Informal learning in the childhood of Puskas

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Abstract

Nowadays it is an important role of a school to prepare pupils for life-long learning. In this role, the school takes notice of the informal learning that can accompany any kind of activity. It appears to be worthwhile to study typical scenes of informal learning in history. We are trying to present the process of informal learning through the famous football player Puskas. He spent a minimal period of time learning in school: instead, he played football on empty sites. His success did not depend on the school but on informal learning. The unwritten law of the empty sites taught him to respect his teammates and his opponents – this is the only way to be successful.

Keywords: informal learning, Puskas, sports clubs, reception/integration process

1. Introduction

In today's unpredictable world, one of the determining competences is the ability to learn. The necessary knowledge and set of behaviors which make it possible to respond adequately to the continuous and ever-accelerating changes in technology, economics and society are acquired by learning. The system of life-long learning [(which is not a brand new phenomenon (Field, 2006)] and life-wide learning makes an important distinction between formal, non-formal and informal learning. Informal learning takes place everywhere all the time so it is worth both studying it from a historical aspect and analyzing the scenes of informal learning. We can analyze the process of informal learning through such highly respected individuals as Puskas, who became world famous even though he spent a minimal period of time learning formally in school. It is interesting to focus on a football player because sports clubs could be considered the most influential non-governmental organizations at the beginning of the 20th century. It is worth studying sports clubs as a special scene of informal learning and analyzing their role in the life of Puskas and his peers.

Schooling institutions are still in search of their destined new place in the present world, but it is already evident that they will have to take up a key role in the development of learning competences. Considering that the places of education have changed (Csapó, 2002), schools can become integrators by opening up and preparing pupils for both the difficulties and the joys of learning and by introducing them to knowledge management, getting them to enjoy learning, and teaching them how to be effective at it. To make this a reality, mass-education has to be replaced by individually customized education (Halász, 2008). We agree with the scholars (Colley, Hodkinson & Malcolm, 2003; Golding, Brown & Foley, 2009) who take the stance that the task is not to separate the formal and informal

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properties of learning as precisely as possible, but to integrate them. In addition, it is also necessary to show the importance of informal aspects in the education of individuals. This is partly due to the amount of informal (also known as natural, or everyday) education, which can accompany any kind of activity, thus being present during a considerable amount of time in people's lives, even those of the highly qualified ones (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974). Secondly, the paradigm of learning throughout life (which combines the life-long and life-wide features) boosts the value of our of school education. Thirdly, it appears to be worthwhile to pursue the study of history and the typical scenes of everyday (natural, informal) learning in a given period.

2. Aims and methods

We are examining the period between the two World Wars, when Hungary began to become a “sports power”. This paper focuses on Ferenc Puskas, the famous football player. The focus of attention is on his club (Kispest Athletic Club) and on the settlement near the capital city Budapest, where he was educated. When we draw the development of a football player, we try to understand both the general and the individual elements in the microsystems of sports clubs. It may be hypothesized that we can identify the forms of learning and education in small communities, the scenes of informal learning, namely the sports clubs, if we rely on the history of the society, on local history, on oral history (interviews with relatives, peers, old club mates), and on analyses of local newspapers and photos.

3. Sport in Hungary after World War I.

After the Treaty of Trianon, sports and physical education gained a special role. Not exclusively for the sake of the activities themselves but for military reasons, the popularity of sports brought real success in championships, and involved masses. Thanks to the regulation of working hours and to the increase in free time, sports had become mainstream by the period of our interest. Due to military considerations, junior physical education enjoyed explicit governmental support in Hungary, which helped the popularization of sports (Gergely & Kiss, 1976). In the 1930s, the number of competitors in all sports taken together exceeded one hundred thousand. Hungary was on the way of becoming a major player in competitive sports, as demonstrated by the various achievements and successes in the Olympic Games. Just one piece of evidence: “Before 1918 the number of institutions for sports in Hungary was about 700”; by 1935 the same indicator had jumped to 6882 (Romsics, 2005, p. 221). This is an enormous growth, even if we discount the 2000 shooting clubs which were largely linked with the ‘levente’ associations. On the other hand, one should not dismiss the ‘leventes’ contribution to the construction of sports and shooting clubs and other establishments (Levente, 1932 (3-4), p. 56). For example, when the wooden stand of the Kispest Athletic Club (KAC) was destroyed on fire, they helped in the reconstruction work in 1935 (Gergely, 1989).

The most popular of the sports was football†, thanks to its accessibility and low costs: it did not require establishments or equipment, and it was suitable for a multitude of boys who played it on suburban grounds or on a village’s grazing field, even if only barefoot. [In rural areas boys had less time for football because by the age of 6-7 they had been dragged into family work. First they were in charge of grazing the geese, then they became responsible for the pigs (Boreczky, 2001)]. The other factor behind the popularity of football was that it offered pleasure, creativity, opportunity for personal and team achievements, created a tension of contention, and was a trial of skills and strength, all at the same time. With its incredible ingenuity it attracted audiences of thousands week by week (Horváth H., 2010).

† “In Hungary ‘kicking the balls’, alias football, kicked off in 1895. The first public match was played in 1897, and drew 2000 viewers. In little more than a decade, in 1911, when the football team of the Ferencváros Athletic Club (Fradi) returned from its first tour abroad, the successful players were greeted by 30 thousand fans at the Eastern Railway Station.” (Romsics, 2005, p. 100).
3.1. „KAC” – a football club

Sports clubs can be considered the most influential non-governmental organizations at the beginning of the 20th century (Glatz, 2003). Their establishment represented an expression of the identity of the people living in the given settlement, and later on, as a result of their operation, this identity was constantly formed (Hadas & Karády, 1995). Sports clubs and associations were mostly flourishing in urban environments, due to the tendency that sports had become some of the most important free-time activities all over the world. Playing football gained the utmost popularity (Romsics, 2005).

In the period of our interest the number of sports clubs soared. In Kispest near the capital city the first club, called Kispest Athletic Club, was established in 1909. (It is interesting that the neighboring settlement Szentlőrinc had already had its own club though its population was below eight thousand when it gained independence.) The club was meant to be a place of development for many fields of sports (athletics, biking, tennis, gymnastics, etc.), but the popularity of football was unchallenged. In two decades’ time both settlement had been home to twelve clubs (PIHGY, 2007). The majority of clubs were operated by social institutions, which took support from local craftsmen and tradesmen to cover running costs and to construct new ranges (Pestszentlőrinci Hírlap, 1932, Pestszentlőrinci Újság, 1935).

Restaurants also played an important role in the life of sports clubs. The Kispest and Pestszentlőrinc associations, for instance, operated with the help of membership fees and the donations of the locals, the latter being a very significant source of support in a petit bourgeois neighbourhood. The clubs often organized balls and dances in order to strengthen the union of their members, to promote sports life and last but not least to improve their financial conditions. These events were usually organized in local restaurants (Kispest-Szentlőrinc, 1933). Several clubs did not even have headquarters and used one of the restaurants instead. Restaurants became home to club life, for both informal meetings and official consultations. Béla Mayer, a founder of Kispest Athletic Club and the team administrator, often had consulting hours in cafés and restaurants (Nemzeti Sport, 1943. Dec. 12).

Most lower-middle-class and working-class boys in towns were playing football on empty sites all day long. They were dreaming of becoming as famous players as their idols were. These boys were extremely happy if some club members or managers invited them for a trial match. Clubs held recruitment events more than once a year, and often the primary team's coach was present as well to get informed about what talents to expect from the grounds in the forthcoming years.

Typically football clubs had three classes of teams: kids (10-13 years), junior (14-17) and adult (from 18 years on). Each of the classes had two teams: the adults had a primary and a backup team, while the others were mainly grouped by age, although individual skills were also a determining factor. The hierarchical status of the players was strongly affected by the level of their team. Kids would watch the performance of “the olds” in amazement, and while they were already proud of their admission to the club, they were dreaming about the time when they would be able to put on the club's champion uniform.

3.2. Integration process in the changing room

The adults of the primary team had a hierarchy too, which influenced the weight of someone's opinion in the dressing room, or his turn in the shower (and whether he was left enough warm water). It went without saying that younger players addressed their peers, who were 8-10 years older, formally. It was an honor to carry an accomplished player's volcano fiber suitcase on the team's tours or to clean their shoes. As a part of the integration process, seniors sent the juniors for newspapers and drinks. Of course, the young Puskás carried the suitcase of an old teammate, as he remembered, on the tour of KAC in Transylvania in 1944 (Borsi-Kálmán, 2008, pp. 97-98). Puskás had to obey these hierarchical rules. He was fortunate to be able to integrate more quickly, as his talent was soon acknowledged and, thanks to his football-coach father, he could avoid most of the inconvenient side-effects of the changing room hierarchy.
Many things determined the success of a freshman's integration, but there was one experience that everybody had to go through — the inauguration ritual. Usually this came right after the newcomer player's first match in the club. In the shower he was held down, and dragged onto a bench, where every player spanked his naked butt once. When it was over the team, with the captain at the front, greeted their new teammate with cheers and handshakes. The admission of those debuting in the national football team also involved spanking (Rejtő, 1966). According to Buzánszky's memories, he received his on the train, travelling back from the national team's match (personal account of Buzánszky, 2010).

This ceremony formed such a bond within the team that it ensured the holiness of the game, which had to be kept intact in spite of any possible debates among the players, who were to fight for each other together. On the field, social boundaries are temporarily suspended – this is the democratic side of football. On the other hand, skills soon unveiled, which in turn determined the ranks of the players, giving a meritocratic aspect to the game. These features were attractive for the audience too, as was demonstrated by the doubling of the capacity of the stadiums of the two most popular teams, FTC and MTK, from 20 thousand people to 40 thousand (Romsics 2005).

Sport, especially football, thanks to its popularity, played an important role in the formation of collective identity. Puskas grew up in Kispest, where his father was a football player and later a coach; they lived next to the football field so he became committed to this sport at an early age. He joined the KAC junior team after his pre-junior team, and at the age of fourteen he was elected a member of the Junior National Eleven. Puskas was always ready to play tricks both while playing a match and in civil life. This is proven by his teammates' recollections and by the photos taken of him (Horváth H. 2012). He watched the older players and imitated them – he could practice a move for hours. He practiced until the new element naturally fitted into his repertoire. He did it willingly, and it was not at all tiring for him because he understood the pleasure that playing football could give him.

The dream of his life was to be member of the first team, which he managed to achieve at the age of seventeen. After his first matches he was interviewed by the leading sports newspaper, Nemzeti Sport (National Sport). In the interview he was asked, among other things, whether it was too tiring for him to play with adults as he was so young. Puskas answered that on the empty sites they usually ran a lot more, so it caused no problems for him. The interviewer also asked him where he liked playing more, in the field or on the empty sites. He immediately replied: “on the empty sites”. This was typical of Puskas – however much he dreamed of the fame which the first team could lead him to, he never denied his friends and the empty sites where he had spent more than a decade. Football was also an excellent socializing agent, as it is interesting only if the rules are accurately kept. What also strengthened the boys was togetherness. It taught them the unwritten laws of the empty sites: for example that a person who is your opponent today may be your teammate tomorrow. This view helped Puskas to appreciate both his teammates and his opponents. The boys spent more than 50 hours a week playing football – we can deduce this from the recollections of their contemporaries – and they learned a lot together and from each other (Horváth H. 2011). Because these boys typically spent six years in school, we can say that the time spent learning informally on the empty sites played a very important role in their lives.

4. Conclusion

Sports became one of the most important free time activities all over the world. The establishment of sports clubs represented an expression of identity for the people living in the given settlement and later on, as a result of their operation, this identity was constantly formed. After the Treaty of Trianon, sports and physical education gained a special role in Hungary. The explicit governmental support helped the popularization of sports. Hungary began to become a “sports power” in the period between the two World Wars, as demonstrated by the various achievements and successes in the Olympic Games. The most popular sport was football, thanks to its accessibility and low costs. The lowest middle-class and working-class boys in towns were playing football on empty sites all day long. They were dreaming of becoming famous players such as their idols were. These boys were extremely happy when they were invited to join the pre-junior team. They knew about the strict hierarchy and discipline of the changing rooms. The way they behaved in this reception/integration process played an important role in their future careers. New talents were appearing all the time so someone who wanted to stay at the top had to work hard. Football is a game-
sport so individual success and fame do not work without the other aspect, the respect of playing. Puskas knew this well. He played not only for himself but also for his teammates and for the public. He was always ready to play tricks while playing a match as well as in civil life. But playing football was a serious thing for him – it was his life. The personality of Puskas, who is an idol today as well, was established in these years and by scenes of informal learning.

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