Rights-based Youth Sport: An Overlooked Area of Importance for Youth Studies

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Participating in organized club sport constitutes a vital part of many young people's lives. This is particularly true in the Nordic countries, where almost all children have spent time in sport clubs at the point of reaching youth (Elofsson et al., 2019; Rask et al., 2020; Strandbu et al., 2017). Sport participation thus plays an important role in making friends and being included in social networks (Strandbu et al., 2016) as well as in the construction of social identity (Ronkainen & Ryba, 2020; Wrang et al, 2023). Being 'good at sport' is also often attributed to high social status among peers, especially for boys (Dalen & Seippel, 2021). In addition, participating in organized club sport involves more than being physically active since, in several respects, the participation will foster young people and shape their opinions, thoughts and normative beliefs also in adulthood (Redelius, 2021).

Even though youth research for decades has explored the significance of subcultural arenas such as street sport activities and their importance in the construction of youth identities (Blackman, 2014; Hodkinson, 2012), less attention has been given to organized club sport within youth studies so far. We believe this is detrimental since research at the intersections of sport sociology and youth studies has much to offer in exploring the full range of young people's everyday lives. Considering the

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vast number of youths taking part in organized sport, developing more knowledge about the conditions they face there and whether they have their rights to participation met is bound to be relevant to everyone interested in youth cultural studies.

Such rights of children and youth are ensured through legislation, for example, in school laws, and curricula in many countries worldwide. However, the everyday lives of many young people also encompass organized activities outside the school domain, which are less regulated. This is especially true for organized youth sport (Agergaard et al., 2024). Compared to school activities; sport is often organized by volunteer leaders and coaches with varying competencies and backgrounds, and participation in sporting communities are typically characterized by shared interests and civic engagement, but also informal leadership structures (Kilger, 2020).

Objectives

This special issue aims to examine rights-related issues in the everyday context of organized youth sport. This is relevant considering the numerous inherent paradoxes in and around youth sport that deserve further, and specific attention.

One is that participation in organized club sport is supposed to be available to everyone in the Nordic countries, while participation in youth sport is also clearly conditional and polarized. Numerous studies show that particularly those with low socio-economic backgrounds, minority ethnic backgrounds, together with disabled youth do not have access to sport to the same extent as others have (Andersen & Bakken, 2018; Elofsson et al., 2019; Rask et al., 2020; Strandbu et al., 2017). While some youth spend almost all their upbringing taking part in sport, others opt out early and some never take part at all.

Another paradox is that, on the one hand, sport is important for socialization processes and the fostering of democratic citizens, and on the other hand, sport tends to be an adult-led activity with little possibilities for young people to influence (Redelius & Eliasson, 2022). The tradition of organizing sport in local clubs has been crucial in the formation of civil society (Goksøyr, 2008; Korsgaard, 1982; Lindroth, 1974), and is still acknowledged by the Nordic nation-states with considerable economic subsidies (Ibsen & Eichberg, 2012; Norberg, 2021). Yet, organized club sport does not seem to have kept pace with modern youth, and the voices of youth are often absent (Eliasson, 2017; Redelius & Eliasson, 2022).

A third paradox is the overwhelmingly positive political and public trust in the normative position of sport as good for society (Krowel et al., 2006), while at the same time, sport has also proved to be an arena for abuse and misconduct (Brackenridge & Rhind, 2014; Donnelly et al., 2014; Fasting et al., 2011). These paradoxes raise questions about the issues at play for organized club sport to meet the rights of young people.

Rights-related Issues

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was launched 25 years ago, and its impact as an instrument to promote rights of children and youth is difficult to overview. The full range of rights stated in UNCRC could be grouped into the three

broad categories—participation, provision and protection (Redelius & Larsson, 2016). The convention states that children and youth are vulnerable and need *protection* (from, e.g., abuse, discrimination and neglect) and have rights to *provision* (of education and health among others). The convention also underlines children and youth as active subjects with the right to be heard and have their voices accounted for in decisions that affect their lives—their right to *participation*.

A review of social scientific work on children's rights points out that attention in scholarly work has been directed towards the rights of autonomous individuals, and a global industry has developed for standard-setting, implementation and monitoring of children's rights (Reynaert et al., 2009). According to the authors, this development has led to a decontextualized understanding of rights that does not consider the variety in children's living conditions, along with the diversity within the group of children, for example, in terms of age, abilities and ethnicities (Reynaert et al., 2009). As such research and work directed towards promoting children's rights have been critiqued for being based in western ideas of white, middle-class children who are trained in negotiating their individual rights of participation rather than conceptualized as rights of groups of children with diverse backgrounds, who do not all have the same access to societal arenas.

While former studies have focused mainly on the rights of autonomous individuals (Reynaert et al., 2009; Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014) studies of rights-related issues in organized club sport may contribute with novel understandings of rights in a community perspective. Through studies of organized youth sport, we may develop insights into rights as a sociocultural phenomenon, since individual children lean into their team, age group and community in sport. Further, studies of sport direct attention to the variety between enacting rights in and to youth sport with universal and targeted approaches. While all children have the same rights, focused efforts may have to be put in place to ensure equitable access to leisure and recreation for children in vulnerable positions (Hjort & Agergaard, 2022).

Content

The articles in this special issue consider young people's rights *in* but also *to* sport. The *rights in sports* manifest in issues such as having your views, welfare and safety considered. Meanwhile, the *rights to sport* are related with having access to recreational activities that are appropriate for you (Agergaard et al., 2024). Thus, this special issue contains papers that describe not only how rights are played out in youth sport but also the options (and barriers) that derive around the current organization of youth sport.

While the importance of youth *participation* is often emphasized, and the significance of involving young people in decision-making processes is acknowledged, various social and cultural factors play a crucial role in young people's opportunities to participate and have their voices heard. Two of the articles in this special issue explore and discuss young people's right to be heard and have their voices accounted for in matters of their concern—their right to *participation:* The study by *Anna-Maria Strittmatter,* Eivind Skille, Cecilia Stenling and Josef Fahlén on organizational culture shows how sport organizations, despite aims to include and empower young people in decision making bodies and processes, are 'othering' the youth.

Youths are given restricted access to real decision-making arenas and young participants in boards experience that their stock of knowledge is not valued.

Furthermore, the article by *Therese Waerner*, Britta Thedin Jakobsson, Karin Morgan and Karin Redelius analyses whether and in what ways young equestrians can make their voices heard. They distinguish between two dimensions of *participation*—social participation (the feeling of belonging to a community) and political participation (experiencing having a voice and being involved in decision-making). They show that political participation depends on the context; young people's possibilities to influence and have a say is more pronounced in private stables than in riding schools; the latter being more adult-led.

The rights to *protection* and how these might be neglected in various ways in sport, is the topic of another two articles. *Inger Eliasson* investigates young people's (12–18-year-olds) and coaches' perspectives on emotional abuse in youth sport. She reveals five different kinds of emotionally abusive interactions in sport, and she also shows that these interactions were not always recognized by coaches as harmful but were sometimes even downplayed. A conclusion is that this could lead to a restricted willingness among children and youth to reveal experiences of emotional abuse or to express their opinions—resulting in a silencing of young people's voices.

Of uttermost concern when it comes to young people's rights of protection is harassment and abuse that can occur in relationships with coaches but is also occurring among peers. *Vidar Stevens'* autoethnographic study contributes with in-depth knowledge of how such harassment and abuse can develop. Anchored in research on harassment and abuse among peers in sport, and with his own diary notes as the empirical data, he gives a thick description of numerous micro-behaviours, group formation processes and shifting norms, which led to sexual abuse. Stevens describes how the locker room can be an area of sexual abuse and gives examples of the toxic masculinity that prevails in some team sports cultures. The article also offers suggestions on how this testimony can help to identify and handle dominant and toxic forms of masculinity when occurring in team sports.

The last article in the special issue by *Georgios Pavlogiannis,* Inger Eliasson and Tor Söderström, contributes with an overview of the existing research on children's rights in sport. Their review of studies on young people's rights in sports includes both studies where the main topic is on children's rights, and studies exploring other topics in youth sports that nevertheless had an indirect focus on children's rights. The review shows that abuse was the most frequent topic in these studies, followed by studies about raising awareness of children's rights and legal topics in youth sport, along with studies depicting consequences of a 'win at all costs-mentality'. The review also reveals that the existing research is mostly descriptive, non-theoretical, derived from a few countries, a limited number of sport disciplines and often describe conditions for children and youth of the same ages. The authors point out that studies with more explanatory and theoretical designs and a clearer, direct focus on children's rights would be beneficial for enhancing general and theoretical understanding of children's rights and associated problems. We are happy to say that the other articles in this special issue contribute in this regard, but the research field could still merit from further studies not only of the range of rights in but also rights to youth sport.

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