Experience of Involvement : a Retrospective Case Study of Supporting the Continuation of Sports Club Participation in Adolescence

Perkinen, Annika

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Experience of involvement - a retrospective case study of supporting the continuation of sports club participation in adolescence

ANNIKA PERKINEN[1], JUHA VALTONEN[2], HEIKKI RUISMÄKI[3]
[1,2,3,]Department of Education, Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, FINLAND

Abstract
Purpose and problem statement: Sports clubs have a positive impact on many children and adolescents, yet teenagers are increasingly quitting their sports club participation when they reach adolescence. The drop-out phenomenon has been widely studied. Conversely, the factors supporting the continuation of the sports club participation have been examined less. Our research question was: How is the experience of involvement related to continuing to participate in sports club activities? In this study, the concept of sports club participation means training in a football team. Involvement, for its part, consists of belongingness, inclusion, and togetherness. *Approach:* Eight female footballers were interviewed in this retrospective case study. Guided by the theoretical background, the classification body of the four components of involvement; communality, creating space for youth voice, participating in a sport that suits oneself, and environmental factors, was formed. The interview material was transcribed and placed in the categories of involvement components according to the content analysis. Consequently, the resulting subcategories were formed and discussed. *Results:* The main results of the research suggest that according to the interviewees, *communality* was built at both the club and the team level and within each adolescent's positive social relationships. *Creating space for youth voice* included the dialogue between the club and the player, the coach and the player and the player's role in the team. The factors that made a *sport suit oneself* were the holistic consideration of the adolescent's life, the experiences of finding one's own place in the sport and the meaningfulness of the sport. The *environmental factors* were linked to the club's structures, and both the location and the costs of the sport. Due to the limited nature of the research data, the results of the study cannot be generalised but can be considered to be indicative. *Conclusions:* Based on the study, involvement could provide a diverse approach to the development of sports clubs. By identifying the factors leading to meaningful sport, and by adapting participation according to the components of involvement, it is possible to motivate adolescents to continue their sports club participation longer, develop the sense of belonging and hence their well-being. Further studies should examine the component of creating space for youth voice in sports clubs, as it has been less studied.
Keywords: **participation, involvement, agency, sports club participation, dropout**

Introduction

Participating in sports club activities is a very typical way of exercising and playing sport in Finnish society: as many as nine out of ten children try sports club activities (Koski, 2012). However, the cessation of sports club participation in adolescence is alarming (e.g., Mathisen et al., 2019). The drop out phenomenon has been identified both nationally and internationally. The reasons associated with quitting sports participation, have been studied extensively (e.g., Crane & Temple, 2014; Deelen et al., 2018; Gonçalves et al., 2011).

In contrast, the continuation of a sports club participation and the factors associated with it have received significantly less attention (e.g., Cope et al., 2013; Jakobsson, 2012; Litchfield & Elliott, 2020). As the activities of sports clubs are quite permeable to age groups, the potential of sports clubs as a factor in increasing children's and adolescents' physical lifestyle is great. Therefore, not only from the point of view of the sports clubs, but also of the individuals' health and the public health, it is very important to find the reasons that engage an adolescent in a sports club (e.g., Mathisen et al., 2019). In some studies, the drop-out phenomenon is explained by a lack of experience of involvement: if an adolescent does not have the opportunity to influence matters related to their own sport, ending their participation may be the only way to show agency (e.g., Evans, 2007; Gretschel & Salmikangas, 2010).

This study is strongly built around the Finnish concept of 'osallisuus', and the English term 'involvement' is used in this paper when referring to it. The concept is challenging not only because of its complexity but also because there is no clear English translation for it. Inter alia, involvement consists of equality, active citizenship, democracy, experience of belonging to a society, being heard and accepted, having a voice and being able to have an influence on things (e.g., Karlsson, 2020; Weckström, 2020). The concept of involvement in the context of this article will be defined in the sections that follow.

Corresponding Author: ANNIKA PERKINEN, E-mail: annika.perkinen@gmail.com

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As stated above, *involvement* can be understood as a personal experience of belonging to something, such as a sports club. An essential feature of involvement is the interpersonal interaction: the feeling of belonging to something arises in the interaction between people (e.g., Allen et al., 2021; Lehto, 2018; Thomas, 2007). In this context, the concept of agency, which is related to the concept of involvement, means resource-bound experience of one's ability to act, have an influence on things and make one's own decisions (Müller-Kuhn et al., 2021). Involvement and agency, on the other hand, can be seen as being interrelated (Karlsson, 2020; Sirkko et al., 2019). An environment built on a democratic and equal foundation forms the basis for involvement (Karlsson, 2020; Scorgie et al., 2019). Involvement has been examined in recent years in studies and reviews related to exercise and sports environments (e.g., Aggerholm & Breivik, 2020; Gretchel & Salmikangas, 2010; King & Church, 2014; Lehto, 2018).

The involvement of children in sports can be examined on the basis of the elements shown in figure I (e.g., Bowers & Green, 2014; Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011; Gretchel & Salmikangas, 2010; Haapala, 2017; Jakobsson, 2012; King & Church, 2014; Lehto, 2018; Sharp et al., 2014).
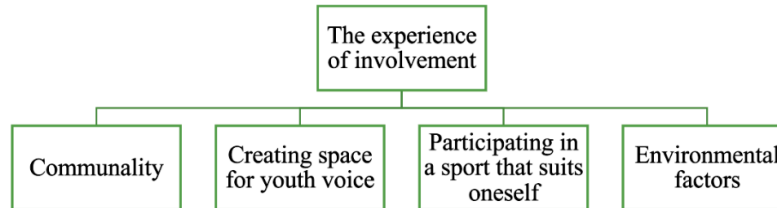

Figure I. Elements of the experience of involvement in sports environments

These factors relevant to the experience of involvement have emerged in several studies, albeit with different emphases (cf. e.g., Bowers & Green, 2014; Gretchel & Salmikangas, 2010).

The importance of *communality* as a factor in strengthening involvement is undeniable (e.g., Karlsson, 2020; King & Church, 2014). A sense of communality arises through people: finding like-minded people and receiving the support and encouragement shared by the community significantly develops a sense of communality (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011; King & Church, 2014). The feeling of involvement is created within positive interpersonal relationships and in a safe community, where everyone can engage in interaction and activities from their own point of view (Lehto, 2018; Zumbrunn et al., 2014). Communality can also be supported by involving all stakeholders in the planning of sports situations, which also promotes positive interaction in the environment and supports social well-being (Haapala, 2017, 46–48). The importance of communality in team sports has been studied extensively (e.g., Cope et al., 2013; Crane & Temple, 2014; Light et al., 2013) and it has a major impact on enthusiasm for training, for example. When a child feels that he or she belongs to a community, such as a sports club, the motivation to participate in the activities of the club and to act in accordance with its rules is easier to find. If a community is not perceived as one's own, commitment to its rules and practices may seem off-putting (Sharp et al., 2014).

Creating space for youth voice is also an important factor in constructing an inclusive practice (e.g., Lehto, 2018; Scorgie et al., 2019). It can be seen in situations in which the opinions and wishes of all concerned are listened to and when the community is open to the ideas of all its members (Haapala, 2017; Zumbrunn et al., 2014). Allowing adolescents to come up with ideas and organise activities in which they are interested supports their agency, sense of communality and involvement (Evans, 2007; James et al., 2018). When devising a new activity, it is essential to keep in mind that everyone is listened to equally - not just by choosing one child to represent all the other children (Karlsson, 2020). It is important to create ways in which everyone can be heard (Gretschel & Salmikangas, 2010).

By recognising children's expertise in matters related to their own lives and letting them speak aloud, such as when planning engaging sports club activities for children, new perspectives might occur (Murray, 2019). However, being heard does not automatically mean getting your will through. Creating space for youth voices in a sports club means that children and youth will also be heard and that their knowledge and opinions will be treated equally (Evans, 2007; Karlsson, 2014).

Participating in a sport that suits oneself. An environment that suits oneself is a place in which an individual can identify that he or she has been considered. When a person recognises an environment as looking like one's own, his or her sense of belonging to it gets stronger. By allowing the members of the sports club choose from a range of activities and by allowing alternative ways of being, the sports clubs can be shaped to look like their members (e.g., Haapala, 2017; Lehto, 2018; Sharp et al., 2014; Gretschel & Salmikangas, 2010). The opportunity to shape a tangible environment also increases the sense of belonging to the location and supports the commitment to community action (King & Church, 2014). A sport can feel like one's own also on the skill level corresponding to the teammates' own skill level (Bowers & Green, 2013). By identifying and supporting issues relevant to adolescents, it is possible to develop other environments – for example sports clubs – to strengthen involvement and agency. When developing an environment and supporting the involvement of youth, it is important to pay attention to the whole. The whole culture and environment must respect and support

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the experience of involvement of all members of the community, so that involvement can occur for all members of the community, not just the most active ones (Thomas, 2007).

Environmental factors. The experience of involvement and an equal environment is also partly built on the impact of practices other than those outlined above. An environment that reinforces the experience of involvement and agency is one that provides resources for action. When sports clubs are developed in collaboration with all stakeholders, and they are developed to look like their users' own clubs, the experiences of involvement and agency in those environments become possible. Environmental factors can be used to enable children and adolescents to play a role in the settings of sports clubs. For example, improving the access to the environments, in this case football pitches, and developing recreational facilities, as well as providing the necessary equipment for the sport will remove obstacles to movement and provide everyone with the resources they need to participate in the sport (James et al., 2018). With such a procedure, the individual's freedom of choice and opportunities for action increase. A strengthened sense of agency, in turn, reinforces the experience of involvement. By taking children's wishes into account in environmental design and providing open environments for all, it can be possible to engage in a variety of inspiring sports (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011; Gretschel & Salmikangas, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to find ways to support the continuation of sports club participation by adolescents. Sports clubs could use the increased understanding while developing their practices to be more important and relevant to children and adolescents, and consequently motivate adolescents to continue their sports club participation for longer. Continuing sports club participation during adolescence has not only physical benefits, but also psychological and social benefits for the individual, in addition to which it is important from the point of view of the public health (Lagestad, 2019).

The research question was: How is the experience of involvement related to continuing to participate in sports club activities?

Material and methods

A research group of eight female footballers was selected for the study with the help of the teams' leaders, who were introduced to the topic of the study. The team leaders distributed a request to the players to register for the study. The participants were from five sports clubs in southern and southwest Finland. They were aged from 22 to 33 years, and they had all started playing football before they turned ten. Everyone had been practising for at least ten years and were playing football in the lower national league levels at the time of the interview.

The research material was acquired through a semi-structured theme interview guided by the four categories of involvement (Table I). The body of the interview was divided into six parts: the interviewee's background information, starting a sport, training in a sports club, continuing the sport, whereas the last part of the interview gave the participants an opportunity to further refine their thoughts on the subject and talk about the topic more freely. Preliminary interview questions were based on previous studies (e.g., Eliasson & Johansson, 2020; Jakobsson et al., 2014; Lehto, 2018), which also facilitated the analysis steps when the answers obtained in the interviews were attached to the theory. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The average length of the recording was about 60 minutes. About 150 pages of text were transcribed (Times New Roman 12 p, line spacing 1.5).

The research material was analysed using theory-driven content analysis in which the analysis starts from the data, but in the background, the theory serves as an aid to the analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In the analysis of the research material, we sought to identify factors related to involvement and the continuation of sports club activities. The analysis process began with getting to know the material and reducing it. Subsequently, the expressions relevant to the research task were marked from the reduced material. The expressions were placed into the four categories of experience of involvement (Figure I). Subsequently, substantially similar expressions were combined, and subcategories were formed for each inclusion component. These subcategories were the answers to the research question.

Results

Each category of the experience of involvement became more precise due to the subcategories in the Table I, explaining the factors affecting participant's decision to continue training.

Table I. Elements of the experience of involvement in a sports club

Communality	Creating space for youth voice	Participating in a sport that suits oneself	Environmental factors
The impact of the club	The dialogue between the club and the player	The holistic consideration of the young person's life	The structures of the club
The impact of the team	The dialogue between the coach and the player	The experience of finding one's own place in the sport	The location of the sport
Social relationships	Player's role in the team	The experience of the meaningfulness of the sport	The costs of the sport

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Communality

Based on the data, three subcategories were formed: the impact of the club, the impact of the team, and social relationships.

At the club level, communality was built on a variety of things: from similar uniformed clothing and the club logo to the fact that members of different teams knew each other and other club members. Half of the interviewees (4/8) said that over time they had ended up organising club activities themselves. One of the interviewees stated that the club's contribution to the players' sense of belonging and community also supported their continued participation. At best, the club may feel like another family: *"... we used the phrase great family when talking about the club".*

The impact of the team in pursuing activities and the interviewees' desire to engage with other people was highlighted in each interview: *"... the best thing is that it is a team sport. After all, I played badminton when I was young, but I chose football because there are those friends and it's a team sport and then if you make a mistake then everyone suffers compared to if you make a mistake alone in badminton."* The team proved to be an essential factor influencing the continuation of the participation, and the teams were perceived as being important communities for the interviewees. In all the interviews, the team and the associated community spirit were elevated to one of the best aspects of playing football. The formation of a community atmosphere was supported by a sense of security, experience of working in the community to achieve common goals, a sense of belonging, the same spirit of community members and equal treatment within the club.

Social relationships also affected perceived communality. In the interviews, parents, siblings, friends, coaches, as well as team leaders and employees in the sports club were mentioned as influencing the continuation of the sports club participation. It was seen in part as an opportunity to meet new people and spend time with friends. The persistence of teams was seen as a contributing factor, while situations in which people changed frequently were identified as challenging situations in terms of continuing the sports club participation.

Creating space for youth voice

The subcategories were the dialogue between the club and the players, the dialogue between the coach and the player, and the player's role in the team.

The dialogue between the club and the players came up in several (6/8) interviews. Influencing the sports club's activities seemed quite difficult from the adolescents' point of view: *"Well, as a youngster, quite often there was a feeling that I would have wanted to influence and give my opinion, but maybe in the past there were no clear ways to do that."* One of the interviewees stated that as an adult player, she would like a firmer link between the adult teams and the club, a contact person that the captain could contact if the team had suggestions for improving the club, for example. In at least some of the clubs, the connection with the club was established mainly through long experience: players who had played at the same club for a long time gradually began to recognise the club members and vice versa, and with that they also made their voices heard in the direction of the club. In the children's and adolescents' teams, similar pathways had not yet emerged - except in situations in which the interviewee's own parent was involved in the club management.

The dialogue between the coach and the player came up in seven of the eight interviews. A well-functioning relationship between the coach and the player was an important factor supporting continuing to play – or leading to quitting – as described by one of the interviewees: "*One of the times that I quit was because of exclusion. I asked my coach, why is this one player sitting on the bench, when she's been at every training session and knows how to play and told him that it isn't about who the best player is, but about who is best suited for that field. So, I obviously crossed my own limit and after that the coach benched me at the beginning of the next game and I noticed that the action was exclusive after that".* On the other hand, one of the interviewees said that the players in the team she coached used to talk to the coaches if one was considering quitting. In such discussions, the coach and the player worked together to consider the reasons for the player's thoughts of quitting. Based on the discussions a break was agreed, but only rarely did anyone actually quit.

The player's role on the team also influenced how much she could get her voice heard. The greater the role the player played, the easier it was for her to have room to express her own opinions. In some interviews (3/8), it emerged that it was more difficult for a shy or a quieter player to express their opinions on team activities. Two of the eight stated that they were shy, especially in their youth, while one of the interviewees stated that she found that although they could and did dare to make an impact, not all of the team members could.

Participating in a sport that suits oneself

The subcategories formed from the material were the holistic consideration of the adolescent's life, the experience of finding one's own place in the sport, and the experience of the meaningfulness of the sport.

The holistic consideration of young life emerged in all interviews as a factor influencing the continuation of the sports club participation. Six of the eight interviewees pointed out that at some point, the sport may have required so much commitment that either the interviewee or one of her teammates had ended up quitting. At that time, the organisation of the sport had taken precedence over the needs of the adolescent: the activities of the team had possibly been developed by the development of the sport and less so than by considering the adolescent's holistic life situation.

Finding one's own place in the sport was strongly related to an adolescent experiencing ownership and a sense of belonging to the team in which they played. Ownership of one's own doing, recognising the work

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undertaken to reach the level that she was at, was also related to participating in a sport that suits oneself. Respondents unanimously expressed that it would be important to be able to offer alternative teams to adolescents, because if there is only one way to play football, it will not serve all the youths. In that case, those adolescents who do not experience the sport as their own may lose interest in it and quit. This could be applied to both the age distribution of the players on the teams and the goals of the teams.

The meaningfulness of the sport also seemed to be an important factor in the continuation of the sports club participation. In seven of the eight interviews, learning and development were mentioned as factors that inspired in the sport. If sports were organised in such a way that individuals received challenges appropriate to their own skill level and thus experiences of success, they saw the sport as an activity that brought content to their own life and developed them: *"... I think that of course, if the skill level is in general much lower than your skill level, it can kill the interest in the sport. Or accordingly, if you experience that you are much weaker than the others, that everything is too hard for you, it can kill the interest as well. You should get to challenge yourself and get feelings of success"*. In more than half (5/8) of the interviews, football was perceived as a very meaningful and addictive sport.

Environmental factors
The data consisted of three sub-categories: the structures, the location, and the costs of the sport.
Different structures at the club level emerged in half of the interviews (4/8) as factors that may contribute to the continuation of sports club participation. Based on the data, these included at least issues related to gender equality at the club, the low threshold to start or continue the sport after the break allowed by the club, club activities being well-organised, the skills of the people in the club and having enough club members.
All the interviewees spoke about the location of the sport. Some (3/8) had lived right next to the playing field, while others (5/8) had lived further away, and had to ask for a ride to training from a parent or another adult or use public transport. In one interview, the interviewee emphasised the location of the training place as an important factor that directly affects the sport: *"... especially as a kid, where you physically have to move from home is quite a big deal. It was very easy for me – my team's training was held near to my home"*.
Money and sports fees as factors influencing an adolescent's hobbies, also emerged in almost all (6/8) of the interviews. In three interviews, interviewees proposed different ways to tackle the challenges of high fees in continuing to participate: various foundations - as well as the sports clubs themselves in some cases - can provide grants, and in addition to that, the clubs may have sibling discounts. Proposals for grants for equipment payments also came to the fore. In one interview, the interviewee stated that she would have been ready for voluntary work if it would have helped to reduce sports fees.

Discussion
The purpose of the study was to find out the connection between the experience of involvement and the continuation of an adolescent's sports club participation. The main results consisted of the subcategories for each category of involvement.

Communality supported the continuation of the participation, which is also in line with previous literature (e.g., Cope et al., 2013; Crane & Temple, 2014; Light et al., 2013). The sense of communality was born firstly with the impact of the sports club. The team's impact on the experience of communality was also great: team sports were considered important because of the community spirit associated with them, in addition to which the team's atmosphere – if it was good – supported the continuation of the sport. The social relationships of the players also played a significant role in whether the players experienced a sense of communality. Both the relationships in the team and the adolescent's other social relationships have been found to have an impact on the continuation of sports club participation (Eliasson & Johansson, 2020; Jakobsson, 2012; James et al., 2018; Litchfield & Elliott, 2020; Skille & Østerås, 2011).

Creating space for youth voice also supported the continuation of the sport. Within the sports club, players' opportunities to use their voices varied and the participants expressed several wishes considering this topic. The process of creating space for the voice of youth could be seen in the dialogue between the club and the players and the coach and the players, as well as in the role of the player in the team. Some participants expressed preferences considering the dialogue between the club and the player: they hoped that the club would consider the wishes of the players and that there would be a clear channel for both adult and junior players to communicate through the club. From the dialogue between the coach and the players, the participants hoped that the coach would listen to the wishes and opinions of the players and that the players would be able to tell the coach about their own thoughts about playing. The interaction between the coach and the players has also been found in previous studies to be related to the decision to continue (Eliasson & Johansson, 2020; Light et al., 2013). The player's role on the team made it possible – or challenging – to use their voice: for example, it was easier to get one's voice heard if one was one of the captains or had a lot of playing experience than what it was for a shy player with less-developed skills. Based on both the interviews and the research literature (e.g., Witt & Dangi, 2018), how much playing time a player gets also influences their enthusiasm to continue playing.

The experience of participating in a sport that suits oneself was built both in holistic consideration of an adolescent's life, finding one's own place in the sport, and in the fact that one felt that the sport was meaningful in one's own life. When a sport is developed with the idea that it supports the young person's life holistically, the

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sport will not become one that forces the adolescent to choose between it or friends. For instance, by considering the training times with the teenager and by hearing her opinions about them, the sport could be in balance with the adolescent's other life as well. Finding one's own place in the sport was strongly related to finding your own team. Crane and Temple (2014) cited as one of the reasons for quitting that the adolescent no longer feels that they can do well in the group in which they participate: in that case, the level of the group is not suitable for that adolescent. The experience of the meaningfulness of the sport can be supported by providing opportunities for the adolescent to have fun, succeed and challenge themselves and develop (Deelen et al., 2018).

The structures of the club, and the location and costs of the sport stood out as features related to the tangible *factors of the environment*. The club's structures included the provision of low-threshold hobbies, the diversity of the coaching culture, the rational organisation of activities and having enough club members, as well as an adequate level of competence amongst the club members. The characteristics of a sports' location that supports the involvement of an adolescent included the adolescent's ability to travel there themselves, the setting and condition of the location, and whether the adolescent spent their free time outside the sport there. Previous studies have established that the location and the condition of the place where the sport takes place have a considerable effect on the continuation of the sports club participation (e.g., James et al., 2018). The costs of the sport were also related to specific environmental factors that could support the adolescent's sports club participation and the experience of involvement, based on research material and research literature (e.g., Jakobsson & Lundvall, 2021; Lagestad, 2019 Rittsteiger, 2021).

In terms of the reliability of the study, it might have been advisable to interview adolescent individuals rather than adults. In the context of this research problem, it would also have been particularly fruitful to have been able to interview a more diverse group of respondents - almost all the interviewees (7/8) had played competitively at a young age, which may have contributed to one-sided results. On the other hand, the factors challenging the results of the study described above can also be seen as supporting each other: since the participants were especially players who had played football for a large part of their lives in adolescence, they still probably remember it well, even though they were now adults. The perspective of the sport increased with age, and this may also have helped some of the interviewees to reflect on their experiences during adolescence. In addition, a thematic interview that allows for a free and conversational tone in an interview situation is well suited to addressing the topic, while also allowing the open and in-depth interview situation.

Based on the results, the experience of involvement can be seen to be related to the continuation of adolescent's sports club participation. By identifying the factors that make activities relevant to adolescents and adapting them accordingly, the adolescent's attachment to a sports club can be supported, a sense of belonging can be developed and thereby the teenagers' well-being can be strengthened. In addition to the reduction in physical activity, Eliasson and Johansson (2020) also emphasised that when a teenager quits her sports club participation, she doesn't get to enjoy the opportunities that the sport brings. In team sports, for example, the social dimension is essential, and it is difficult to substitute such a social environment. In addition to that, in the bigger picture, sports clubs and public health would profit from prolonged participation in sports club activities. Based on the results of the study, the perspective of involvement could well support the development of sports club practices.

Conclusions

The importance of participating in sports club activities is often justified on health grounds, albeit its effects are much more broadly related to general wellbeing. As the last question of the interviews, the participants were asked what playing football had taught them. The responses emphasised the skills needed in life in general: the ability to work as a team and to get along with different people. In addition, some of the participants said how playing football and working for a team had shaped their whole identity and contributed to the kind of person they had grown into, what jobs she had applied for and what skills she possesses. Some of the participants described how sports club participation had developed their ability to tolerate disappointment and reflect on their own actions, increased their self-awareness, and taught them leadership and responsibility. Only a few of the interviewees pointed out that playing football had taught them the sport itself, it goes without saying. Based on the interviews, sports club participation seems to be a holistic thing that affects a person's life and, at best, positively shapes an individual's development. Consequently, sports clubs could also have something to give to those who now end their participation.

These suggestive results may be used when developing a sports club's training and other activities.
The study raised several interesting questions that require closer examination. In particular, the opportunity to continue sports club participation as a question of socio-economic status, gender, and place of residence were topics that were discussed in each interview. In addition, it would be important to examine the theme of creating space for the voice of youth, which has received less attention in previous studies, and the related processes in sports club activities. Many topics related to the theme of creating space for youth voice seemed to challenge participants' thinking and arouse reflection. Could it be that the activities of sports clubs, which rely heavily on tradition and partly on authority, are not seen as a natural place to use one's own voice, as a result of which the topics associated with it seem unfamiliar? A closer look at the subject could provide interesting perspectives on

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how sports clubs could be better developed to support the process of creating space for youths' voice - and thus the continuation of the sport.

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