Integration into and through sports? Sport-activities for migrant children and youths

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ABSTRACT

Migration over recent years has meant that issues of integration are high on the agenda. Sports clubs are considered important settings for promoting integration. This notion is reflected in national and international policy documents. This study focuses on how leaders in a non-profit sports club, operating in a community where a majority have a migrant background, work with the stated goal of promoting integration. The aim of this study is to explore how leaders interpret and negotiate their explicit assignment to promote integration and counteract segregation and how they try to implement strategies to reach these goals and also to explore how participants experience the sports club's activities related to aspects of integration. The study takes an ethnographic approach with participant observations and interviews. The results indicate that the leaders' work in terms of integration was related to negotiating diversity, norms, rules and language. Both leaders and participants highlight how the activities enhance feelings of trust despite racism in society and how the leaders worked to create relationships and to make the activities into safe spaces. Whether this work contributes to integration is, however, debatable and the leaders emphasised inclusion as their main strategy and goal.

KEYWORDS

Integration; inclusion; segregation; sports club; youth

Introduction

In 2015, the European media were filled with images of refugees who, because of war, were forced to flee their homes. Initially, these people were greeted with ‘refugees welcome’ and civil society stood up with food, clothing and housing (Koca, 2016) but this also stirred sentiments critical of migration (Benček & Strasheim, 2016). In many countries, including Sweden, from where this article retrieves its empirical data, there was an explicit political expectation that civil society should take a leading role in what is now referred to as ‘the refugee crisis’ (Ideström & Linde, 2019). Community
Sports clubs were anticipated as important settings for promoting participation and integration (Arnoldsson 2019) and it is a widespread assumption in both research and sports policies that participation in sports leads to integration (Aagergaard, 2018; Coalter, 2010; Doidge et al., 2020).

From 2015 to 2018, the Swedish Sports Confederation received funding from the Swedish government for their ‘work on establishing new arrivals’ based on the presumption that sport is one way into society (Arnoldsson, 2019). The democratic and egalitarian principles governing the Swedish sports movement and the extensive volunteer engagement this movement holds were believed to provide unique opportunities to create trust between people, and the sports club movement was expected to provide newcomers an opportunity to build social networks and acquire significant resources in the new country (Fundberg, 2017).

To some extent, Sweden has become superdiverse (Vertovec, 2007) and in 2019, 25.5% of the population was born in another country or has two parents born in another country (Statistiska centralbyrån, 2019). Unfortunately, Sweden has also turned into a highly segregated society. The refugees who arrived in Sweden in recent years have come to a society that in many ways is strongly ethnically segregated in terms of employment, housing and education (Darvishpour & Westin, 2015). The present study takes place in a residential area where the majority were born in a country other than Sweden or have parents born in another country. Although many of the inhabitants have lived in Sweden for decades, the area is strongly segregated and poor in terms of economic and educational resources.

This study focuses on a non-profit sports club active in the described area, which was commissioned by the municipality to promote integration and counteract segregation, and the municipality also financially supported this mission. In Sweden, such cooperation between municipalities and sports clubs is relatively rare. The logic of the Swedish sports movement is an ‘implicit contract’ between the government, who decides the extent and the general purpose of the funding of sports, and the Swedish Sports Confederation, who interprets the government’s intentions, decides on details and distributes the resources to the individual sports clubs (Fahlén & Stenling, 2016). In the present case, the sports club was involved in an ‘explicit contract’ with the municipality to implement what, against the backdrop of rapidly increasing migration to the local community, was considered to be an urgent social policy. This relates to what Stenling and Fahlén (2016, p. 868) claim to be a common assumption increasingly made among Western governments, ‘that sports clubs are ready, willing and able to act as implementers of externally formulated policy aims’. Thus, by means of an empirical study, this article seeks to contribute to the discussion and problematisation of the assumption that sports can promote integration. The overall aim of this study is therefore to explore how leaders in a non-profit sports club interpret and negotiate their mission to promote integration and counteract segregation and how they try to implement strategies to reach these goals. The aim is also to explore how participants experience the sports club’s activities in relation to aspects of integration.

The article has the following structure: After outlining research related to integration and sport, a description is presented of the Swedish social context in which this ethnographic study was conducted. Subsequently, the study’s empirical data,
consisting of participatory observation of sports activities and interviews with leaders and participants and how this data has been analysed, are presented. This section is followed by the analysis of results and the article closes with conclusions and implications of the study.

Integration in relation to sports

The article takes its theoretical point of departure from theories of integration related to participation in sports and empirical research in this field. In *The White Paper on Sport*, The European Commission states that sport ‘makes an important contribution to economic and social cohesion and more integrated societies’ (European Commission, 2007, p. 7). Thus, sports are politically perceived as a panacea for a plethora of social issues creating unwarranted high expectations of the social impact of sport (Ekholm, 2016; Spaaij, 2012). One criticism may be that it is simplistic to assume that sport can solve major societal problems and create integration, wealth and well-being (e.g. Coakley 2011; Spaaij, 2012). There are many examples of projects and strategies in which sport is expected to contribute to positive development, but there is little evidence that it actually has all these effects (Coalter, 2010). Since sport is embedded in a social world characterised by structural inequality, sport can also be a divider (Coakley, 2011). Furthermore, socialisation and integration into sports is not an automatic process, and the role of sport in promoting integration for migrants is ambiguous (e.g. Dukic et al., 2017; Rich et al., 2015; Spaaij, 2012).

However, a primary goal of national sports policies is to increase social inclusion (Bailey, 2005). Both in recent research and in policy, sports are recognised as relevant for increasing societal participation and active citizenship (Green, 2007). Likewise, there are assumptions that sports can increase the typically sparse contact between migrant and non-migrant youth and other social networks, and therefore have a significant impact on their commitment, well-being, and sense of meaningfulness (Lagergren & Fundberg, 2009).

The mechanism for increased societal participation, active citizenship and social networking is often said to be social capital. Although the term is very popular, there is no uniform definition of social capital. The dominant definitions come from Bourdieu (1994), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000), of which Putnam is most frequently used in connection with sport and integration. Putnam (2000) emphasises the importance of shared social norms, trust and civic engagement which ‘glues’ communities together and helps people cooperate. He distinguishes between bonding and bridging social capital. The former is important for group cohesion and shared identities, helping people to ‘get by’ in everyday life, the latter is important for connecting and bringing different groups and communities together, helping people to ‘get ahead’ in society. Thus, according to Putnam social capital brings individuals together in groups, it brings groups together in communities and communities together in the wider society. Social capital in this sense highlights fundamental aspects of social integration (Nicholson & Hoye, 2008).

Agergaard (2018) distinguishes between integration into sport and integration through sport: the former implies becoming a sports participant and a member of a
sports community, and the latter implies that participation in sport creates possibilities for access to other social spheres (i.e. job market, education, citizenship). As asserted by Agergaard (2018), integration through sport is difficult to achieve because the relationship between the sub-world of sport and other social spheres is loosely coupled. In line with this assertion, studies of the importance of sport for the creation of social capital show that sport can have an important role in facilitating bonding social capital within minority groups and bridging social capital among migrants from different ethnic communities, but that it has little effect in creating linking social capital across migrant and non-migrant communities (cf. Spaaij, 2012; Walseth, 2008).

A challenge to social capital in relation to various forms of sports projects with the aim of promoting the integration of migrants is that it is a vague concept that is difficult to operationalise and measure as a specific outcome (Doidge et al., 2020). In their study of a refugee integration project, Doidge et al. (2020) emphasise the need for a holistic approach in researching how migrants might be integrated into sports projects. They argue for a focus on the process of creating a supportive environment for social inclusion, rather than a focus on results and outcomes, and they also emphasise the role of the managers, coaches and volunteers in creating such an environment.

The understanding of integration in sports programmes is also important regarding what kind of integration that might be accomplished and how. Agergaard (2018) argues that in political discourse, integration has become an umbrella concept that, apart from its original meaning, also encompasses the concepts and strategies of assimilation and segregation. Assimilation refers to one-way adaptation processes in which minority populations are supposed to give up their cultural heritage and adapt to the language and culture of the majority population. Segregation denotes separation processes along ethnic lines resulting in social and cultural segregation. Thus, assimilation and segregation are two radically different means to understand integration as a social process. However, integration can also be understood as two-way processes leading to cultural exchange and diversity, that is, the multiculturalist position. In line with this, Doidge et al. (2020, p. 3) define integration as ‘a multidimensional process that sees new members of a community being able to fully participate in social, economic and political activities’.

**Integration and sport in Sweden**

In terms of integration, there is a preference for the wider concept of ‘inclusion’ in the Swedish sports discourse. The Swedish Sports Confederation discusses ‘sport-for-all’ based on the general egalitarian principle that everyone should have the opportunity to participate in sport. With inclusion as a fundamental value, criticisms have been made regarding the performance-oriented logic of sport because this logic hinders the stated ambition to offer sport-for-all regardless of ambition, skills, and background (Sjöblom & Fahlén, 2010).

In 2015 it became clear that the sports movement was expected to contribute to integration when a large number of refugees arrived in Sweden (Fundberg, 2017). A survey conducted by the Swedish Sports Confederation of the initiative to support the work with newly arrived refugees shows increased awareness of issues related to
diversity, norms and inclusion in many clubs (Molin 2019). The initiative resulted in a large number of activities, there was a great social commitment among many leaders, but the clubs also encountered practical challenges and had difficulty finding information channels that reached out, as well as difficulty in involving and retaining girls in the activities (Arnoldsson, 2019; Molin, 2019). Ekholm et al. (2019) highlight the fact that girls from ethnocultural minorities are by and large absent in sports contexts. Their analysis of coaches’ approaches raises explanations related to patriarchal structures and a lack of female role models in the form of female coaches. In research on integration in the Swedish context, role models in sport recur and are considered a door opener to other parts of society (Ekholm, 2019). Hertting and Karlefors (2013) show that there is a great variation within the group of refugee children in terms of experiences of organised sports, which needs to be considered when organising sports activities for newly arrived children. Sport is emphasised as a way of educating citizens according to specific ideals of solidarity and inclusion, but Ekholm and Dahlstedt (2017) show that in many cases this is not a reciprocal process but that it contains strong assimilatory characteristics.

The context and the activities in the sport club

To contextualise the study, a few words need to be said about the social and ethnic composition of the population, the city and the neighbourhood where the sports club operates. In a national comparison, the proportion of immigrants is not higher than the national average in the municipality where this study is conducted, that is, about 25.5% (Statistiska centralbyrån, 2019). However, the municipality is characterised by a high degree of ethnic segregation and is one of Sweden’s most segregated municipalities (Börjesson, 2018). At the secondary school in the area, 98% of the pupils have migrant backgrounds. 17% of these pupils have parents with post-secondary education, compared to 53% as the average in the municipality (Skolverket, 2019). In Sweden, it is not allowed to register ethnic or religious affiliation. Population statistics indicate gender, age and whether a person is born outside Sweden’s borders. We are aware of the various uses and sensitivities surrounding the terms ‘migration background’ and ‘immigrant’. In this study, we use this definition ‘migrant’ in this sense, that is, a person born outside Sweden or having two parents born in another country. It is thus difficult to say anything with certainty about the ethnic background of people in the neighbourhood. It is, however, an area where it is easier to get access to housing than other areas, and many refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia and Eritrea have moved into this area in recent years. Poverty and unemployment are greater in the neighbourhood which is categorised as an ‘area with socio-economic challenges’. Socioeconomic segregation is thus also ethnic segregation and can be seen as an expression of structural racism as foreign-born people constitute the majority in these residential areas (Ramboll, 2020). Against this background, there is a political will on the part of the municipality’s politicians to work for increased integration and reduced segregation, and it is in this context that the sports club conducts its work.
The club has mainly engaged in football activities comprising regular training and matches with teams of youths and adults divided by gender and age. However, since 2010 the sports club has engaged in various social projects. These social projects have the stated purpose to ‘contribute to integration and contact with both the Swedish language and Swedish culture as well as other cultures and languages’.

The sports club is a non-profit club run by volunteer leaders. Because of the municipality’s financial support and contributions from various funds, the sports club has six employees who work as leaders in outreach activities and encourage participation in various sport-activities. This study mainly focuses on the social projects labelled open sports activities, that is, no pre-registration was required, and participation was free. The open sports activities were football for girls and boys aged 10–16 years and open multisport activities, where girls and boys and young people aged 12–25 years (younger children also participated) could try football, basketball, dancing, wrestling, boxing, table tennis, and fencing. The open football activities were created during the refugee crisis in 2015 when the sports club had a large influx of newly immigrated youths and the volunteer leaders had difficulty managing all the new arrivals in the regular teams on such short notice. Many of the newly arrived had played football or engaged in other sports in their countries of origin, but not always in an organised form, that is, how it is practiced in Sweden. In addition to being a social meeting place, the stated goal of these open sports activities was to socialise the youth into the community and clarify rules and expectations in organised sport-practices. The leaders should guide the youths to other sports clubs when they had achieved a language level sufficient for them to understand rules and instructions at a basic level. The event offering multisport activities started after a period of social unrest in the neighbourhood and was created to offer young people meaningful leisure activities, and help them find new interests and hobbies in other parts of town from where they lived.

**Methods**

**Ethnography**

The study has an ethnographic approach (Atkinson et al., 2007). The fieldwork was conducted during 2016 and 2017 and comprised participant observations of practices of open sports activities: weekly football events for girls and boys, and an open multisport activity event every other week, in addition to educational programmes for the leaders. The ethnographic approach allowed us to understand central factors in the open sports activities and the meaning leaders and participants ascribed to these everyday practices (Atkinson et al., 2007).

The overall aim of the study concerns experiences of leading and taking part in the activities and in ethnographic studies the researcher continually oscillates between inside and outside perspectives and between immersion and distancing (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015). The researcher must thus approach these practices with an outsider’s perspective in order to critically examine and question what the participants take for granted as insiders, but also being aware of the risk of ‘going native’ (Atkinson et al.,
Thus, ethnography is about ‘making the familiar strange’ and ‘the strange familiar’ (Van Maanen, 1995, p. 20).

**Empirical data**

Since the sports club had an agreement with the municipality to promote integration, contact was made with the leader of the project. She in turn mediated contacts with the other leaders and the research project was planned in cooperation with the leader-team. They in turn invited us to the sports activities and introduced us to the participants. In connection with the activities, children and youths were asked about participation in focus group interviews.

During the participant observations, the research team, that is, the three authors of this article, sat on the sidelines of the sports halls in which the activities took place, talking to the youths and the leaders about small and large issues, incidents, and experiences. We also participated in a 4-day course: two of the leaders, and other voluntary leaders, participated in discussions about gender equality, inclusion, and diversity in sports activities. Field notes from every activity were written immediately afterwards. The field notes generated new questions we could ask during subsequent observation.

The research team participated in 25 open sports activities, which were part of the social projects operated by the sports club (Table 1). The participants in the open sports activities were young people between 6 and 20 years, living in the neighbourhood. A large proportion of these youths were newly arrived immigrants to Sweden, and almost all the youths were born outside Sweden or had two parents born outside Sweden. Some youths participated only in the open sports activities; some youths also participated in the sports club’s regular football practice sessions.

**Table 1. Overview of participant observations.**

| Participant observations | No. of activities | No. of participants | Age |
|--------------------------|------------------|---------------------|-----|
| Open football boys       | 11               | 10–20               | 6–16|
| Open football girls      | 6                | 2–7                 | 13–17|
| Open multisport activities boys and girls | 4 | 100–300 | 6–20|
| Education-days for leaders | 4               | 8–12               |     |

**Table 2. Overview of interviews.**

| Interviews | No. of participant | Age |
|------------|--------------------|-----|
| Interviews leaders |                   |     |
| Interview 1 | 3                  | 26–42|
| Interview 2 | 2                  | 24–28|
| Interview 3 | 1                  | 45   |
| Interview 4 | 5                  | 24–45|
| Interviews youth |                 |     |
| Interview 1 | 3                  | 10–13|
| Interview 2 | 5                  | 10–17|
| Interview 3 | 4                  | 14–16|
| Interview 4 | 4                  | 15–18|
| Interview 5 | 3                  | 14   |
| Interview 6 | 4                  | 13–14|
| Interview 7 | 4                  | 16–19|
Formal focus group interviews were conducted with the six employed leaders and with 27 participants: 11 girls and 16 boys, of different ages (Table 2). The purpose of the selection of interviewees was to get a variety of participants, in terms of age and gender as well as time participating in the sports club’s activities. In some cases, the interviews with the participants were performed in relation to the sports activities in a corner of a sport hall, dressing room, or a location close to a sports hall. In some cases, we agreed on another time for an interview. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interview questions took their starting point from examples and situations noted during the participant observations. The participants were asked about their experiences of participating in the activities, reasons why they started participating and why they continued, relationships with the leaders and other participants and how they reflected on the meaning of taking part in the activities. The interviews with the leaders were open interviews based on four themes: integration, inclusion, equality and intercultural dialogue. Focus group interviews were chosen since this type of interview encourages discussion and is thus a suitable method when studying attitudes, values, and complex social phenomena (Bryman, 2016).

Several of the young people participated both in the open sports activities and regular football activities, and in their responses, they do not distinguish between the two forms of activities. In the result, all leaders are given names starting with the letter L and all participating youths are given names starting with the letter P.

**Analysis**

The analysis of the empirical data included several steps and was performed by all the authors. First, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Second, all the interviews were read to obtain a sense of each interview and to consider the whole interview material as one unit. To contextualise the interviews, the field notes were read in parallel. Third, the texts were decontextualised into units of fundamental meanings relevant to the study’s aims. Fourth, the meaning units were condensed to discern patterns. By oscillating between empirical visible patterns in the interviews, the units were compared to discern patterns and contradictions (Bryman, 2016). In the fourth step, the fieldnotes supported our understanding of how the perception of meaning was put into practice and of central aspects of the interaction between leaders and youths. To increase the validity of the results, some preliminary analyses were presented to the leader team (Interview 4) in the middle of the analytical process, and the leadership team’s reflections on the preliminary results were included in the result. Fifth, a review of themes was performed to ensure they adequately captured related patterns. Finally, a deductive summary of the process was prepared, revealing the analytic narrative in relation to research in the field (Bryman, 2016).

**Ethics**

This study was reviewed by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Gothenburg, who decided that Swedish legislation on ethical review does not apply and, therefore,
provided an advisory statement. The advice provided by the board has been followed, as well as general principles of research ethics.

**Results**

The aim of this study is to explore how leaders in a non-profit sports club interpret and negotiate the club’s explicit mission to promote integration and counteract segregation and to explore how participants experience the sports club’s activities related to aspects of integration. The analysis resulted in the following four themes: (1) *Negotiating diversity and norms* (2) *Rules and language* (3) *Trust and racism* (4) *Relationships and safe spaces.*

**Negotiating diversity and norms**

Although the leaders in this study, according to the agreement with the municipality, should promote integration, the leaders articulated their belief that integration, as they perceived the concept, was beyond what they could influence through their work. They associated integration with structural factors, such as breaking residential segregation, reducing economic inequality through access to work, but above all that individuals in their daily living become part of contexts with a mixture of people both born in Sweden and born abroad. This understanding of integration is consistent with previous research (e.g. Coalter, 2010; Dukic et al., 2017; Rich et al., 2015; Spaaij, 2012; Walseth, 2008).

The leaders in this study considered that the core of their work was to let everybody take part on equal terms, that is, welcome and include all children and young people to the sports club regardless of age, gender, language, religion, ethnicity, sporting ability or previous criminal record. However, the leaders preferred to use the term ‘inclusion’ rather than ‘integration’ because to them, ‘integration’ had strong assimilatory connotations of adaptation to the majority culture. Inclusion, as they used the concept, was about welcoming new participants regardless of background and ability, creating activities where everyone was welcome and lowering thresholds for participation, and this was something the leaders could work with and influence.

Other studies reveal that the local sport and recreation activities in many cases have an assimilatory role when newcomers were expected to fit into existing sports programmes (Ekholm & Dahlstedt, 2017; Forde et al., 2015). The findings in the present study also show that the leaders’ work included interpretation and negotiation of norms and cultural codes in a multicultural and multi-ethnic environment, simultaneously representing and safeguarding fundamental values of the majority society. An example of this was when some parents expressed appreciation for arranging basketball training for girls wearing a hijab, which was a misconception:

Lena: They [the parents] come and say, ‘Oh, how good that you started basketball for girls with hijab’. No, we did not. We fixed an introduction for girls who wanna play basketball, and we will never do anything only for girls who wear the hijab! Our goal is that they eventually will go and practice with other girls in the Arena, but they may like to try it here and feel how it is first. (Interview 3, leader)
The leaders described their work as balancing between listening to and challenging these kinds of perceptions while maintaining that nobody would be excluded because of cultural or religious beliefs. Thus, they were confronted with dilemmas concerning essential values, for example, regarding gender equality or freedom of religion. The general strategy of the leaders was to implement an approach where religion, ethnicity, and gender were secondary identities. The leaders’ primary focus was on unity in the sports activities and the affinity related to it. They emphasised diversity as an institutional value. These findings are in line with Doidge et al.’s (2020) perspective of an active integration - it is crucial to be aware that there are many different groups and identities to which individuals belong and that sports clubs should not make some members, in their case refugees, different from other members of the sports club.

Moreover, conflicting views regarding the rules and procedures for the open sports activities seemed to be a permanent source of debate between the municipality officials and the leaders. The municipality officials wanted to insert certain basic rules. They wanted the participants in the activities to wear sports clothes and, from their point of view, there should not be people in the sports halls who were not leaders or participants. This was very far from the leaders’ views and the actual conditions of the activities. During observations of the open multisport activity sessions, we saw several activities where kids played sports and ‘fooled around’ without formal rules, and not wearing sports clothes. For example, on several occasions, we observed teenage girls wearing long Somali hijabs and skirts and teenage boys in winter boots and winter jackets playing basketball with their friends. Most likely these children would not have been participating in sports activities or socialising with the leaders if rules about sports clothes had been enforced. In this case, the municipality officials seem to have an assimilatory approach (Forde et al., 2015) while the leaders were more understanding of different cultural norms, which Ager and Strang (2008) argue is crucial for social integration.

**Rules and language**

At the same time, ‘integration into sports’ (Agergaard, 2018) also assumes certain assimilatory traits. For example, this was made visible when the leaders emphasised some basic rules: everybody must be quiet before the game starts, everybody must participate in all the activities, such as the start-up gathering and warming up, and the participants must not exhibit disturbing behaviour. The leaders articulated a strong framing of the activities. They also stressed that the multicultural environment poses specific demands on clarity and consistency. Regarding direct questions as to why they so often referred to ‘these kids’ as special and with special needs, the leaders pointed out that many of the youths have a background with difficult experiences that affect their interactions with other youths. Clarifying boundaries and expectations was thus described as a means of socialising the youths to respect themselves and each other, strengthening their social skills and trust.

Lena: But think like this: The children are from war. And with a completely different upbringing, in a completely different country. So, of course, they need a lot, more than the Swedish children need. The Swedes have not experienced this; they have not experienced it. Their mentality is not the same at all. I mean, you need to change all you’ve learned from your upbringing. You’ll change your language, your everyday life …
everything’s going to change. So, of course, they need extra discipline, love, care, knowledge, information, education, everything. (Interview 4, leader)

This quote expresses a paternalist position and the leaders’ strong emphasis on the norm of speaking Swedish can also be understood as an assimilationist approach. However, the emphasis on Swedish was motivated as a way to learn the language, but also to avoid conflicts that could arise if conversations were conducted in languages that not everyone understood. We noticed that when the participants had the choice of creating teams, they tended to group the teams along linguistic and cultural lines, which the leaders sometimes attempted to break, but sometimes let pass. Some of the participants that recently migrated to Sweden said that participating in sports activities had a positive effect on learning Swedish. Research has shown how leisure activities can contribute to better learning of the local language, especially if the language training was connected to goals of participation in meaningful activities (Werge-Olsen & Vik, 2012). During the observations, we noted that it was difficult to follow the rule only to speak Swedish. Participants who had been in Sweden longer served as interpreters and translated when needed. The youths also told us that they sometimes used their native language when quarrelling and did not want the leaders to understand what they said, which we also noticed during the participant observations. When a majority of participants were members of a specific ethnic group, they frequently turned to their native language. On such occasions, the leaders sometimes insisted on Swedish, sometimes not. This inconsistent but pragmatic approach to the language issue illustrates one of the challenges of the practical work of inclusion in sports settings. On the one hand, a common language and a common understanding of the rules of the game are essential in order to participate. On the other hand, the leaders aim to include everyone regardless of their linguistic ability and an underlying assumption was that migrant youths also learn Swedish by being in an environment where the language is spoken and they are forced to communicate in Swedish.

The leaders also indicated that religious expressions, such as praying next to the football court and in this way stressing a Muslim identity, were not acceptable. The multicultural environment meant that the leaders oscillated between the inclusive approach where differences must exist and an attitude where some differences had to be left out of the sport (cf. Brubaker et al., 2004; Harris, 2009). When the leaders try to implement ‘only Swedish’ this can be understood as a way of inhibiting bonding in certain (ethnic/linguistic) groups and at the same time an example of bridging to create a new ‘in-group’ with a sense of belonging in the multicultural neighbourhood, a new ‘we’ (cf. Agergaard, 2018).

**Racism and trust**

Leaders and older participants reported that children and youths in regular football activities often received racist comments from opposing team players, coaches and parents. On some occasions, the leaders had chosen to cancel the match because of this. Some of the participants also testify to how they got negative looks and comments:
Pela: We have coloured players, and they shout such offensive words about the skin colour, and like, put more on the ones who have dark skin and such, they feel this, the girls in the team.

Parwin: You see the looks, when I come to play, you see how some of the audience is watching you, based on my hijab and stuff. So yes, you will always meet this, but just sweep it aside. Don’t give a damn. […]

Pela: When we go and play, that’s … like … you see the looks they give and there you sit, really proud: so check out our team, we have Swedes, we have mixed and good. This is nothing to open your mouth about. This you poke in their eyes, we have mixed, that is, of all kinds of people, of all cultures and we do not care about your comments or what you think. So that’s what I LOVE with the sports club!

Pernilla: And they really stand up for anti-racism and such. If it happens during a match, then you report it directly here to the sports club. There are no … there are no questions about the matter, they report the incident immediately. (Interview 7, participants)

In conversations during the participating observations, participants, just like in the above quote, talked about experiences of racism, but also about how they felt that the sports club was on their side and a safe space, that the leaders considered racism unacceptable. The leaders discussed and reflected on what this does both to children and adults to constantly face this when meeting other teams.

Lena: When the kids run past, they just ‘run your fucking nigger’, ‘Uh, go home again fucking wog’. These words they meet at every match they go to, or they hear it, they give them looks, ah now they come, now they come! And this, this everyday racism, it is very widespread. (Interview 3, leader)

The leaders stated a need for basic values work in children’s and youth sports in general, which means that no child should play football and be exposed to this kind of comment. The older participants also expressed pride and said that they refused to be subdued by racist comments - they have the right to be themselves and this they wanted to convey to the younger children in the community. Racism exists in all societies worldwide and it is a well-established fact that racism is made visible in both elite and leisure-time sports, not least through various types of microaggressions in the form of racist jokes and racial epithets (e.g. Scott, 2015; Spaaij, 2012). Everyday racism is part of a dehumanising process that counteracts all aspects of integration, social connectedness and trust in society. The pride of the multicultural character of the club and neighbourhood articulated by the participants can be understood as a counterstrategy to the racism and prejudice they were subjected to (Love et al., 2019).

**Relationships and safe spaces**

Relationship building emerged as central in what the leaders’ articulated regarding their work. They devoted a significant amount of time, attention, and energy to relationship building, and articulated relationship building as their main tool of inclusion. In concrete terms this was achieved through greeting the youths when they arrived; offering a hug; doing ‘high five’; learning names; asking questions about age, schools, siblings, friends, and interests; inviting participation in the sports activities; and just
having a sit and chat. Some leaders are multilingual or know many phrases in different languages, which they used to establish contact and build trust. To build relationships in a positive environment can help refugees to find a place in the community, socialise and make friends as well as contribute to positive emotions, and to shape a sense of belonging (Doidge et al., 2020). Repeatedly, relationships were articulated in family terms. The leaders stated that they perceived themselves as ‘big sisters’, ‘brothers’, and ‘mothers’ in relation to the participants, and this phenomenon was also mentioned by some of the participants. That is, the leaders were someone to turn to in a crisis, to obtain advice from, or to share thoughts with.

Latif: He himself says that since he began with ‘check in’ as a start-up, talking to the lads before [the training] asking how they are doing during the week, this does… it was a pretty tough team before. And he notices a huge difference in the team, relationally, with these guys. It’s ‘his guys’ now, and they’re more ‘on’. Because he shows that he should not just train them in football and say jump or run, but he actually asks how the week has been and what’s up. And just these small things: that I actually show that I’m interested in how you are. Because I mean, if it’s a mess in … football, there might be a reason for it. Just care! (Interview 1, leader)

As articulated in the quote above, the leaders considered themselves to be leaders who see, meet, raise, and educate the youths, even in areas other than sports. It might be decisive for integrational practices if leaders in sports clubs create a welcoming environment for migrants where the young people can feel safe, included and comfortable (Doidge et al., 2020; Forde et al., 2015). The leaders also considered themselves to be leaders offering pleasant and fun leisure experiences. Both children and youths, girls and boys express the idea that having fun and the social aspects of participating in football or open activities were in the foreground. Competing and achieving results was subordinate to the priority of inclusion, as expressed in the following interview with 14-year-old girls:

Parisa: We have been going bowling because we played a good match. Because it doesn’t matter, we don’t have to win, it depends on how we play. When the other team plays ugly, we don’t have to do the same and win, but it doesn’t matter to us.

Interviewer: Playing yourself a good match, whether you win or lose?

Parisa: You win inside (Interview 5 participant)

Scholars have shown that for most children the reason for participating in sports involves having fun, which is often interpreted as being social and ‘playing’ (Cope et al., 2013). Furthermore, having fun, fellowship and affinity with peers as well as feeling equally welcome can be an essential reason for youths to continue attending their sports clubs (Lindgren et al., 2017).

The leaders also emphasised the effort they put into creating relationships with the parents which affected the preconditions for the participation and their work on values. This is a form of bonding between leaders and young people, and as the leaders moved among many groups and created activities where everyone could participate, their work became a forum for bridging between different groups in the neighbourhood.
Several of the older participants talked about the sports club as a safe space and stressed the multicultural character of the club as positive:

Parwan: We’ve got girls with hijab, we’ve got girls who are blonde and white, we’ve got girls who are Swedes, we’ve got girls who are Arabs, we’ve got girls who are Somalis, we’ve got Turks, we’ve got everything! You know, that’s what I love, I can sit and watch the team and just smile. To view, at practice and just: damn it, this feels safe! So, I don’t think anyone would ever come and feel left out. Like, everyone is welcome the way they are. It doesn’t matter what religion, what colour, what sexual orientation you got! (Interview, 7, participants)

According to this participant, the sports club managed to create an inclusive environment and stated that the multicultural character contributed to feelings of safety. The approach to inclusion expressed can be seen as an example of bridging between different groups (Agergaard, 2018; Walseth, 2008) and creating a sense of belonging through participating and thus becoming part of new social contexts.

The leaders emphasised that their activities could possibly have a linking function for some individuals as the youths could try different activities and through this strengthen their agency and self-efficacy. Thus, some of them may dare to enter other activities outside the neighbourhood (cf. Coalter 2013; Dukic et al., 2017). Whether or not their work and strategies were successful in terms of individuals having more social contact with people living in other parts of the town is not the focus of this study. However, when some of the older participants described their experiences of inclusion in the sports activities, they maintained that being part of the club had contributed to the development of confidence and self-esteem in other social contexts. The leaders’ strategies for strengthening agency and self-efficacy hence seem to be efficacious for at least some of the participants.

Conclusions and implications

This study presents insights into how leaders in a sports club interpret, negotiate and work with the explicit mission to promote integration. The ambitious political goals that underpinned the sports club’s social activities were problematised by the leaders. One of the main conclusions based on the analysis of this study is that the role sport might play in promoting the integration of migrants is unclear and ambiguous. The ambitious goals of the sports club’s social activities, to promote integration and counter segregation, were problematised and negotiated by the club’s leaders. They found that integration was out of reach, as integration was understood as a matter of fundamental economic and social structures in society. They also questioned the idea of integration since they interpreted it as an assimilatory strategy aimed at adapting the diverse minority migrant population in their local community to the majority non-migrant culture in other parts of the municipality. Instead, they emphasised inclusion as their main strategy and goal and distinguished this from the concept of integration.

Inclusion thus appeared as a shared and important value for the leaders we followed, but also for many of the participants. To them, inclusion meant that everyone is welcome, regardless of who you are, and that everyone must be able to take part in equal terms. For the leaders, the strategy of inclusion meant creating a supportive and
safe environment for the participants. Inclusion in this sense is fully in line with the
general values in sports policies and does not differ from the basic principles
demanded by the Swedish Sports Confederation. Thus, as an integration strategy for
sport, it is ‘business as usual’.

But there were specific challenges to the open sports activities. First, open activities
did not require long-term commitment, which made it difficult to maintain continuity
and build long-term relationships. At the same time, the open activities can be seen
as a door opener and a ‘low-threshold’ activity where there are at least some prerequisites
for establishing contact between individuals from different backgrounds, and for
some of the participants, the activities had meant the establishment of new social
relationships and senses of belonging. Second, because the participants did not always
speak Swedish and often grouped along ethnic lines, the ‘only Swedish’-policy, which
according to the municipality’s policy aimed at integration, did not always work very
well. Third, there was a general uncertainty among leaders about how to balance and
negotiate the diversity of identities among participants with the mission to help them
develop a new (Swedish) sports identity. All people have a multitude of identities that
appear distinctly in different contexts. In a democratic and multicultural society, issues
of identity and differences are constantly negotiated – how do we live together as
equals and different? What norms, rules and views do we have to agree on and what
can we agree to disagree about? This dilemma was apparent in the sports
club’s practices.

The inclusive approach in relation to the sports activities meant that potential con-
licts related to ethnicity, religion or social class must be partly put aside. But there is
an obvious paradox in this because while the participants must put aside part of their
identity, the identity offered as the new common and unifying identity-related to
‘Swedishness’ in their new homeland was quite abstract and apart from demands to
speak Swedish and formal rules inserted by the municipality, non-present. Both leaders
and older participants expressed ambivalence when it came to ‘Swedishness’. On the
one hand, they emphasised certain norms as ‘Swedish’ and presented themselves as
representing the Swedish society in relation to new migrants. On the other hand, they
talked about ‘Swedes’ and the Swedish society as something they were not part of.
Instead, they emphasised pride and belonging in a multicultural identity related to the
multi-ethnic and multi-religious neighbourhood.

Our impression is, however, that this ambivalence was a ‘sensitive topic’ that was
only made explicit in interviews and in personal communication with leaders and
older participants during observations. This ambivalence illustrates the segregation of
the community within which the club operates, and it also illustrates a fundamental
challenge in relation to the aspirations of promoting the integration of members of
this community into the Swedish society at large. We believe that it would have been
vital for the leaders and the club to confront this ambivalence and discuss its implica-
tions for the implementation of the municipality’s integration policy. The concept of
integration needs to be unpacked beyond general references to social capital forma-
tion and intercultural understanding in order to gain real substance and meaning. The
responsibility for solving residential segregation and economic inequality is political
and cannot be solved by civil society alone. That said, we argue that the work of this
sports club and their social projects give the youth a meaningful context. It is clear that this work provides these youth affirmative experiences and a sense of pride. In this sense, sports clubs provide constructive development for this community.

Integration must be understood as a reciprocal process that needs time and mutual respect and curiosity. To the extent that civil society is to become more active in contributing to different policy goals, spolicymakers at different levels need to have reasonable expectations of what civil society organisations can achieve. If sports clubs are expected to contribute to the integration of migrants there needs to be a mutual understanding of what is meant with integration and shared strategies for achieving it.

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