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"Just taking part or fully participate with others!?": Social integration of members with disabilities in mainstream sports clubs

"Einfach nur dabei sein – oder gleichberechtigt und wirksam teilnehmen!? Soziale Integration von Menschen mit einer Behinderung in Sportvereinen

Summary: People with disabilities still show lower participation rates in mainstream sports clubs. Even when they are members of mainstream sports clubs, their participation is often limited to structural integration, while broader social integration including cultural and affective dimensions is only partially achieved. Thus, this study analyses the broader extent of social integration of members with disabilities in sports clubs, applying Esser's model of social integration, which is comprised of four dimensions: culturation, interaction, identification, and placement. The article describes multiple case studies conducted with this model on a sample of three mainstream clubs, including 14 members with disabilities. Results show overall high scores on the four dimensions, consequently pointing to effective social integration of members with disabilities. Moreover, the studies also reveal indications of factors that are relevant for social integration. This knowledge is helpful for clubs with regard to managing social integration strategies and practices.

Keywords: disability sports, participation, inclusion, determining factors, multi-level approach

Zusammenfassung: Menschen mit Behinderungen sind nach wie vor in Regelsportvereinen unterrepräsentiert. Selbst wenn sie Vereinsmitglied sind, beschränkt sich ihre Teilnahme oft auf die strukturelle Integration, während eine tiefergehende soziale Integration, die auch kulturell- affektive Dimensionen

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umfasst, nur teilweise erreicht wird. Diesbezüglich analysiert diese Studie das Ausmaß der sozialen Integration von Mitgliedern mit Behinderungen in Sportvereinen, auf der Grundlage von Essers Modell mit den vier Dimensionen Kulturation, Interaktion, Identifikation und Platzierung. Auf der Basis des Modells, wurden qualitative Fallstudien mit14 Mitgliedern mit einer Behinderung von drei Regelsportvereinen durchgeführt. Insgesamt zeigen die Ergebnisse hohe Werte bezüglich den vier Dimensionen, was auf eine tiefergehende soziale Integration von Mitgliedern mit Behinderungen hindeutet. Darüber hinaus konnte auch Einflussfaktoren herausgearbeitet werden, die das Ausmass der sozialen Integration erklären. Dieses Wissen ist hilfreich für Sportvereine bezüglich ihrer Integrationsstrategien und -praktiken.

Schlüsselwörter: Behindertensport, Partizipation, Inklusion, Einfussfaktoren, multi-level Modell

1 Introduction

The engagement of the disabled population in sports is still less than that of the non-disabled population (e.g., Sotiriadou and Wicker 2014; Ullenhag et al. 2012), especially in the organised sports setting (e.g., Breuer and Feiler 2019; Lamprecht et al. 2020). Moreover, people with disabilities are predominantly practising separately in specific disability sports clubs and training groups rather than with others in mainstream sports (Collins and Kay 2014; Patel 2015). Therefore, there are international political claims – particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and the White Paper on Sport by the European Commission (2007) – aiming for persons with disabilities to get access to mainstream sports and to fully participate on an equal basis with others in sporting activities at all levels. For an organized sport such as sports clubs, this concludes that social integration is to consider more than structural integration (Elling et al. 2001), i.e., the mere access to integrative sport by a club's membership and participation in a training group. Effective und fully social integration in the context of disability sport is to also consider, in a deeper context, social-cultural and socio-affective integration apart from structural integration. Similarly, Esser (2009) provided a framework of social integration, largely applied in studies on people with a migration background (e.g., recently by Adler-Zwahlen et al. 2018). According to Esser, fully and effective social integration is comprised of culturation (e.g., the knowledge of a club's norms and values), interaction (e.g., social interaction with other club members), identification (e.g., affiliation

and commitment to the club), and placement (e.g., engagement in a club's policy or service provision).

Regarding these broader concepts, there is also evidence that participation in mainstream sports leads to a deeper social integration, as it provides important social benefits for people with disabilities, for instance, extended participation in other contexts of social life (Kissow 2015) and higher levels of self-esteem and autonomy (Di Palma et al. 2016). In particular, organised sports activities are considered to have a high potential for stimulating social integration (Elling et al. 2001; Kissow 2015; Østerlund and Seippel 2013). Here, with regard to interaction, research showed that people with disabilities participating in mainstream sports clubs gain broad social benefits, as these settings foster their social networks, relationships, and friendships (Albrecht et al. 2019; Carter et al. 2014; Corazza and Dyer 2017; McConkey et al. 2013). Moreover, sports participation with non-disabled players also contributes to personal development, leading to a positive self-perception with enhanced athletic identities and abilities as well as lower stress levels (Crawford et al. 2015; Spencer-Cavaliere and Peers 2011; Radtke 2016). Thus, research indicates that participation in sports clubs apparently strengthens social integration. Yet, Klenk, Albrecht and Nagel (2019) summarize in their review that participation in inclusive mainstream sports clubs does not necessarily lead to stronger social integration, as there is evidence for negative outcomes (e.g., Crawford et al. 2015; Devine and O'Brien 2007) too. Consequently, the contribution of mainstream sports to effective social integration of people with disabilities appears to be contradictory sometimes (Lee et al. 2014) and even has been critically questioned (Coalter 2007). The empirical picture of social integration of people with disabilities in mainstream sports remains complex and rather ambivalent; thus, further research is still needed. For enhancing the existing research, this study pursues the following question: *To what extent are persons with disabilities socially integrated in different forms of inclusive mainstream sports clubs?*

By analysing the broader context by applying Esser's model of social integration, this study provides in-depth knowledge for a comprehensive understanding of social integration. Esser's model permits a systematic and objective analysis; hence, this study provides practical implications by contributing to the often normative and ideologically loaded debate on social integration and inclusion by raising the debate to an evidence-based and rational level.

On the other hand, this study also contributes to research. Applying Esser's model, which has, so far, been applied in migration research, in the context of disability sport seems very fruitful, as it enables direct comparisons of the results between these two groups. Ultimately, this expands and deepens existing research on diversity management in sports clubs when dealing with different member groups.

2 Social integration of people with disabilities in sports clubs as a multi-level process

Social integration is considered a multi-level process comprised of various but interdepending constructs and factors on different levels, which influence the process of social integration. The multilevel approaches used in European sports club research (Nagel et al. 2015) are distinguished between the individual (micro), organisational (meso), and environmental (macro) levels. According to this, a multi-level based model could be developed (see Figure 1) for describing and explaining social integration of people with disabilities in mainstream sports clubs. Basically, social integration in a training group and the club itself is influenced by factors at three levels that can facilitate, hinder, or even impede the integration of members with disabilities.
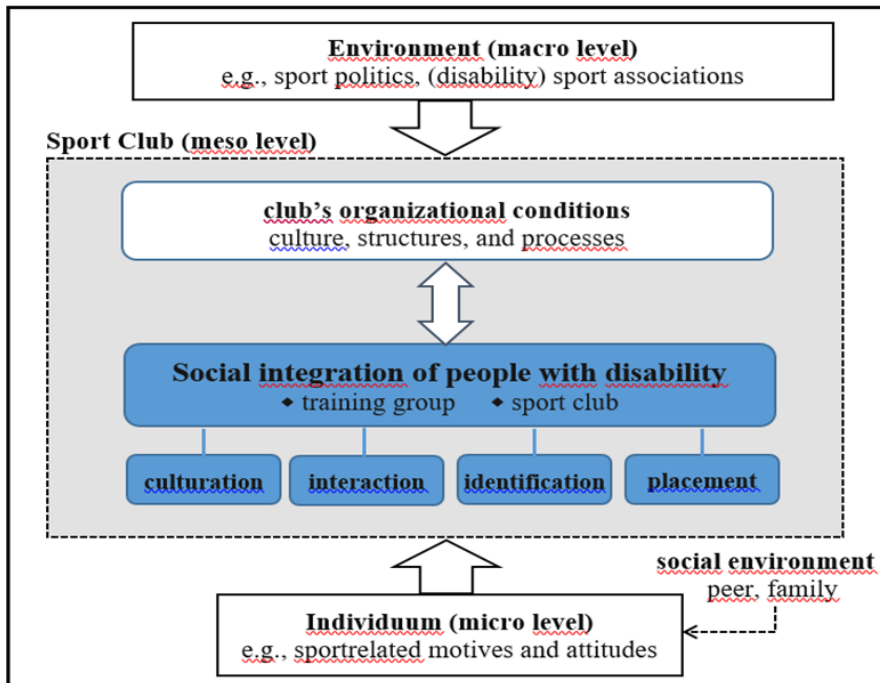

Figure 1: Multi-level model explaining social integration of persons with disabilities in sports clubs.

(i) At the organizational meso-level, the relevant factor refers to the club's specific conditions, such as its culture (e.g., culture of welcome, respect, and appreciation), structures (e.g., specific sport programmes and initiatives), and processes (e.g., establishment of inclusion/diversity management).

(ii) At the macro-level, factors of the club's external environment are taken into account (e.g., legal requirements of national and local sports politics, guidelines of affiliated sports associations).

(iii) At the micro-level, personal conditions of the members with disabilities are critical, such as their respective motives and attitudes toward sports as well as the experienced support of their social environment.

With this model, it becomes apparent that social integration is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. In the following, the four dimensions of social integration, which are the focus of this study, are introduced, while the influencing factors at the micro-, meso-, and macro level are not discussed but are taken up again in the discussion section.

2.1 Dimensions of social integration in sports clubs

Esser (2009) provided a model for social integration that is widely used both within and outside sports science research. Although the focus is on the migration context, it is a general model that seems equally applicable in the context of disability sport. There are several overlaps with Elling's model for disability sport (2001), e.g., the cultural-affective dimension, but Esser offers a more differentiated model that also provides an empirical approach. According to the model of Esser (2009), social integration is comprised of four dimensions (see Figure 2). Fully and effective social integration is then achieved when club members show high levels of culturation of the club's values, interaction with other club members, identification with the club, and placement within the club.
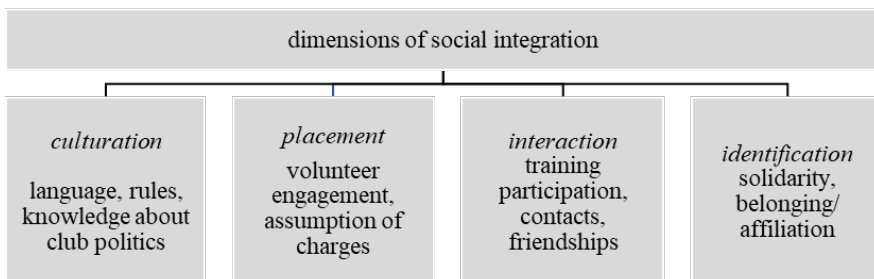

dimensions of social integration

culturation	*placement*	*interaction*	*identification*
language, rules, knowledge about club politics	volunteer engagement, assumption of charges	training participation, contacts, friendships	solidarity, belonging/ affiliation

Figure 2. Dimensions of social integration in sports clubs according to Adler et al. (2018); orginally, Esser (2009).

Culturation includes the acquisition and acceptance of knowledge about existing explicitly-written and implicitly-unwritten values and norms of the clubs (e.g., statutes) and the club's respective established routines and practices (e.g., behaviour rules in a training group). The acquisition does not necessarily mean adoption but also requires the acceptance and respect for alternative and divergent values and identities (pluralism).

Interaction is understood as the establishment and preservation of social contacts, relationships, and networks in attending a club's sports groups or social events. In this context, the quality of social contacts and perceived solidarity is crucial (e.g., no/few conflicts, contacts to other groups, mutual support among members). This dimension includes both the quality of the relationships within the club and contact with other club members outside of the club.

Identification refers to the emotional devotion by loyalty to a social system or group that is considered supportive for long-term membership and volunteer engagement. Thus, identification comprises the affiliation and commitment to the club (e.g., fan ship and supporter, attending a club's social events). It involves having pride in belonging to a club, emotional connectedness, and the sense of belonging to the club.

Placement means the assumption of rights and duties as well as the filling of positions, including voluntary work and active participation in voting, for example, in the club's general assembly. It includes whether members are interested in the planning of the management of the club, taking part in discussions about club affairs with other members, and contributing their ideas to the club.

There have been various recent studies applying Esser's model to focus on social integration on members with a migration background, delivering empirical evidence of social integration (e.g., Adler Zwahlen et al. 2018; Schlesinger et al. 2019).

Regarding the culturation dimension, Kleindienst-Cachay, (2007) reports a "de-dramatisation" of cultural difference in that commonalities in everyday cultural practices are developed through the acquisition of culture-specific knowledge. Herzog et al. (2009) observed that language acquisition was supported. With respect to the interaction dimension, Herzog et al. (2009) and Mutz (2012) showed that young people with a migration background gained more inter-ethnic contacts and friendships with peers by their club membership and, moreover, could also establish contacts with club members outside the sports club. Ultimately, this also affects their club's identification, as the extended contacts and interactions led to a reduction in feelings of foreignness and distance, which, therefore, led to feelings of acceptance and belonging to the club. For the placement dimension, Nobis (2011) observed that club members with a migration background are more politically interested in the club's politics and are less politically

alienated. Furthermore, members with a club's volunteer engagement also do voluntary activities in their respective community and neighbourhoods (e.g., translation services, event organisation) and, therefore, are more strongly networked outside the club.

For the disability sport, comprehensive empirical research exists above all on the social interaction and identification dimension. Klenk et al. (2019) revealed in their literature review that participation in sports clubs can contribute to an enhancement in the social contacts, interactions, and friendships of people with different forms of disabilities; however, the benefits are received more frequently and stronger for disabled peers in a separated setting than for nondisabled peers in an inclusive setting. A comprehensive empirical picture of the different dimensions of social integration in the context of disability sport is still lacking; therefore, this study aims to contribute to this topic.

3 Methodological approach

To comprehensively analyse the dimensions of social integration of members with disabilities in sports clubs, we conducted a multiple qualitative case study in three sports clubs in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. Data were collected on the meso level of sports clubs and training groups as well as on the micro level of participants with a triangulation of methods and data sources (Yin 2018).

Regarding the disability sport structure in Switzerland (Albrecht et al. 2019), disability sport is mainly separated from mainstream sport, with various disability sports federations and institutions offering sport programmes for different disability forms, mostly focusing on one form, either physical/visual or intellectual/cognitive disabilities. With the ratification of the UN CRDP and following national legislations, there is a clear tendency towards inclusive mainstream sport. Currently, every fifth mainstream sport club offers sports for people with disabilities. Some of them attract specific public attention by acting as regional pioneers, including the selected cases.

3.1 Selected cases: Sports clubs, training groups, and participants

Elling et al. (2001) differentiated four stages of structural integration: minimal integration (e.g., members with disabilities practicing sports in an informal group

and hardly mingling within the club), organisational integration (e.g., mainstream sports clubs have a special division for members with disabilities), direct integration (e.g., teams or groups consist of both abled and disabled persons as well as representing other social groups), competitive integration (e.g., disabled sports teams participating in open competitions), and inverse/reverse integration (e.g., abled persons participating in a minority sport group of members with disabilities). Based on these stages of structural integration, three different integrative disability sport groups with different forms of disability (e.g., intellectual, physical, visual) were selected theoretically to capture and compare the variety of the disability sport structure (see principle of case selection; Yin 2018).

The three cases reflect a diverse and purposive sample comprising 14 participants, with 10 of them having different forms of disabilities (see Table 1).

- *Case 1: Special football training group (organisational integration)*
  The mainstream (premier league) club offers biweekly special training for children and adolescents with disabilities from special needs schools as well as for young refugees. The selected group comprises 20 persons with intellectual and multiple disabilities. Generally, the two offered training groups are open to all persons (with a focus on beginners), but so far, the training remains mostly separated, comprising the persons with disabilities and refugees.
- *Case 2: Track and field sports club (competitive integration)*
  In a performance-oriented track and field club, one training group is open to participants with disabilities, competing in both Paralympic sports competitions at the international level as well as in mainstream competitions at the national level. The selected training group comprises mostly non-disabled athletes and two athletes with physical and visual constraints. Practices occur three times per week, and most of the group members practice more individually or in other training groups.
- *Case 3: Goalball club (reverse integration)*
  In this case, sighted people participate in a disability sport goalball team for blind people that is specifically for people with visual impairments. The selected training group comprises three participants with visual impairments. The club is open to both persons with and without disabilities, focusing on beginners as well as advanced athletes. Practices take place once a week in a gym focusing on competition preparation.

Because the setting matters (Klenk et al. 2019; Østerlund et al. 2014; Østerlund and Seippe 2013; Schlesinger and Nagel 2015), different results for the cases are to be expected, which makes a comparison useful.

Table 1: Selection and composition of the sample.

Case / setting	Club size: members/with disabilities (N)	Training groups/with members with disabilities (N)	Head coaches + assistant coaches (N)	Participants (N, gender, age)	Disability forms	Interviewed participants (age, sex, disability)
1 Football group (intellectual disabilities and refugees) (*organisational integration*)	Stock corporation: membership numbers not available / 20	13 / 2	1 (nd) +2 (nd) Interview: 65 min	20 wd (16 m, 4 f; 10–16 y) + refugees	id, md	1 (f, 13, id) 2 (f, 12, id) 3 (m, 11 id) 4 (m, 11, id) 5 (m, 10, id) 6 (m, 9, id) Interview: 26 min in total
2 Track & field group (physical disabilities and non-disabled) (competitive integration)	350 / 2	15 / 1	1 (nd) Interview: 40 min	13 (6 m, 7 f; 13 – 25 y), thereof, 2 wd + 1st generation migrant	pd, vi	7 (f, 24, pd) 8 (m, 25, vi) Interview: 53 min in total
3 Goalball group (visual impairment and non-disabled) (inverse/reverse integration)	56 / 4	2 / 2	2 (nd, vi) + several players that act as assistant coaches (nd, vi) Interview: 25 min	15 (10 m, 5 f; 12 - 53 y), thereof, 3 wd	vi	9 (f, 50, vi) 10 (m, 36, nd) 11 (m, 12, nd) 12 (m, 16, nd) 13 (m, 52, vi) 14 (f, 20, nd) Interview: 65 min in total

f: female; id: intellectual disability; m: male; md: multiple disabilities; nd: no disability; pd: physical disability; vi: visual impairment; wd: with a disability; y: years

3.2 Data collection

We applied multiple qualitative instruments, document analyses, observations, and interviews, to gain a comprehensive picture of the cases (Flick 2011). The instruments were developed theory guided according to Esser's model based on the questionnaire of Adler et al. (2018).

- Primarily, we *analysed documents* on the club level (e.g., club's vision, culture, and sport offerings) and detailed information on the group level provided by the trainers (e.g., participants' age, form of disability, training's objective and programme).
- Afterwards, we carried out *non-participant observations* of training sessions with an observation protocol focusing on social interactions and relationships of the participants, the implementation of the training, particularities of the sports practice of participants with disabilities, the sports infrastructure, and the presence of family, friends and/or caregivers.
- Directly after observing the training sessions, *semi-structured interviews with the head coaches* were conducted to gain further knowledge about the respective sports clubs and training groups and to reflect on the non-participant observations. The interview guide consisted of questions on access and inclusion of athletes with and without disabilities in the group and the club (e.g., How did access and integration into the group go? Who adapted? Were specific measures undertaken?), on the training design (e.g., What do you use as a guideline for planning and conducting the training? What is special in planning for this group? What are challenges and problems?), as well as on support services, cooperation, and information exchange (e.g., Is there special support for this group? To what extent are the parents involved? Do external co-operations exist?).
- Finally, *focus group interviews* on social integration with two to three participants were conducted. Whereas the document analyses, observation, and coach interviews seek to gain knowledge on the club's and group's context, the interview questions with the participants focused on the four dimensions of social integration, i.e., focusing on culturation (e.g., knowledge of the club's goals and programme and its values, standards and manners), interaction (e.g., contacts and friendships with other club members inside and outside the club, given and received social support), identification (e.g., sense of belonging, social acceptance, and well-being in the club and training group), and placement (e.g., volunteer engagement, assumption of club and group tasks).

We conducted all the interviews in the respective sports facilities (e.g., changing room in a gym), which were familiar to the interviewees (coaches and participants), to guarantee a pleasant atmosphere. The interviews were audiotaped and fully transcribed. The interviews with the head coaches varied from 20 to 50 min, and no specific adjustments were necessary due to the fact that all coaches are not disabled.

The group interviews with the participants differed. For cases 2 and 3, the interviews were longer (53 and 65 min), as no specific adaptations were necessary because the interviewees had physical impairments (pd, vi) and were in their adolescence. In contrast, the interview for case 1 was kept short (26 min), as the interviewees were in their early adolescence and had intellectual impairments. Thus, specific adaptations had to be made by simplification of the questions in terms of content and language (easy and visual language with much more narrative parts).

3.3 Data analysis

The data were analysed by applying a thematic analysis with a semantic focus according to Braun and Clarke (2016). For the deductive category application, a code plan was created according to the theory-based interview guides and the observation protocol. However, the research process was quite flexible and open so that additional categories were added inductively to the code plan during the encoding process and categories were revised during coding for their reliability in naming relevant factors for social integration, describing characteristics, and recognizing patterns (Braun et al. 2016).

For intersubjective traceability (Steinke 2015) from a constructivist perspective, every transcript was analysed by two coders of the research team independently and then compared afterwards. For consensual coding, differences were discussed, and in difficult cases, a third researcher was consulted.

For the data analysis, a data triangulation was applied (Flick 2010; Yin 2018) in order to correlate the contextual data on clubs and groups with the data on social integration. For this purpose, all gathered qualitative data were integrated into a single analysis instrument (we used Atlas.ti ™ software) that allows for a common and cross-coding of the three data types (document, observation, and interviews). For example, all text passages on the dimension "placement" were identified and summarised by applying the Mayring and Fenzl (2019) three-step content analysis approach and subsequently interpreted by adding the respective and relevant context data where relevant.

4 Results

The results of the triangulation of the document, observation, and interview data are presented in an integrated manner all at once, theoretically guided by the four dimensions of Esser's model with a focus on the participants' interview data. The three cases will be compared with each other; because the cases differ in their settings, different results are to be expected. In the data analysis, the three case studies were each considered separately, but because of the limited space in a journal article, the results of the cases are presented in a compact comparative form. The differences and particularities of the three cases are highlighted, but commonalities of the three cases are also discussed.

4.1 Culturation

The analysis reveals that the form of disability affects culturation much more than the setting. Results show that older participants with physical disabilities and visual impairment (case 2: inclusive track and field group; case 3: reverse integrative goalball group) have *knowledge of a club's values* and, accordingly, behave according to the club's explicit and implicit values and norms (e.g., mutual respect and tolerance, consideration for each other, responsibility and collegiality), resulting in *rules and standard-compliant behaviour* being exhibited that applied for the group.

> "[Regarding the club culture] In any case, the first thing is respect for each other, [...] and openness. [...] It [what happens in the association] is actually always quite comprehensible." (Case 3, participant 9)
> "Tolerance that is also visible in training. I also believe that reliability and a sense of responsibility are important. [...] And what is very much cultivated is collegiality [and] consideration for each other, that is simply done." (Case 3, participants 13 and 14)

In contrast, younger participants with intellectual disabilities (case 1: inclusive football group) show knowledge of values and respectful behaviour to a lesser extent, and their knowledge is mostly on explicit rules. Noncompliant behaviour mostly arising from single participants disturbs the group, as the training sessions have to be disrupted.

> "Yes [there are rules we follow in training], for example we are not allowed to insult each other, the coach said. [...] I already stick to it, but the others [two other boys] [don't] ... [and] sometimes there are arguments because of the rules." (Case 1, participants 1 and 2)

In case 1, the participants' understanding is mainly on group and training procedures, whereas there is a marginal *understanding of club procedures*, though most of them are not very interested in club politics. Instead, their coaches are responsible for all the decisions, which is also fine for the participants. If they have problems or are unsatisfied, they would consult either their coaches or their teachers.

> "It [decisions of the club] doesn't interest. [...] It [decisions about training] is all made by the coach. [...] [Because I, however,] didn't understand so much, I always asked [the trainer or the teacher]." (Case 1, participants 1 and 2)

Against this, participants in case 2 and 3 have a more profound *understanding of club procedures*, as the clubs are quite small, and they have close contact with club officials and coaches outside of training sessions (e.g., in informal gatherings or via social media). This understanding and contact allows them to bring in their ideas and positions into the group's and club's *decision making-process*.

> "There is always the possibility to ask [about club politics and decisions]. Whether in person here at training [...] or via chat. You can actually tell the board directly if something is wrong or if you have an idea." (Case 3, participant 11)

4.2 Placement

For placement, the participants' *interest in the club's policy* is relevant. Most participants with disabilities in case 3 are generally interested in the club's policies; this applies logically to the participants engaged as board members, in particular. The participants do not often discuss club matters with other members because they do not see the need as *"it just works out"* (Case, 3, participant 12), which reflects a basic satisfaction with the club's policy. Participants in case 2 are also interested in the club's policy, but the contact person is missing here, as they *"do not know who to talk to"* (Case 2, participant 7). Most participants in case 2 and 3 attend the club's general assembly regularly, while participants in case 1 show little interest in the club's policy and do not participate in the club's general assembly. This is probably because it is a professional football club where the focus of the assembly's agenda is on running the professional league and not on the participants' training group.

An additional essential aspect for the club's placement is the *volunteer engagement*. Here, results show that the volunteer engagement of participants in case 3 is quite high (promoted and encouraged by the club), assuming different posts (e.g., material keeper, caterer, auditor, coach/referee, and board members). The voluntary work not only brings them into a position to influence the club's

decision-making but also leads to a deeper integration into the broader context of the clubs by obtaining a deeper understanding of club culture, structure, and processes as well as getting in contact with other club members.

> "We are actually already relatively strongly involved and engaged in the club [...] you do what you can." (Case 3, participant 10)
> "As a board member, I do feel the motivation [...] and then I like to help. [...] And therefore, identification is there in our club. [Besides, the engagement]
> bring the network and knowledge with."(Case 3, participant 13)

The extent of volunteering may be triggered by the membership fees, as they can be waived through voluntary or assistance hours. In contrast, for all active members in case 2, the membership fees are mandatory, which may be a reason for the lower volunteer level of the participants. The club encourages the participants to pursue further education (e.g., to become a coach), but the participants do not take this opportunity due to lack of time.

In case 1, the offered trainings are free to the participants and no club membership fee needs to be paid, but donations are welcome. Participants are encouraged to volunteer on the match days of the professional football team (e.g., ticket sale, catering), though they do not take up this offer nor do they volunteer in any other way in the club. That may also reflect the above stated low interest in the club's policy.

4.3 Interaction

Participants of the three cases show different experiences regarding the *establishment and preservation of contacts and friendships* within their groups. Participants in cases 2 and 3 have lively contact among each other and close friendships within and outside the training group, whereas the contacts among participants in case 2 outside the club is mostly digital (e.g., via WhatsApp) and the participants in case 3 seek real-life contact with a meeting after every training session for a joint dinner and occasionally meet each other in their everyday life. The latter is essential to build and maintain the contacts and friendships. Participants in case 2 show stronger friendships than those in case 3. Apparently, the common focus on performance and competition fostered stronger relationships within the group (bonding) and *"even the training camp is always very social"* (Case 2, athlete 7). As the club is rather small, there are also relationships between the club's training groups; thus, the participants in case 2 are also in regular contact with other club members and are appreciative of that.

> "I like the social aspects very much, that we meet people from different training groups ...,
> that we have contact with them, that the people on the sports ground know you. Well, in
> bigger clubs, everyone makes their own thing and here everyone speaks with each other."
> (Case 2, participant 8)

In contrast, participants in case 1 have lively contact with each other in the training sessions and are about building relationships, but so far, have not established friendships. Relationships exist with a select few other team members, for instance, the girls seek contact with other girls, while other children prefer contact with the coaches and assistant coaches. One participant mentioned sometimes being treated as an outsider by the team members in situations when *"they have a match and they're losing"* (Case, 1, participant 6).

Overall, the contacts of the participants in case 1 seem to be limited to the training sessions, as they do not have contact among each other outside of the club. Moreover, there are no relationships and friendships with the refugees (who are also part of the training group), as there are few opportunities for contacts due to the heterogeneous performance level. Broader contact with other club members and fans beside the training sessions and competitions is very limited due to the fact that it is a professional football club and the occasions for the participants to get in contact are restricted. Although few friendships in case 1 exist, there is strong *mutual respect and appreciation* among the participants with disabilities, as they show consideration to and support each other; this also applies between the intellectually disabled and the non-disabled refugees.

> "This is completely different from normal football players–much more caring. [...] The big
> ones takes care of the little ones. To observe this is a very special situation. Sometimes it's
> rough the way some people talk [...] in the contact, they are very caring with each other."
> (Case 1, coach)

In case 2, mutual respect and acceptance is there too. Interestingly, although close friendship and open atmosphere were stated, there are communication taboos with neuralgic issues (e.g., the disability itself) that are bypassed.

> "There is [...] a cautious distance when it comes to the topic of the disability itself. You don't
> ask everything. And she [participant 7] won't say everything either." (Case 2, coach)

Acceptance seems to decrease outside the group, as the coaches of other training groups may not be as positive about the integration of people with disabilities and, therefore, show reticence.

Participants in case 3 show mutual respect and acceptance among each other. All participants were treated equally by the coach, which the visually impaired participants appreciated.

"I like that we are all coached in the same way and he [coach] doesn't say you can take one more break than the others or something like that. I must train just as hard. I like that, that's very positive." (Case 3, participant 8).

But this picture is reversed outside the group. The participants experience disrespect from other teams when competing, especially when they are stronger than the other team. They are blamed for having an unfair advantage because they have members without disabilities on their team.

"It's interesting what our club experiences, how we immerse ourselves in the blind [sport] scene. [...] Normally, it's blind and visually impaired people and very few sighted people who play. And [...] the integration is quite good up to a certain point. Suddenly, when good player come, [...] then the desire for integration stops. [...] Because then they say we have a sporting advantage." (Case 3, participants 10 and 14)

Interaction is not limited to the interaction between participants but also to the interaction between the participants and their social environment. In case 1, the children with intellectual disabilities receive strong *social support* from their teachers and caregivers. They accompany most of the children to the training sessions, motivating them and being proud of their participation.

"Yes [we are supported by family and friends]. There are also colleagues from school and parents, actually everyone you know, who think it's great [that they go to training]." (Case 1, participant 4)

In case 2, the two athletes with disabilities receive support from their non-disabled teammates who help them with rides to the training and the competitions. The social support from teammates also takes place outside the sports field in their everyday life and increases over time due to their successful performance.

"Well, I already knew a few people in the club. Most of them [...] of the goalball team. [We keep in touch] by e-mail, or we meet up when we're in the region. [...] We all know each other quite well and also have contact in our other lives, apart from goalball." (Case 3, participant 10)

In case 3, due to their age and slight disability, the visually challenged participants are widely autonomous and organise the transportation to the trainings themselves, mainly by public transportation. Most of the participants' social networks (e.g., family members, friends) give support at competitions and tournaments on the weekends (e.g., timekeeper, goal judge, transportation).

4.4 Identification

For the participants in case 3, the *club is of great importance*, as it gives meaning to their leisure time. All participants are very *proud to belong to the club*, as they feel socio-emotional attachment to the club.

> "The club is quite close to me. [...] It is like the members of the goalball club are an extended family to me." (Case 3, participant 9)

This is also expressed by the fact that the participants are very proud to *wear the club clothing* at matches.

> "We have some identification options. Let's talk about the green colour [of the team shirt]. Because when we went to a tournament for the first time, [...] we wanted a uniform." (Case 3, participant 13)

One participant even wears the team shirt very often outside the club *"at school, whenever [...] [I] put it on"* (Case 3, participant 11). Besides the shirt, the team even has *"a club song that [they] sing [...] to develop a certain sense of togetherness"* (Case 3, participant 13). Overall, this seems to foster the social interaction and cohesion within the group.

For participants in case 2, pride in belonging to the club is observed too.

> "It is a very familiar club, though it is a high-performance club. Even though it is small, we have some top athletes, and therefore, I am, in any case, proud that I am in this club." (Case 2, participant 7)

Compared to case 3, the identification is less strong. At matches, they (are obligated to) wear the club outfit to represent the club. The wearing is considered rather functional and less a symbol for identification: *"Sometimes like that, sometimes like that, that is, what has just been washed and is at the top"* (Case 2, participant 7).

The importance of the club is assessed rather from a functional perspective too, as the club with its infrastructure is seen as critical for their sporting success.

> "It [the club] certainly creates the basis for success, with the coaches, with the infrastructure, with the team colleagues, with the other training groups, which have also become friends in the meantime." (Case 2, participant 8)

With the latter, the athletes also do recognize the socio-emotional aspect of a club's affiliation by building friendship. The motives of sport performance and success dominate, as the athletes would switch if the club disappointed them in developing their performance.

Basically, for the participants in case 1, the sports activity is very important, whereas the club itself seems to not be of significant importance, reflecting once again the low interest in the club's policy. However, the participants express their identification by calling themselves fans of the club. They are very proud to belong to the club, as they can practice in the stadium where the professional team has its matches.

> "I think the players are very great as is the stadium. And it's also great that we can even be here in the club and play here." (Case 1, participant 3)

In addition, the feeling of belonging to the club is fostered by participating as a team in competitions for the club (e.g., in a national football tournament held by Special Olympic Switzerland two to three times a year) and wearing the club clothing, reflecting its unique colours.

5 Discussion

Albrecht et al. (2019) provided representative national data for Switzerland showing that people with disabilities seem well integrated in mainstream sports clubs. At first glance, this current study coincides with this statement, as at least a considerable level of social integration was reported for all four dimensions, culturation, placement, interaction, and identification. Upon closer inspection, the case study design leads to deeper insights on social integration in integrative and inclusive disability sport in Switzerland, exemplified by the three selected cases of the German-part of Switzerland.

Applying Esser's model seems to be a fruitful approach, as with the four dimensions, a more differentiated picture of the level and quality of integration could be provided. Moreover, this study demonstrates that Esser's model could be successfully transferred to the context of the disability sport; thus, this study also makes a theoretical contribution to research on social integration.

Content analysis reveals that culturation will be facilitated by knowledge of values and understanding of club procedures, rules, and norms. Placement is fostered by voluntary engagement and interest in the club's policies. Identification includes aspects such as the importance of the club and the pride in belonging to the club. Interaction manifests in social contacts inside the training group and the club as well as outside and, moreover, in mutual respect and acceptance as well as in establishing and preserving friendships. As the level of social integration, (regarding the four dimensions) differs between the analysed cases, with this study, it becomes apparent that the social integration in mainstream sports

depends on the form of disability (physical vs. intellectual) and the setting (organisational, competitive, reverse integration), which, therefore, has to be taken into account.

Results show that participants with (slight) physical disabilities and visual impairments of the track-and-field group (case 2: competitive integration setting) and participants with visual impairments of the goalball group (case 3: reverse integration setting) show a high(er) level of social integration than participants with intellectual disabilities (case 1). Although performance sport is often considered a barrier to inclusion (e.g., Jaarsma et al. 2014; Kitchin and Howe 2014), our results contrast with this statement and underlines the fact that competitive sports can also facilitate and foster social integration, coinciding with the conclusions of Elling and Claringbould (2005), Østerlund et al. (2014), and Schlesinger and Nagel (2015). Besides performance sport, the volunteer engagement seems to be a decisive facilitator, as it enables a closer contact with other club members in the club, gaining deeper insights into the club's politics and its respective influence that, consequently, leads to a deeper identification with the club (see Putnam, 2001). Because the volunteer engagement of the participants in case 3 is the strongest, that may explain their higher level of social integration compared to those of the participants in case 2 (with less volunteer engagement).

In contrast, participants with intellectual disabilities in the inclusive football group (case 1: organisational integration setting) show a lower level of social integration compared to the participants with physical disabilities and visual impairments (case 2 and 3); that applies for all four dimensions of integration. This coincides with the study by Sørensen and Kahrs (2006), who pointed out that "those with greater needs for support and resources will not be able to adopt the practices and values of able-bodied sport and therefore have fewer opportunities to participate" (p. 199). This indicates that people with intellectual disabilities (and with multiple and severe disabilities) are still confronted with assimilative clubs' practice. To avoid failing to get access to the club and, therefore, experiencing exclusion, as Jeanes et al. (2018) and Patel (2015) reported, the initiative for joining a training group and to feel socially integrated and accepted has to come mostly from the people with (intellectual) disabilities themselves.

5.1 Factors influencing social integration

With the results differing between the three selected cases, this study clearly indicates that social integration is influenced by contextual factors such as the form of disability and the club's setting. Therefore, the specific findings of each of the three cases will be discussed in the light of existing literature.

Generally, factors that hinder the club's organisational meso-level are inaccessible infrastructure, inadequate sports materials, transport difficulties, lack of financial resources, high costs, and lack of specific sports opportunities and physical activity programmes (Becker and Anneken 2013; Cunningham 2011; Jaarsma et al. 2014; Kitchin and Howe 2014; Shields et al. 2012; Shields and Synnot 2014; Wicker and Breuer 2014). These factors are considered with regard to getting access to a club and into a training group, which refer to structural integration. These factors also influence social integration too, such as people with intellectual disabilities participating in special trainings offered by a professional football club (case 1) who are socially integrated to some extent, in particular with regard to the dimension interaction and culturation (Albrecht et al. 2019). Furthermore, albeit with a negative connotation, participants with physical disabilities in competitive sports (case 2) stated that the club's provision of sport infrastructure, material, and training opportunities is critical for their club affiliation; otherwise, they would leave the club.

A decisive factor in social integration is the organisational identity of sports clubs, i.e., the club's culture, vision, and structures (Agergaard and Sørensen 2010; Stenling and Fahlén 2016; Skille 2011). Regarding the club vision and structures, our study contradicts the findings of Wicker et al. (2014) that smaller clubs are less likely to integrate people with disabilities, as cases 2 and 3 represent two rather small clubs. Our results are much more in line with the study by Kitchin and Crossin (2018), who pointed out that the brand and the size of the organisation assisted its integrative capacity. Accordingly, these clubs are specific and could be considered as regional pioneers. The professional football club (case 1) has explicitly established these special trainings to promote diversity, which is part of the club's corporate social responsibility management (CSR). Similarly, (inverse) integration reflects the vision of the goalball club (case 3), and it was explicitly declared as a club goal. These two clubs seems to pursue and run a strategic and systematic diversity management. In contrast, for the track-and-field-club (case 2), such an approach could not be identified, which supports the assumption by Spaaij et al. (2018) that diversity management in sports organisations is rather disorganised and accidental.

A crucial factor facilitating social integration is the club culture that comprises, for instance, a club's openness to disabled members and an atmosphere of being welcomed and equally accepted. This was observed for the participants in case 1, who perceived in their training group an atmosphere of welcome and acceptance and togetherness. Also, the coaches' attitudes and practises were unquestioned by the participants, which Townsend et al. (2018) reported too. Besides this case, a general club's reality seems different, with Ives et al. (2019) pointing to the fact that participation was hampered by preconceived images of

sports as competitive and judgmental and anxieties about sporting abilities. More specifically, Hammond et al. (2019) revealed that coaches replicate and reproduce elitist and ableist assumptions, questioning the capacity of the disabled to fully participate. This is evident in this study too, as shown in the competitive track-and-field club (case 2), in which the two participants with physical disabilities felt that some of the other coaches of the club may not be thinking as positively about the integration of people with disabilities and showing reticence towards them. This may not necessarily demonstrate a negative attitude towards disabled people, but the reticence can also be due to the insecurity and fear of contact (Becker and Anneken 2013; Jaarsma et al. 2015). Contrastingly, negative attitudes are obvious with regard to the disrespect from others teams when competing that is experienced by the participants with visual impairments of the reversed integrated goalball team (case 3). The integration of players without disabilities is assumed by others to not correspond to the social identity of the members of the other goalball clubs (DePauw 2000). This reflects a setting bias when disabled people are engaged in non-disability and disability communities simultaneously, which Purdue and Howe (2012) describe as Paralympic paradox. Basically, ableist discourses in sports clubs can pose a risk to sports clubs, with Storr et al. (2021) demonstrating that these may lead to conflicts within the club. In their case, it resulted in the disability team not being integrated into the club as part of its core business. However, this does not apply to the goalball team in this study. Since there are no such ableist discourses, the reverse integration setting has a positive impact within the team and club, as the participants with visual impairments reported similar feelings of integration as their sighted counterparts. Thus, this setting provides mutual gain for both groups, coinciding with the findings of Giese et al. (2019).

Social support for the disabled members is another essential factor influencing their social integration (Bult et al. 2011; Jaarsma et al. 2015; Shields et al. 2012; Stroud et al. 2009). In line with this, this study reveals that, in particular, participants with intellectual disabilities and minor restrictions require stronger social support by their social environment (e.g., family, teachers, teammates, coaches), for instance, accompanying them to training and matches. Specifically, the coaches are challenged by having to focus on participants with disabilities but still treat all participants equally (Greve and Bechthold 2019).

6 Limitations and future perspectives

For this study, with the three training groups in different settings, diverse cases were purposefully selected to provide a broad range of results (Yin 2018) showing that participants from different cases are, to a large extent, socially integrated in the club and in the training groups. However, there are differences between the cases, emphasizing the relevance of both individual, in particular the form of disability, and organisational factors. Due to the limited number of selected cases, follow-up studies with a larger number and variety of cases are needed to generate a broader picture, and in-depth case studies are necessary because selection bias cannot be excluded, as the following statement indicates: "I think that's something that's been selected now; those who signed up for the interview are also those who do a lot of other things [for the club]. Or, it's a bit like not everyone has the same priorities in the club." (case 3, participant 14). All interviewed participants volunteered for the group discussions and, thus, were motivated and might have another attitude towards integration and feel better integrated socially than other members might. Furthermore, clubs where the integration of people with disabilities works well were probably more inclined to volunteer for the project.

In this study, we interviewed sports club members. In future studies, researchers should also interview non-members who have never been active in a sports club about barriers and former sports club members who are no longer a member to explore their experiences regarding differences compared with current members to explore further structures relevant for the social integration of people with disabilities.

The study provides exploratory insights, especially from the perspective of the participants with disabilities, on their social integration in integrative sports clubs and training groups in Switzerland. To better identify integration processes, larger scale quantitative and longitudinal studies should be applied to reveal representative empirical evidence. Further research focus should be on the underlying factors determining (the dimensions) social integration. Here, applying the introduced multi-level model of social integration (see Figure 1) seems fruitful, as it provides a comprehensive and systematic analysis. To evaluate measures to increase sports participation and social integration of people with disabilities in (integrative) training groups and sports clubs, intervention studies would be appropriate. Furthermore, the project could be conducted with differentiation of different disabilities, different sports, and different stages of structural integration according to Elling et al. (2001) to compare the results of these different groups.

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