“We Can’t Get Stuck in Old Ways”: Swedish Sports Club’s Integration Efforts With Children and Youth in Migration

Authors’ contribution:

- A) conception and design of the study
- B) acquisition of data
- C) analysis and interpretation of data
- D) manuscript preparation
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Abstract

The last years many people have been forcibly displaced due to circumstances such as conflicts in the world, and many people have come to Sweden for shelter. It has been challenging for Swedish society to receive and guide newcomers through the resettlement process, and many organizations in civil society, such as sports clubs, have been invited to support the resettlement. However, a limited numbers of studies has drawn the attention to sports clubs experiences. Therefore the aim of the paper was enhance understanding of sports clubs’ prerequisites and experiences of integration efforts with immigrant children and youth. Ten Swedish clubs with experience of working with newcomers participated. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and analyzed with qualitative content analysis. Two categories were identified: *Struggling with sporting values and organization* and *Seeing integration in everyday activities*. The clubs experienced that integration occurs in everyday activities, but current ideas focusing competition and rigid organization of sports constrained possibilities for integrating newcomers with no or limited former experience of club sports. The clubs experienced potential to contribute to personal development, social connectedness and enjoyment in a new society and building bridges between cultures. In conclusion, clubs cannot solve the challenges of resettlement in society but have potential to be part of larger societal networks of integration.

Key words: Integration, youth sports, qualitative methods, migration, newcomers

Introduction

Throughout history, migration for economic, political and social reasons has been a natural part of global society, and sport has long served as a global link between people and across cultures. According to the UNHCR (2020), 70.8 million people across the globe have been forcibly displaced due to circumstances such as conflicts and climate change. In 2015, 156,000 asylum seekers entered Sweden (UNHCR, 2020), and in 2017, Sweden was the fourth largest recipient of asylum applications in the EU (Eurostat, 2018). It has been a challenge for Swedish society to receive and guide newcomers through the resettlement process, and many organizations in Swedish civil society, such as the Sports Confederation [SSC], have been invited to support the resettlement process for newcomers. The Swedish government allocated approximately EUR 6.5 million annually between 2015–2018 to develop opportunities for immigrants to participate in sports to integrate into society (SSC 2017). Swedish society

has a long tradition of voluntarism in club sports (Bairner & Darby, 2001; Toftegard Stöckel et al., 2010) as a means to open up opportunities for all residents to participate, irrespective of physical, economic, social, cultural or religious background (SSC 2009). In the European Commission's (2014) Eurobarometer on sport and physical activity, 25% of Swedish respondents indicated that they volunteered time to work in sport, which was the highest level in the EU. In 2014–2015, more than 70% of Swedish children aged 12–15 years participated in sports in a club, and Sweden had approximately 822,000 volunteer trainers, coaches, leaders and board members in 20,000 sports clubs (SSC, 2017).

Integration and sports

Coming to a new society is associated with complex processes of maintaining continuity and incorporating change into people's lives. Integration is affected by the reason for migration (e.g. immigration, asylum, voluntary move, mobility and permanence), the political context in society of origin and society of settlement, individual factors and social support (Berry, 1997). Integration is described by Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas (2016) as the process of *becoming an accepted part of society*. They reject the notion that integration is a linear process of assimilation or adaption to a host society. According to Ager and Strang (2008), the concept of assimilation is linked to the assumption that newcomers will adapt in such a way that they become indistinguishable from those already residing in the host society. But as Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas (2016) point out, integration can better be considered a multilayered process, driven by actors in the host society and involving legal/political, socio-economic and cultural/religious processes. There is, indeed, an inherent imbalance in the power relations between newcomers and organizations and institutions in the host society. However, Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas (2016) emphasize that it is the interaction between newcomers and the receiving society "...that determines the direction and the temporal outcomes of the integration process" (p. 17). Therefore, in this paper, integration is defined as a two-way interaction process between newcomers and host society citizens. According to Esses, Hamilton and Gaucher (2017), refugees initially require suitable housing and support to learn the host language followed by employment support and opportunities, health support, social connections and civic integration, where sports clubs can contribute to civic integration.

Sports, with its strong network of volunteer-based clubs, is often highlighted as an important facet of the civic integration process for newcomers (Agergaard, 2011; Ambrosini & Van der Leun, 2015; Fredriksson, Geidne & Eriksson, 2018; Spracklen, Long & Hylton, 2015), and participation in sports can create a sense of belonging for newcomers (Bergström-Wuolö, Dahlström, Hertting & Kostenius, 2018; Hertting & Karlefors, 2013; Walseth, 2008). In its White Paper on Sport, the European Commission (2007) stated that "sport can also facilitate the integration into society of migrants and persons of foreign origin as well as support intercultural dialogue" (p. 15). In a globalized society, integration through sport can serve as a vehicle for adapting to new cultures (Allen et al., 2010; Elbe et al., 2018; Lee & Funk, 2011; Verhagen & Boonstra, 2014). In a review article, O'Driscoll et al. (2014) found that physical activity and involvement in sports were used as a means of integration and increased participation in sports was associated with increased integration. In a Swiss study, Makarova and Herzog (2014) concluded that newcomers who participated in sports with Swiss peers reported a greater degree of social contact and increased feeling of integration. However, studies point out that clubs, coaches and leaders in general require more intercultural knowledge (Schinke et al., 2013; Spracklen, Long & Hylton, 2015; Walseth, 2008) and a readiness to understand the different cultural backgrounds of participants (Palmer, 2009; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2012). Interethnic relations in sports are often limited to the sports field (Spaaij, 2012; Spracklen, Long & Hylton, 2015; Walseth, 2004). This is also supported in a Swedish study, which concluded that sports seems to have limited impact on friendships between newcomers and native youth (Lundkvist et al., 2020). Power relations in terms of the dominance of existing traditions could therefore present a barrier to integration (Dowling, 2019; Forde et al., 2015; Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016; Skille, 2006; Walseth, 2004; Schinke et al., 2013;). Lee and Funk (2011) studied the way recreational sports can facilitate integration, and their results indicated that programs focusing on multicultural contacts (integration) were rated higher among participants than programs focusing on one-directional processes (assimilation). Forde et al. (2015) studied an award-winning community sports and recreation program for immigrants in Canada and concluded that limited attention was given to the mutual learning of physical cultures. Instead, the emphasis was assimilating immigrants to the current physical cultures provided by the host society. This is also supported by Dagkas (2018), who argues that recent immigrants in Western societies participate in PE and sport based on the dominant Western discourse. Thus, Dagkas (2018) questions the ability of sport to facilitate the integration of ethnic minority groups into society through sports activities. This is supported by Dowling (2019), who questions voluntary sports clubs' ability to develop ideas of cultural diversity.

From a broader societal perspective, researchers contest the notion that sports, and local clubs are general solutions to social problems such as marginalization (Dacombe, 2013; Dagkas, 2018; Ekholm, 2018). Osterlund and Seippel (2013) argue that civic integration is unevenly distributed among different groups, and sport has a varying ability to promote civic integration. In a study on social policy in Sweden, Ekholm (2016) argues that this solution has a limited impact on structural problems and creates a risk that the focus will turn to the individual as the source of the problem. Vandermeersch, Vos & Scheerder (2015) investigated the assumption that sports clubs facilitate social inclusion and concluded that socially vulnerable groups of children and youth are excluded from sports clubs to a greater degree. In line with results from Morgan & Costas Batlle (2019), Dagkas (2018) and Kelly (2010), the authors argue that inequality in sport is associated with inequality in society at large, and sport alone has a limited capacity to change the structural conditions that reinforce the exclusion of certain groups in society. Thedin Jakobsson et al. (2012) studied reasons why young people choose to remain or drop out of Swedish sports clubs and concluded that those with a certain disposition for sports and stronger cultural capital were more likely to remain in the sports clubs. Fernandes (2015) analyzed the introduction programs for immigrants in Sweden, Denmark and Norway and came to a similar conclusion; focus of the programs were on transforming the individual rather than transforming structures. Fernandes (2015:259) argued that focusing on structures “might reduce the potentially stigmatizing element of the programs and the framing of immigrants as a social problem that needs to ‘be fixed’”.

In summary, on the one hand there is support for the assumption that sport can facilitate integration into a new society. On the other hand, there are also studies criticizing and contesting this assumption. However, research on sports as a facilitator for integration has often focused on how the cultures and/or religions of immigrants have formed a barrier to participation in sports (Cortis, 2009; Fundberg, 2012; Spaij et al, 2019; Strandbu, 2005; Walseth & Fasting, 2004). Moreover, studies often highlight participants and policy perspectives of integration. Ryba, Schinke, Stambulova and Elbe (2017) argue that there is a knowledge gap in terms of sport clubs’ capacity to understand integration processes, and in a Swedish context no study has focused solely on the perspective of sports clubs.

Therefore, we aim to enhance understanding of sports clubs’ prerequisites and experiences of integration efforts with immigrant children and youth. How do clubs work with integration of newcomers? What challenges and solutions do clubs express?

Data collection and data analysis

We invited ten Swedish sports clubs with experience working actively to support integration for new children and youth immigrants to participate. The clubs were selected from two categories: (1) clubs which were highlighted as good examples by the SSC on their homepage and (2) clubs highlighted by the media as good examples. We had no prior contact with the clubs and invitations to the study were sent via e-mail to club representatives, requesting for participation of a person with insight into the club’s work with immigrants. This could be a board member, club manager or similar. The invitation contained information about the researchers, the project and research methods as well as information about research ethics. All clubs accepted the invitation and semi-structured interviews inspired by Kvale (2007) were conducted. The interviews were based on an interview guide with four themes: the club, the children, the leaders and sport as integration. The interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcribed interviews formed the basis of the qualitative content analysis (QCA) (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Schreier, 2012). In general, the focus of the content analysis may be manifest or latent content (c.f. Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). According to Schreier (2012), QCA is used when the content is less obvious and interpretation is necessary, i.e. latent content. To support the purposes of this paper and acquire an overview of the interviews, the transcribed data were first read individually by the authors. After the first naïve reading, we discussed interpretations in order to arrive at an initial shared understanding of the data. The next step was to identify and condense meaning units from the interviews (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The condensed meaning units served as a basis for the coding process or the content abstraction. The next step was categorization of the different codes, which resulted in nine categories. The categories were closely linked to the aim of the study but also served as a basis for exclusion, since data might not fall into two categories or could be excluded if it fell between two categories. When designing categories, the different codes were systematically analyzed to create categories with similar content. The final step in the analysis was to create main categories based on the subcategories. Two main categories were identified, and seven subcategories. The analysis process was non-linear and shifted back and forth between parts and the whole during the entire process.

Table 1. Overview of the clubs, their integration activities and function of informant

Club	Sport	Integration activities	Location	Function of informant
A	Multiple	Established for newcomers, sport and community activities to support integration	Town	Club founder and manager
B	Soccer	Soccer team for newcomers, community activities	Big city	Board member
C	Soccer	Former project for newcomers, which was postponed	Town	Club manager
D	Soccer	Needed more players. Developed activities such as youth center and collaboration with the school	Rural area	Club manager
E	Basketball	Started as a project, now part of ordinary activities, open basketball, cooperation with refugee accommodations	Big city	Chairman of the board
F	Floorball	Established for newcomers, providing sports and support establishment at the labor market	Big city	Club founder and manager
G	Basketball	Drop-in basketball, collaboration with schools and other clubs, support establishment on the labor market	City	Club manager
H	Soccer	A multicultural neighborhood, open for everyone, no particular activities for newcomers	Town	Club manager
I	Basketball	A multicultural neighborhood, helps with equipment, multilingual information, open for all, support schoolwork, youth center	Big city	Chairman of the board
J	Soccer and floorball	A multicultural neighborhood, cooperation with schools, multilingual information, drop – in sports, economic support structures	Town	Chairman of the board

Results

In the interviews two main categories were identified: *Struggling with sporting values and organization* and *Seeing integration in everyday activities*, which will be presented below.

Struggling with sporting values and organization

There was a strong belief among the clubs that sport could contribute to integration. However, the clubs expressed a need to adapt their activities in order to include all children and youth in the club. This category is characterized by the club's efforts to deal with organizational assimilation in their attempt to achieve integration.

One criticism was that, within sport, too much emphasis was on specific sports skills. The leader of Club A said: "To speak frankly and openly, there is one big club in this town, which took the most skilled players. Out of 20 youths from the refugee accommodation, one or two were sufficiently skilled, the rest were on try-outs but didn't possess the skills to be in a club. So instead they did nothing. That's the reason I started the club." Club C encountered a similar problem in its project with unaccompanied youth: "We had one or two immigrants who made an effort to practice with our junior team, but no one developed far enough to be part of the squad." The logic of competition was considered problematic by many of the clubs. Many young immigrants lacked experience within organized club sports. This was an aggravating aspect of being fully involved in a team: "The difficulty is that logics of competition and of integration collide. We must do something there. I don't know exactly what, but I think it's a key factor. And many of the youth come at a time of their lives when teams select players and competition and results become more important. And how do we solve that equation?... there's an exclusion mechanism right from the start", as Club B expressed it. Club F tried to overcome the logic of competition by starting a floorball team for players with no prior experience: "The problems are within sport itself. It is so focused on competition. It is aimed at scoring more goals, being at the top of the table and I'm very critical of this...you must place it in the proper context". Another aspect was the bureaucracy within Swedish sports, which the leader of Club H believed risked excluding young immigrants: "I think we make it unnecessarily complicated sometimes. We get bogged down in administration, registration must be carried out in a certain way and you definitely cannot play with another team if you're too young or too old; then you need special permission... We are Swedes and we are sometimes very rigid

in terms of bureaucracy and rules". Criticism of regulatory structures was expressed by most of the clubs and was considered to be a factor that prevented the participation of new child and youth immigrants in club sport, as Club E expressed: "...we can't get stuck in old ways of organizing sports, we must change". Hence, the clubs generally regarded the sporting values of competition, selection and focus on skills as inhibitory when receiving newcomers. In order to cope with this, the clubs developed different strategies.

The clubs also experienced financial challenges, and there was an awareness that individual's financial circumstances could exclude them from club sports. Special arrangements were required, often in cooperation between multiple actors. Club I had a solution: "We've had several uninsured children because their parents couldn't afford the club fees. Thus, a couple of years ago, we started cooperating with the local housing association, where anyone with financial problems can apply for financial support. They can then afford the membership fees and will be insured". Club E had noticed that young immigrants participated in basketball training at different times and discovered that not all youngsters had shoes. Therefore, they took turns participating: "Because we had a sports company as our sponsor and the municipality as a partner, we were able to solve the problem with the shoes in a joint cooperation". In summary, there was criticism that the organization of sport was too rigid, making access to sport more difficult for new young immigrants. This could result in a separation from sport if the sport culture was not assimilated. However, the clubs utilized different strategies to challenge traditional organization and sporting values in order to promote integration.

Some clubs reported that the start-up phase was problematic within their own organizations. In Club B it was advocated from members that the club first had to deal with its "core business", then focus on its activities with the newcomers: "There was a conflict around the team, or different opinions as to whether as a small and not perfectly functioning club, we should do this... And this opinion pops up occasionally. For instance, when we are short of coaches in a team they say: 'but the newcomer's team has five coaches'. So, I believe this view is present all the time". Some clubs also felt that other clubs hesitated to accept immigrants due to a lack of knowledge, which was expressed by Club C: "Some clubs get a bit scared. 'What do we need to know?' It's easier to take Kalle from Sweden with parents and everything into the club... I think if someone is visiting clubs and talking about meeting people from other cultures in a simple way, this is how it works if you are interested in testing out and inviting some young people from other countries. It would be less of a problem". Some clubs had received funding from the SSC to conduct specific projects, but there was a feeling of unequal allocation of funding from municipalities. Club A, which was established specifically for immigrants, felt unfairly treated by the municipality. The well-established club received funding: "This club has received SEK 1.1 million in integration funding. We don't receive any municipal funding. I think the municipality has already allocated its funding to the club, which is very big here. I don't know. Unfair sponsoring or what it can be, but it is very difficult for us to get funding from them [the municipality]." Collecting membership fees from young immigrants was generally a problem. Club B tried to solve this by using municipal funding for unaccompanied minors but ran into problems: "My idea was to take the municipal allowance and pay membership fees. But we are not allowed to use it for membership fees, only for material". In summary, some clubs experienced prejudice and unfairness within the club, as well as from other clubs and officials.

Seeing integration in everyday activities

The common experience from the clubs was that integration occurs in ordinary everyday activities. Projects and other forms of organization could be a good first step, but not enough to create intercultural meetings and integration according to the clubs.

The clubs had different strategies for attracting newcomers to sports, for instance attempting to identify creative ways to adapt activities and groups. However, a common view was that intercultural contact and integration is something that takes place in everyday activities. Club C ran a soccer project for new youth immigrants led by a committed leader but could not maintain the project after the project time elapsed: "...the closest form of contact we achieved from the project is that they [the youth] come and watch our home matches". Club D, located in a rural area, was about to discontinue its soccer team since it did not have enough players. Luckily, housing for refugee boys was established around the same time in the village, and the newcomers were invited to join the club. This also encouraged the locals to return to soccer. "So, everything actually stopped, and I thought there would be no players who could step in...I knew there were boys living in the refugee housing. So, I called and said: 'invite everyone who likes soccer to the Tuesday training session'. Increasingly, more boys attended and after a while we had 57 players, half of them from Sweden and half from other countries. There was a positive spirit and trend [among the Swedes]. 'Now I want to start again, now I want to join'...there has been a tremendous interest in soccer".

The clubs had different experiences in their contact with parents, but there was a consensus that it is important and difficult to involve parents in their child's sport activities. Obviously, this was not applicable to unaccompanied children and youth. One common problem was the language barrier, which Club H pointed out: "...for the new teams we will invite parents in a more inclusive way...often the youth have better language skills than their parents. This is perhaps where it fails because we send home messages in Swedish. We are planning to provide information in more languages and provide information about our club by stating, for example, 'this is us'. Ever since I came to the club, I have been told that we can't reach out to immigrant parents". Many clubs also regarded the parent's lack of knowledge about Swedish sport as problematic, as Club I stressed: "How we communicate with parents is the greatest challenge, in my view, and there is a missing link". In connection with this, the clubs saw the importance of having coaches from other ethnic backgrounds, something that Club A had experienced: "But then we have Zahra [a female coach with migrant background] who says: 'now you're in Sweden you must do things like this' – and the girls come. We are very lucky to have Zahra". In general, clubs stressed the importance of having coaches from different cultures. However, Club C criticized the current situation: "I think soccer is good because everyone can participate. However, if you look at the boards of clubs and associations, integration is poor. In this respect, sport has really failed to take care of leaders from other cultures".

The clubs tried to identify more flexible forms of organization in order to engage more participant groups. One strategy was to organize drop-in sport that was open to everyone. For example, during school holidays, clubs could offer open soccer or basketball for boys and girls of different ages. Club E had an open "basket for fun" session for unaccompanied young boys and Swedish boys twice a week: "We visit their homes. Perhaps 6–7 boys live in a group home, so the coach and I visit them and explain what our club is and what we do". Club B discovered that many new child and youth immigrants were eager to play soccer and engage in activities outside their homes. "So, we organized soccer in a specific team in the club. The initial plan was to cooperate with the surrounding clubs but many of the newcomers didn't feel welcome there, it was a case of double alienation: ...they wanted to play together, and the leader was hesitant and said: 'this is not integration, and this is contrary to everything I believe in'. But then, because they wanted it so much, she [the leader] agreed. 15–20 attended the first training session and now, after two years, there are 140". Club H often visited schools and discovered that many children wanted to play soccer but were a bit older (11–15 years) with no previous experience. Therefore, they started a mixed team, mostly for new child and youth immigrants: "We called it a mixed team. It comprised boys and girls of various ages and we initially wanted to transfer them into ordinary teams. But they were having so much fun in this team. There were other problems, such as you can't have different ages playing in matches. If most of the players are ten years old and three of them are fourteen, you still need to play with the older children".

Some clubs aimed to promote integration into society through sport. It is challenging to enter the labor market as a newcomer, and the clubs wanted to support the newcomers in this respect. The project leader in Club F considered sports as a means for accessing the labor market and initiated internships at workplaces: "I try to help guys who have been excluded, because I see sports as a tool for getting closer to work activities". Club G sought out cross-border cooperation with the municipality and organizations for work opportunities for youth, for instance, as coaches: "We believe this is a really important social function. We think it's important to encourage cross-border cooperation in order to create job opportunities to show that we see you – we think the skills you possess are important". Some clubs strove to be part of society at large and offered other activities, such as support for schoolwork and involvement in Swedish traditions and other societal activities. The coach at Club A, who worked with young asylum seekers, stated: "I invited a few guys to dinner at my house and then we went clubbing. They had never been to a night club [in Sweden]. You are given a special kind of ID card when you are an asylum seeker and it's not valid as regular ID. So many pubs and clubs deny them entry. But this time we made it. However, to live in Sweden for three years like 18 years old and never go to a pub is a very isolating experience". In summary, the clubs considered everyday activities to be the base for integration. Inclusive activities, being flexible as a club, involving parents, and connecting newcomers to worklife and society as a whole was considered important.

Discussion

The aim of the paper was to enhance understanding of sports clubs' prerequisites and experiences of integration efforts with immigrant children and youth. As a result of the analysis two main categories emerged. Each category can be considered distinct, though they do overlap to some extent. There are limitations to the study. Firstly, the ten total respondents represent a small sample, but based on the premises established for selection, this was the sample

size that met the criteria for inclusion in the study. Secondly, the club representatives had different functions (see Table 1), and their degree of involvement in integration efforts varied. This may have affected the results. However, we have emphasized internal validity, which requires us to make conscious decisions from basic assumptions in terms of design, data collection, interpretation and the reporting of empirical findings (Kvale, 2007; Miles and Huberman, 1994). According to Whittenmore et al. (2001), this requires authenticity and integrity, which has been an integral part of this process. Internal validity is a prerequisite for transferability (Guba and Lincoln 1981; Polit and Beck, 2010), which means that it is possible to transfer the accuracy of the results to other similar contexts. To support our findings, we have used quotations from the participants in line with Guba and Lincoln (1981). Despite the limitations of this study, the findings may be applicable to, and have currency in, other similar contexts, which is an argument supported by Kvale (2007) and Yin (1994).

The clubs reported that current ideas and the organization of club sport in Sweden constrained possibilities for integrating newcomers into sport clubs. They questioned a dominating logic of competition and rigid organizational structures. This, according to the clubs, risks to exclude those newcomers who do not have resources to assimilate to dominating ideas of sport. The process of assimilation into dominant sport cultures has been highlighted by several authors (Forde, Lee, Mills & Frisby, 2015; Thedin Jakobsson et al., 2012; Dagkas, 2018). Thedin Jakobsson et al. (2012) argue that cultural capital and a predisposition to sport are crucial factors for participation in club sports. The clubs did in fact report that they experienced intersectional challenges. Many newcomers had limited resources regarding cultural and economic capital and lacked a predisposition to sport; clubs had different strategies to compensate for this, using, for instance, various flexible forms of organization and financial support.

Through supplementary SSC funding, many Swedish clubs have implemented projects aimed at child and youth immigrants, often group-specific activities. A problem acknowledged by the clubs was the issue of how to fully integrate participants in sports when they were separated from Swedes in everyday activities. As O'Driscoll et al. (2014) emphasize, a high level of integration has a positive nexus to participation in sports, and as Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas (2016) point out, integration as a two-way process is more likely to occur in intercultural meetings in everyday activities. However, participation does not automatically lead to integration (Walseth, 2004; Spaaij, 2012; Lundkvist et al., 2020). Interethnic bridges between teammates are often limited to the sports field (Walseth, 2004; Spaaij, 2012). There were positive examples: the rural club (D), which was in need of more players, became a vehicle for creating a bridge between the community as a whole and the hosted newcomers, as well as the clubs in areas which had transformed into multicultural clubs over the years. Common for these clubs were that everyday activities served as the base for intercultural meetings and integration. In general, bridge-building was more challenging for the clubs running targeted integration projects. One club highlighted that including girls was especially challenging. This is in line with former studies, where lack of sports identity could explain why some immigrant girls do not participate (Walseth & Fasting, 2004), as well as different cultural codes and conducts (Cortis, 2009).

There are positive discourses from society regarding the capacity of sport to promote the integration of new citizens (cf. the European Union, 2017; Agergaard, 2011; Ambrosini & Van der Leun, 2015; Fredriksson, Geidne & Eriksson, 2018; Dowling, 2019). However, from a research perspective, we argue, in line with Dagkas (2018), Ekholm (2016) and Osterlund & Seippel (2013), that there are critical points that need to be addressed regarding the capacity of sport promote civic integration into society. Echoing Ekholm (2016) and Evans (2010), we see a risk of too much reliance on local sports clubs to solve societal problems and a risk that persistent problems will be attributed to the individual instead. The clubs had different histories, activities and ideas, but they all experienced a lack of structural support for long-term change. The clubs in current study experienced a struggle between their own values and values and organization of sport as a whole. If sport is based on dominant society values (Dagkas, 2018), the struggle can be understood from the view of the cultural position of dominant society. Similar to the situation in Canada (Schmidtke, 2018), interculturalism needs to be on the structural and political agenda for organizations within sport. Nevertheless, taking the step from inclusion of individuals to developing inclusive structures is a challenge (Ekholm, 2016; Fernandes, 2015; Ambrosini and Van der Leun, 2015; Evans, 2010), which was pointed out by the clubs in our study.

Integration is complex and the clubs had different prerequisites, experiences and strategies. The clubs found it challenging to work in current organization of sport, with its strong tradition of competition, classifying systems, separation of participants (i.e. boys and girls) and starting at early age. Their experiences were that sports as organization is excluding newcomers with no prior experience of sport and lack of capital (cultural and economic). They acknowledged the fact that intercultural meetings and integration occurs in everyday activities, where projects and separate groups could serve as a first step in to sports, but is insufficient for integration. This allings with research that questions the ability of sport to facilitate integration (c.f. Dowling, 2019). The clubs were trying to bridge

what they perceived as a gap between societal challenges, sports organizational challenges and individuals. There are challenges for the SSC and its associations: membership is decreasing and the average age in sports clubs in Sweden is 11 due to, for instance, too much emphasis on competition at a young age and the failure to reach out to all groups in society (SSC, 2019). Structural changes have been initiated for the purpose of making sport more inclusive for more people across the whole lifespan (Strategy 2025). This could be beneficial for newcomers with limited experience in club sports. Current study indicated the complexity to include parents to newcomers in the clubs, as managers, coaches and other supportive functions. To include more coaches and participants with a variety of backgrounds can potentially provide sports with new possibilities to develop and become more relevant for societal development. However, the question about integration in to sports is more complex than ethnicity. As pointed out by Vandermeersch, Vos & Scheerder (2015), Morgan & Costas Batlle (2019), Dagkas (2018) and Kelly (2010), intersectional perspectives are required and sports has limited capacity to alone counteract on the exclusion of certain groups in society.

In conclusion, a major strength for sport is its global recognition and ability to attract young people. Sports clubs can also contribute to personal development, social connectedness and enjoyment in a new society. The clubs in current study saw potential and motivation to build bridges between cultures and be a part of larger societal intercultural networks. The clubs had good intentions and promoted a viewpoint based on intercultural values and joint opportunities for participation as well as cultural learning, but expressed a need for expanded organizational support to fully realize their goals.

The question of whether sports contribute to integration or not is still not fully answered. In our study, the clubs told both positive and critical anecdotes, but to what extent do sports contribute to integration into a new society? More studies are required in this field, focusing for instance on newly arrived parents views, involvement and experiences, longitudinal studies of newcomers and the role of sports, and perspectives of intersectionality.

Competing interests

No potential conflict of interest.

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