sport functions as an instrument for day care. At the same time, the investments in extracurricular sport and ‘sport coaches’ (introduced to bridge the gap between sporting clubs and schools) distract the attention from the experienced need for more investment in PE itself.

The alliance between sport and PE also seems to be induced by the increasing political interest in elite sports and talent development. This momentum is used throughout PE to legitimise its role in the curriculum. Because of the reduced attention for the pedagogical perspective, the world of PE is under increasing pressure to reinforce its purpose with arguments that are related to the political
ambitions within (elite) sports. For example, the ambition to be in the top 10 of
the Olympic medal index, the ambition to organise the 2028 Olympics and the
increased attention for elite sports can be seen as both catalysts and results of this
growing importance of sports (Ministry of VWS, 2008a; Ministry of VWS & Ministry
of OCW, 2008; NOC*NSF, 2009). Given the relative impotence of the pedagogical
discourse in the legitimisation of the importance of PE, organisations working in
the field of schools and PE are more or less forced to incorporate this rhetoric in
order to reinforce their very existence (Houlihan & Green, 2006). In addition, there
is an increased pressure to substantiate policy with (scientific) evidence. Taken
together, this has led organisations in the field of PE and schools to search for
evidence-based activities that seem to have all kinds of beneficial effects, such as
school sports in the USA. In the search for this evidence, a critical analysis of the
exact activity and the exact results of these studies are arguably not in the best
interest of these organisations. The demand for science-based practice has resulted
in various studies that have considered a breadth of activities and concepts,
such as PE and sports, sport education, sport participation and extracurricular
activities in the substantiation of school sports in the Netherlands. In other words,
stakeholders have great interest in a ‘mythopoetic’ (Coalter, 2007b) image of ‘school
sport’, in the broadest sense of the word, because it can be associated with all
kinds of beneficial effects for a large group of people, irrelevant of the context.

However, notwithstanding the pressure to generate widespread positive
outcomes, a vast number of researchers have indicated that it is important to
distinguish under which circumstances and to whom the beneficial and possibly
detrimental correlates of school sports apply (Coakley, 2009; Hartmann & Massoglia,
2007; Spaaij, 2009a). What is usually defined as ‘context’ in these studies are the
different outcomes for children with different social(-economic) backgrounds,
different races, genders, types of sport, and different school variables, such as the
neighbourhood or the sport-mindedness of the school (Crosnoe, 2001; Curry &
Weiss, 1989; Eitle & Eitle, 2002; Erkut & Tracy, 2002; Fauth, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn,
2007; Guest & Schneider, 2003; Hartmann, 2008; Melnick, Sabo, & Vanfossen, 1992;
Miller, 2009; Sokol-Katz, Kelley, Basinger-Fleischman, & Braddock, 2006). Although
differentiating the findings for these groups strengthens the validity of the studies,
an important similarity between most of these studies is that the majority have
been conducted in the USA and therefore follow the definition of school sports as
interscholastic athletics (Coakley, 2011). In contrast, in most European countries,
such as the Netherlands, the organisation and social function of school sports are
significantly different from the USA (Stokvis, 2009).
We propose that the way in which school sports are organised and function socially is strongly determined by the cultural context in which the school sports take place. It is possible that some of the ‘effects’ of school sports that have been found in the abovementioned studies are dependent on the culturally determined organisation and social functioning of school sports in the USA (Coakley, 2011). Because of the varying cultural context of school sport in respective countries, it is expected that the ‘effects’ of school sports may be liable to differ in other countries as well.

In order to investigate these hypotheses, the cultural contexts of school sports in the USA and the Netherlands are discussed, after which the organisation and social functioning of school sports in both countries are compared on five elements.

**Cultural context of school sports in the USA and the Netherlands\(^1\)**

Although the complete histories of American and Dutch school sports are beyond the scope of this chapter, a brief discussion is crucial for the understanding of the cultural context of school sports in both countries (for an elaborate analysis, see Stokvis, 2009). In the beginning of the twentieth century, all sorts of extracurricular activities were developed at colleges across the USA, including sports activities. During the twentieth century, high schools copied this system of extracurricular activities. Youth sports in the USA were therefore integrated within the educational system and have remained embedded in this system ever since (for a detailed overview, see Mandell, 1984; Rees & Miracle, 2000). Schools in the USA have extended sport facilities on campus and numerous teams participate in interscholastic competitions and tournaments. These interscholastic events are characterised by a strong emphasis on competition and are very selective in nature. Achievements in these interscholastic events are important for the status of both students and schools (Gems & Pfister, 2009).

In contrast to the American evolution of youth sports, most European countries, such as the Netherlands, developed a system of sports clubs that is independent of the education system (Bottenburg, 2011; Bottenburg, et al., 2005). Stokvis (2009) gives a possible explanation for this discrepancy by comparing the relationship between students and school officials in the USA and the Netherlands, the social composition of the high school student populations and by explaining

\(^1\) The argumentation in this chapter is based on the dominant patterns of school sports in the Netherlands and the USA. It should be noted that these patterns are not absolute and other forms of youth sports exist in both the Netherlands and the USA.
the ideology of PE in the Netherlands. In the USA, students organised clubs to perform all kinds of activities, including sports, outside of the official school hours. Because of disciplinary problems with some of these clubs, the school officials brought these clubs under the supervision of the school authorities. As a consequence, sporting clubs were incorporated into the educational system. In the Netherlands, students also established sporting clubs outside of the schools and independent of the school officials. School officials felt no need to place such student clubs under their supervision as Dutch students and parents cooperated with school authorities. Another reason for the absence of student clubs being under supervision of the school is that, in the Netherlands, separate high schools existed for students of different social classes, which made the populations in these high schools rather homogeneous. Because of this homogeneity, these students felt no need to further associate with the schools in clubs, fraternities or sororities (Stokvis, 2009). In addition, PE in the Netherlands was highly influenced by the German, Austrian and Swedish gymnastics and Dutch medical authorities, which were characterised by a resistance against sports for its ‘un-pedagogical’ elements such as competition, selection and a strong focus on winning. The medical authorities considered competitive sports as dangerous, unhealthy or even immoral (Hilvoorde, et al., 2010). As the main purpose of PE was to compensate for the sedentary behavior during other classes at school, physical educators were afraid their profession would become redundant because of the growing popularity of sports (Stokvis, 2009). For these reasons, sports were excluded from schools in the Netherlands and organised in sporting clubs independent of schools.

Because of the dominance of club sports in the Netherlands, sports and educational policies did not lay great emphasis on collaborations between schools and sports in most of the twentieth century. However, the numerous promising research results of school sports in the USA directed the attention of Dutch politicians and scientists towards the American school sports system. In an attempt to counteract increasing health-related and behavioural problems among youth, to increase regular sports participation and to be within the top 10 of the medal index at the summer Olympics, some elements of American school sports were introduced in the Netherlands (Ministry of VWS, 2008a, 2011a, 2011b; Ministry of VWS & Ministry of OCW, 2008; NOC*NSF, 2009; Stegeman, 2007).

The introduction of elements of American school sports resulted in schools with elaborate sport facilities, which use American sport campuses as an example. However, in contrast to the USA, the sport facilities on Dutch sport campuses are not (primarily) used for curricular or extracurricular activities. Instead, the
sport facilities on these sport campuses are used by independent sporting clubs. Everyone can become a member of these sporting clubs, whether or not they are a student of the school. As there are no curricular or extracurricular activities at these sporting clubs on the campus, the only bond between the school and the sporting clubs is the location. Nevertheless, the described organisational structure is defined as school sports in the Netherlands. In addition to sport campuses, some high schools and even elementary schools or kindergartens are labelled as 'sports oriented’ or ‘sports-active'. This means that these schools provide extra hours of PE, PE-related courses within the curriculum or lunch break sports and active games. Some schools also specialise in facilitating elite club sport athletes or talents in their educational programme. Furthermore, there is an increasing interest in interscholastic competitions and tournaments in the Netherlands, inspired by American interscholastic athletics (Sage, 1990). A difference with the USA is that the duration of these tournaments varies between one to five days divided across the school year (KVLO, 2010). The main goal of these interscholastic competitions and tournaments in the Netherlands is to increase sport participation among students. Therefore, these events are open to everybody, regardless of their grades in other subjects and their sport skills. Not every school participates in these interscholastic competitions and tournaments, which might be explained by the fact that club sports are regarded as more important and not every school has enough interested students to form a team.

While there are a number of existing forms of school sports, we focus our analysis on interscholastic sport participation in both countries to be able to compare both school sport contexts. In this chapter, American school sports are defined as extracurricular sport activities at high schools in which students are members of a sports or athletic team, competing in interscholastic (extramural) leagues. Dutch school sports are defined as participation in interscholastic competitions or tournaments between high schools.

We hypothesise that although some elements of the American school sports can be imported, such as organising interscholastic events, the cultural context of school sports will constrain the possibilities of organising school sports and determine the social function that school sports have. The organisation and social functioning of school sports are expected to relate to some of the ‘effects’ of school sports. It is therefore expected that these ‘effects’ are different in the Netherlands. These hypotheses will be investigated in the next section by comparing the Dutch

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2 In some of the referenced literature, different extracurricular activities or intra- and extramural activities were investigated. From these references, we only used the claims concerning extracurricular and extramural sports.
and American school sports contexts on five elements that refer to the organisation and social functioning of school sports. These elements were chosen because they represent the dominant image of American school sports. In addition, it is hypothesised that most of these elements relate to some of the presumed ‘effects’ of school sports in the USA. Therefore, it is useful to investigate how these five elements relate to school sports in the Netherlands.

**The cultural context of school sports: comparing the Netherlands and the USA**

**Competitiveness**

In the USA, school sports are usually defined as interscholastic (varsity) athletics, in which the best athletes from schools compete against each other. These interscholastic school sports are very selective in nature and highly competitive (Park, 2007). This competitiveness is characteristic of the American mentality and can be seen in many areas of life, not only sports (Kohls, 1984). The competitive characteristic of interscholastic school sports is important for the social functioning of school sports in American schools. For instance, being selected for the school team is important for the status of student-athletes within the school community (Miller, 2009). The competitiveness of interscholastic school sports is further illustrated by the rituals and symbols that surround the interscholastic matches. These rituals and symbols tend to enhance the competitiveness and the importance of beating the opponent (Stokvis, 2009).

Although competitiveness is not as much rooted in the Dutch culture as it is in the American culture, sports are a social sphere in which competition and rivalry are more accepted (Curry & Weiss, 1989). However, in the Netherlands, this competitiveness is mainly present in club sports whereas most manifestations of interscholastic school sports are characterised by a sports-for-all nature. This may be the result of the dominance of club sports and the nonorganic relationship between the educational and sports systems in the Netherlands, as described earlier. Since one of the main goals of interscholastic school sports in the Netherlands is to increase sport participation rates among children, excluding children by means of selection and competition is not a desired effect. In addition, competitiveness in Dutch interscholastic school sports is not stimulated, as performances in school sports have little or no influence on the status of either the school or the students involved. Therefore, rituals and symbols that provoke (and are provoked by) competitiveness are absent in most schools.
The varying emphasis on competition in interscholastic school sports is rooted in both the Dutch and American cultures. It is therefore unlikely that the social functioning of interscholastic school sports, which is highly correlated with competitiveness, will be the same in these countries. As a consequence, changes in this social functioning are unlikely to be expected.

**Intensity**

In the USA, interscholastic high school sports competitions are weekly events in which school teams compete against other schools in regional, state or nationwide divisions. At most schools, these competitions are taken very seriously and the athletes practice numerous times a week, even outside the season. As mentioned earlier, the duration of interscholastic competitions in the Netherlands varies from one to five days throughout the year (KVLO, 2010). This comparatively low intensity can be explained by the dominance of club sports in the Netherlands (Bottenburg, et al., 2005). Not every school participates in these interscholastic school sport events and students who are simultaneously engaged in club sport will have less time and (financial) resources to spend on school sports.

Interscholastic school sports have often been linked to changes in self-perception and behaviour, such as reductions in deviant behaviour and increased educational aspirations and self-esteem (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Hartmann & Massoglia, 2007; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003). These changes are processes that require longer periods of time (Burke & Stets, 2009). Since student-athletes in the USA are intensively engaged in school sports for a longer period of time, it is likely that participating in American interscholastic school sports is related to these behavioural changes. In the Netherlands, the intensity of school sport engagement is relatively low, and therefore behavioural changes have no time to develop through participation in interscholastic school sports. The historically evolved differences in the intensity of school sports might thus be of influence on the correlates of interscholastic school sports with some of the behavioural changes observed in school sports studies.

**Prestige of schools**

American interscholastic school sports are important not only to the athletes and coaches but also to the entire school community and even the school’s home town. In most local newspapers, interscholastic school sports take up numerous pages; the local news networks report their results and interscholastic matches are a dominant weekend issue (Brettschneider & Brandl-Bredenbeck, 2007; Rees & Miracle, 2000; Stokvis, 2009). Schools use this media exposure to
distinguish themselves and use the results of their student-athletes to promote their institutions. In school marketing, the sports results are sometimes implicitly or even explicitly associated with the academic standard of the schools (Coakley, 2009). Therefore, there is potential for great prestige that can be gained from interscholastic school sports in the USA. During athletic events, students are primarily representing their schools and schools take advantage of the image of their student-athletes.

In the Netherlands, schools do not use the interscholastic school sports results in their marketing strategies because nobody associates the school’s athletic performance with the academic standards of the school. Therefore, interscholastic sports achievements do not gain any media coverage and although students represent their school, such success receives very little public attention. As mentioned earlier, there is a growing tendency in the Netherlands to label schools as ‘sports-oriented’ or ‘sports-active’, or to facilitate elite club sport athletes or talents in their educational programme. These schools do tend to use these sports-related characteristics in their marketing. This, however, has nothing to do with school sports as it is defined in the present chapter.

The differences in prestige that can be gained from interscholastic school sports are illustrative of the different significance school sports have to the (school) community in the USA and the Netherlands.

**Status of athletes**

Within the American high school community, athletes have a higher status and are often more prominent than other students (Broh, 2002). Being a ‘jock’ will provide a high status along with the potential benefits and drawbacks (Crosnoe, 2001). It is conceivable that this higher status is of influence on the connection that a student-athlete feels to the school, since their status is depending on their relationship to the school community. In addition, this higher status will provide a more positive self-image and may therefore have consequences for the student-athlete’s self-esteem (e.g., Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Hintsanen, Alatupa, Pullmann, Hirstiö-Snellman, & Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2010; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003). It must be noted, however, that even in the USA where student-athletes in general have a higher status, the types of sports that are practised are also likely to influence the status that a student gains. For example, excelling as a football player will likely raise a student’s status to a much larger degree than being on the badminton team.

With the exception of those participating, the teachers and students in Dutch school communities are usually unaware that their school team is competing in an
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interscholastic event. Moreover, talented athletes – for example, students who play for professional soccer clubs – are often not even allowed to play on school teams due to potential risk of injury. Because interscholastic school sports are rather insignificant within the Dutch school communities, participating in interscholastic school sports is unimportant for the student’s status within the school community and the self-esteem that is suggested to be related to this status. The status that can be gained from interscholastic school sport participation is thus likely to depend on the culturally determined social functioning of American interscholastic school sports and is not expected in the Dutch context.

**Eligibility**

One of the most prominent ‘findings’ in school sport studies is the relationship between school sport participation and academic results (e.g., Barber, et al., 2001; Broh, 2002; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003). This conventional wisdom is at least partly based on misinterpreting correlations for cause-and-effect relations (Brettschneider, 2001, 2007). In the USA, meeting the eligibility criteria is a prerequisite to participate in interscholastic school sports. Without good grades, students are not eligible to participate in interscholastic school sports, ergo the student-athletes who participate must have good grades (Snyder & Spreitzer, 1990). The positive correlations between interscholastic school sport participation and academic results must therefore be interpreted as selection criteria instead of effects. The idea behind these eligibility criteria in the USA is an expected trade-off between academic work and school athletics (e.g., Coleman, 1961; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003). Although a negative correlation is indeed observed by some, it can be argued that these eligibility criteria can intensify the interest of the athletes in their academic achievements, since they are unable to play if they neglect their academic efforts (Stokvis, 2009).

In the Netherlands, participating in all types of school sports is open to every student, regardless of their grades. This sports-for-all ideology is partly related to the historically developed non-selective nature of interscholastic school sports in the Netherlands. Given the absence of eligibility criteria and the moderate amount of time that has to be invested in Dutch interscholastic school sports, a (positive or negative) correlation between academic work and interscholastic school sports participation is unlikely to be found in Dutch students, although research is needed to better understand such claims.

Eligibility criteria are therefore thought to be unnecessary in Dutch interscholastic school sports. The possible downside of the absence of eligibility criteria is that, unlike in the USA, interscholastic school sports participation in the
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Netherlands will not serve as an incentive for students to get high grades. The correlations between interscholastic school sports participation and academic results may thus be strongly related to the specific cultural context in which the school sports take place.

Conclusion

In political rhetoric, the media and scientific literature, there seems to be little doubt about the potential of school sports for solving numerous social, psychological and educational problems of students in a great variety of contexts. Indeed, several scholars have found positive correlations between participating in school sports and solutions to some of the problems schools and students face. An essential similarity between these studies is that most of them have defined school sports as American interscholastic athletics. We hypothesised that the differences between the cultural contexts of school sports in different countries will largely determine the differences in social functioning of interscholastic school sports and the organisational relationship between school and sports. Furthermore, it was expected that the specific organisation and social functioning of interscholastic school sports were related to some of the ‘effects’ of school sports. These hypotheses were investigated by describing the school sports contexts in the Netherlands and the USA, before comparing them on five characteristic elements that relate to the organisational and social functioning.

By referring to the history of youth sports in both countries, we demonstrated that the cultural contexts of interscholastic competitions and tournaments in the Netherlands and the USA differ significantly. In the USA, interscholasticschool sports are integrated within the educational system and have a strong social functioning, whereas club sports are dominant in the Netherlands. These different cultural contexts have a significant influence on the organisation and social functioning of interscholastic school sports in both countries. This conclusion is based on the differences between the USA and the Netherlands in the competitiveness, intensity and prestige of interscholastic school sports, the status that student-athletes can derive from school sports and the use of eligibility criteria. Furthermore, it was concluded that some elements of the specific American organisational structure and social functioning of interscholastic school sports were of influence on the correlation between school sports and school bonding, self-esteem, behavioural changes and academic achievements. As these organisational structures and social functioning of interscholastic school sports are different in countries with a different cultural context of school sports, generalisations of the ‘effects’ of school
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The cultural context of school sports is largely formed by the historical relationship between school and sports. Therefore, changes in the cultural context take time. Specifically, the inflexibility of the cultural context of school sports leaves little room for changes in the organisational structure and social functioning. More competitive and intensive school sports in the Netherlands would, for instance, conflict with the dominant organisational structure of club sports. Also, the dominance of club sports and insignificant history of school sports prevent school sports participants and schools gaining status and prestige from participating in interscholastic school sports. Furthermore, because of the low intensity and significance of interscholastic school sports in the Netherlands, eligibility criteria are unnecessary.

Despite efforts to import some organisational elements of American school sports in the Netherlands (such as sport campuses and interscholastic competitions), it can be concluded that the organisational relationship between school and sports in terms of curricular or extracurricular activities is very much constrained by the cultural context of (school) sports in the Netherlands. In addition, the cultural context of school sports in the Netherlands largely determines the social functioning of school sports in the sports and school community. It is therefore unlikely that the same ‘effects’ of school sports that have been observed in the USA will be demonstrated in the Netherlands.

Although interscholastic competitions and tournaments in the Netherlands and the USA were used as an example in this chapter, it can be concluded in general that the cultural context of school sports is of influence on the way school sports are organised, how school sports function in the school and what the possible effects of school sports are (Kay, 2009). However, within most scientific research and policy on school sports, there is insufficient awareness of this influence of the cultural context on the potential outcomes of school sports. This is illustrated by the fact that studies on American school sports have been used to underpin the expectations of Dutch school sports policies (Ministry of VWS, 2008a; Ministry of VWS & Ministry of OCW, 2008; Stegeman, 2007). Ignoring the influence of the cultural context of school sports may result in an overestimation of the potential of school sports in countries that have a sports culture with little emphasis on school sports. The cultural context of school sports is essential when discussing, investigating and setting expectations of school sports in different countries.