INFLUENCE OF SPORT (ESPECIALLY FOOTBALL) ON SOCIAL COHESION, PARTICIPATION AND WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

A SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE REVIEW

DFL FOUNDATION

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

Dear Readers,

As a foundation rooted in professional football, the DFL Foundation is committed to empowering children and young people to realise their full potential. Our aim is to encourage and enable young people to actively participate in society. Sport and physical activity are our most important resources—professional football is our superpower and amplifier.

But how exactly does sport—and football as a team sport in particular—impact young people? What significance does it hold for society and our coexistence as a whole? To address these questions in depth, we commissioned the present literature review. Our goal was to bring together current scientific findings, examine the topic from various perspectives, and thus create a solid foundation for the further development of our own work as well as the engagement of other stakeholders in this field.

The analysis combines perspectives from sports science and educational science, with a focus on the well-being of young people. This interdisciplinary approach takes into account both the social and educational aspects of sport and relates them to one another.

The results of the analysis are clear: sport can have a positive impact on the well-being of children and young people, as well as on social cohesion—but certain conditions must be met. We would like to share with you which conditions these are, what further insights we have gained, and to discuss and learn from them together. Our goal: to increase impact and create opportunities.

As the DFL Foundation, we will use these findings to tailor our work and the programmes we support even more closely to the needs of children and young people.

My heartfelt thanks go to everyone who contributed to this analysis.

I wish you an inspiring and insightful read.

Warm regards,
Franziska Fey

Chairwoman of the DFL Foundation

CONTENT

Here the essential is summarised, here it gets exciting.


HRS

PART 1

INFLUENCE OF SPORT (ESPECIALLY FOOTBALL) ON SOCIAL COHESION AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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1. INTRODUCTION

In societies increasingly characterised by social inequality, migration, political polarisation and digital fragmentation, the preservation and promotion of social cohesion and togetherness are gaining central importance. Sport, and especially football, is attributed with particular potential in this context due to its social anchoring and low-threshold access. Gramespacher and Schwarz (2018) highlight five central "vehicle functions" of sport:

1. Physical activity as a universal form of expression and communication,
2. Play as a low-threshold form of interaction, especially for young people,
3. The joy generated by sporting activities as conducive to cognitive access and learning processes,
4. Social learning processes through negotiating and adhering to shared rules, and
5. Physical activity as a space for experiencing recognition, which can contribute to the stabilisation of self-concept.

The results of the SINUS Youth Study 2024 reflect some of these functions (Calmbach et al., 2024). They show that popular team sports such as football or basketball are highly popular among young people from all walks of life and thus have the potential to create a unifying effect across different social milieus. Spaces for sport and physical activity serve as important meeting places where young people maintain friendships and make new contacts. The main motives for engaging in sport, as cited by young people, are aspects of community—i.e. the need for social connection and belonging—as well as health, fun, passion, stress relief, physical exhaustion ("letting off steam") and sporting success.

Furthermore, physical activity and sport play a significant role in subjective well-being, regardless of gender, educational background or social environment.

However, Gramespacher and Schwarz (2018) point out that sport should be understood as a "space with optional provisions" and that potential does not automatically guarantee impact. Against this background, the question arises as to when and under what conditions effects in terms of promoting social cohesion can actually be realised. This is where the present literature review comes in, addressing the following research question:

Do (team) sports (especially football) promote better social cohesion among children and young people?

To answer this overarching question in a differentiated manner, the following specific research questions are considered within the analysis:

- How can football strengthen the social capital of a society?
- Which social skills do (team) sports (especially football) promote among children and young people?
- What potential do (team) sports (especially football) have for promoting democratic capacity and social engagement among children and young people?
- What potential do (team) sports (especially football) have for the social integration of migrant children and young people?
- What potential do (team) sports (especially football) have for promoting acceptance of diversity and gender variety among children and young people?
- What challenges exist in (team) sports (especially football) with regard to social exclusion and discrimination of children and young people?

The present literature review consists of two sub-studies: The first sub-study involved a systematic Scoping Review, which deals with the effects of interventions in the field of "Sport and Social Cohesion". Building on this, an **in-depth thematic literature search** was conducted on the following five topics:

(1) Participation and engagement,
(2) Democracy education and youth participation,
(3) Social integration of migrant children and young people,
(4) Acceptance of diversity and gender variety, and
(5) Exclusion and discrimination.

The aim of the study is to answer the research questions based on the results of the two sub-studies using the identified literature, to identify research gaps and, on this basis, to develop new research perspectives.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This literature review consists of two sub-studies: The first sub-study involved conducting a systematic (international) Scoping Review with the aim of identifying the effects of implemented programmes/projects in the field of "team sport and football and social cohesion". Building on this, an in-depth thematic literature search was carried out on the following five key topics: participation and engagement, democracy education, social integration of migrant children and young people, acceptance of diversity and gender variety, exclusion and discrimination.

2.1. CONDUCTING A SYSTEMATIC (INTERNATIONAL) "SCOPING REVIEW"

The approach of the first sub-study is based on conducting a Scoping Review according to the JBI method (von Elm et al., 2019). In the first step, the research question is formulated following the PCC scheme (Population, Concept, Context). This is followed by a comprehensive and systematic literature search in selected databases and the selection of suitable studies based on defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Subsequently, the relevant data from the literature are extracted and analysed. The aim of this review is to determine and systematically present the state of English and German studies in the field of "team sport and football and its influence on social cohesion among children and young people", and to identify research gaps. The Scoping Review was conducted between 15.02.2025 and 15.04.2025 in the databases Web of Science, EBSCOhost and BISp Surf. In addition, the tool Connected Papers was used according to the snowball principle, and the reference lists of relevant articles were also searched to identify further sources. Finally, grey literature in the form of reports, etc. was sought. The keywords for the search in the three databases were determined on the basis of an initial rough search and supplemented during the research according to the iterative approach. In addition to the German keywords, the English translation of the keywords was also used for the search for English-language literature. The following search terms resulted:

a) (cohesion OR togetherness OR social*) AND (children OR youth* OR teenagers OR "young people") AND (football OR team sport OR ball sport) AND (program OR intervention);
b) (cohesion OR social*) AND (youth OR children OR kids OR teen* OR adolescents OR young people) AND (football OR soccer OR team sport* OR ball sport*) AND (program* OR intervention)

To select relevant and up-to-date literature, the publication period filter in the databases was set to 2014–2025. After identifying the sources, duplicates were removed and it was checked whether the publications met the previously defined inclusion criteria. The selection process took place in three steps and is shown in detail in Fig. 1 p. 3: The first step served to identify titles based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria listed in Table 1. In the second step (screening), the abstracts were checked against the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and in the third step, the full texts were examined. The same procedure was used for reviewing grey literature and literature identified via Connected Papers.

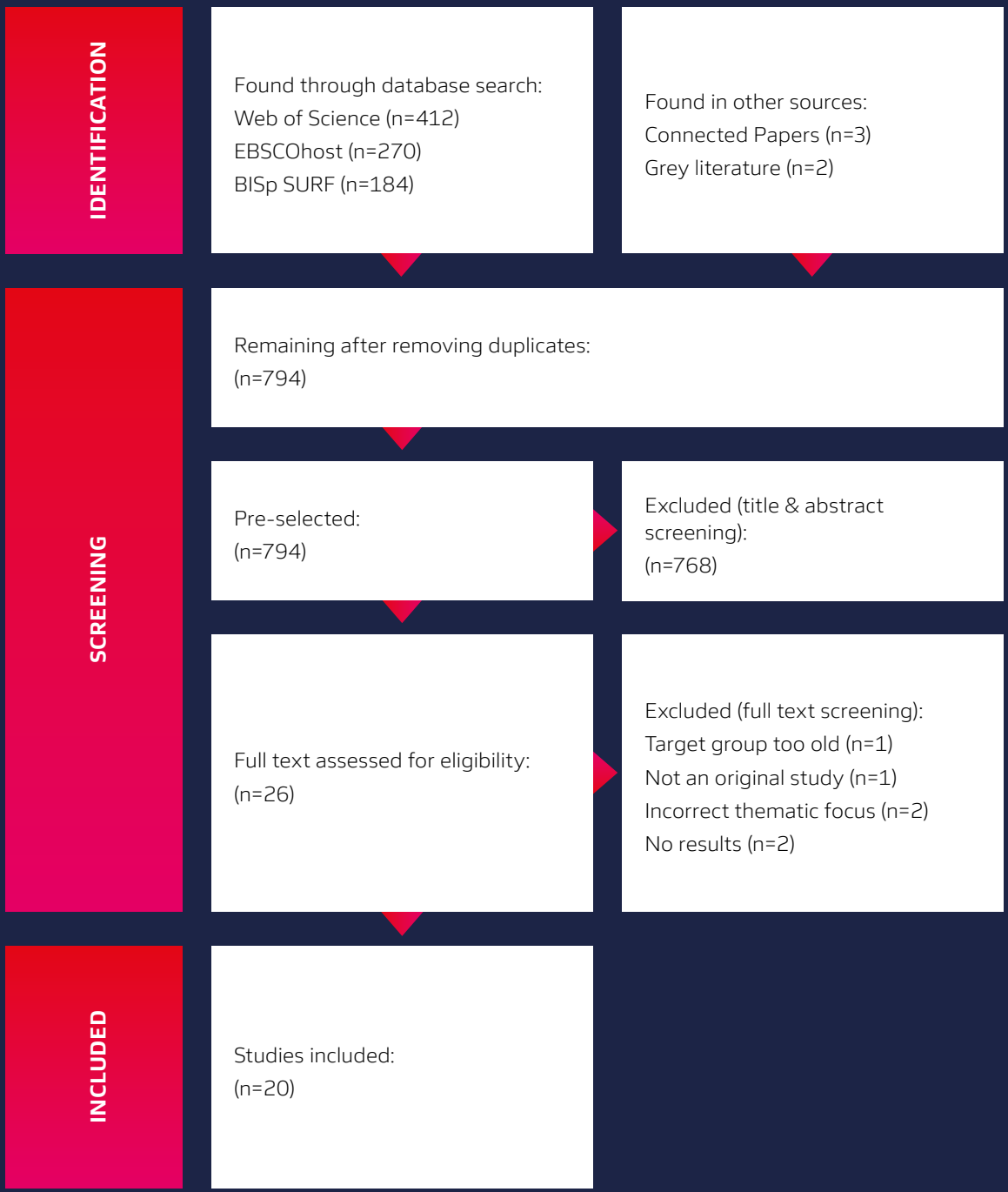
Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Language	German or English	Other languages
Time Frame	2014–2025	Literature older than 2014
Publication Type	Academic articles, reports, dissertations or book chapters with full text available	Academic articles, reports, dissertations or book chapters without full text available and all other document types
Study Type	Qualitative, quantitative or mixed-method studies	Meta-analyses, systematic literature reviews, theoretical articles, position papers
Population	Children and young people with and without socially disadvantaged/marginalised backgrounds (up to 25 years)	Children and young people with physical impairments or physical/psychological diagnoses (e.g. autism), adults, fans, professional athletes
Concept	Football and team sports addressing social cohesion, social skills, social inclusion or integration, democratic capacity	Other sports or leisure activities (e.g. art, music), addressing other concepts or skills
Context	Examination of programmes that use sport as a medium for social purposes Programmes in Germany, Europe and Australia	Examination of programmes that use sport for performance enhancement or do not include sporting aspects Programmes in other countries

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria of the Literature Search Sub-study 1

The systematic preparation of the included literature was carried out by jointly defining categories for data extraction. The categories were formed deductively based on the underlying research questions and category systems of comparable Scoping Reviews (Moustakas & Wagner, 2023; ter Harmsel-Nieuwenhuis et al., 2022; Nieto et al., 2024) and inductively supplemented by the data from the present literature. After reviewing the categories again, the following scheme for data extraction was developed:

- General information about the publication (authors, title, year and country of publication)
- Summary (name, thematic focus, objectives and persons responsible for the programme/intervention)
- Methodological approach of the authors (study design, method, research instruments, theory)
- Target group of the programmes/interventions (age, gender, social background, reach)
- Framework conditions of the programmes/interventions (duration, sport(s), non-sport aspects, educational support, special features)
- Results (system level, influence on social cohesion/social togetherness, influence on social skills development, success factors, negative factors/challenges).

Figure 1: Flowchart of the Selection Process



2.2. CONDUCTING A LITERATURE SEARCH IN THE GERMAN-SPEAKING REGION

The approach of the second sub-study followed the snowball principle. This second literature search is based on the German-language literature systematically identified in the first sub-study. The corresponding reference lists were used to identify further German-language specialist literature and relevant authors from the German-speaking region, whose publication lists were then also searched for suitable specialist literature. The aim of the search using the snowball principle is to determine the state of German specialist literature in the field of "team sport and football and its influence on social cohesion among children and young people". The search relates to the following five topics:

1. Participation and engagement
2. Democracy education and youth participation
3. Social integration of migrant children and young people
4. Acceptance of diversity and gender variety
5. Exclusion and discrimination

The last topic, "Exclusion and discrimination", was chosen because, during the review of the literature, the dysfunctional effects of sport and physical activity on social cohesion were repeatedly highlighted. In addition to the positive aspects of sport and physical activity on social cohesion, this perspective is therefore also considered. As in the first sub-study, inclusion and exclusion criteria were established when searching for suitable specialist literature, in order to systematically decide which literature would be included in the literature review and which would be excluded (see Table 2).

Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Language	German	Other languages
Geographical Scope	Germany	Other countries
Time Frame	2014–2025	Publications before 2014
Publication Type	Studies funded by ministries, collected volumes, monographs or academic articles	All other document types
Academic Scope	Literature written by experts in sports science and education	Literature written by individuals from other disciplines (e.g. social work) or those who cannot be considered experts
Population	Children and young people in Germany	Adults in Germany and children and young people outside Germany
Thematic Scope	Team sport and football	Other leisure activities such as art, music, etc.
Thematic Focus	Addressing participation and engagement, democracy education, social integration of migrant children and young people, acceptance of diversity and gender variety and/or exclusion and discrimination	Addressing other aspects

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria of the Literature Search Sub-study 2

3. PRESENTATION OF RESULT

3.1. RESULTS OF THE SCOPING REVIEW

Within the Scoping Review, a total of 20 relevant studies and programmes on the topic "Influence of Team Sport and Football on Social Cohesion Among Children and Young People" were identified. The descriptive presentation of the identified studies, as well as the implementation of the Scoping Review, is based on the PCC scheme (Population (target group), Concept, Context). In addition, the different methodological and theoretical approaches of the selected studies are discussed.

The results are presented according to the two thematic areas "social cohesion" and "social skills development" and their respective categories and subcategories.

3.1.1. GENERAL STUDY CHARACTERISTICS

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The majority of studies were conducted using a qualitative research approach (n = 14). These were mainly case studies and evaluation studies of individual programmes, as well as two longitudinal studies and one study with a living lab approach. In addition to the more classic case study designs, a longitudinal study design allows for a more detailed examination of the effects of the programmes on the life course of participating children and young people. The living lab approach, on the other hand, places particular emphasis on a participatory research process involving various stakeholders and target groups.

For qualitative data collection, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations were mainly used. Two of the studies were conducted with a mixed-methods design, in which quantitative methods such as (pre- and post-) questionnaires were used in addition to qualitative data collection methods. For data collection, 13 of the studies included not only the programme participants but also other stakeholders, such as coaches, teachers, social workers, and cooperation partners in leading positions from schools, clubs, municipalities, or civil society organisations. The inclusion of various stakeholders in data collection allows for a more differentiated view of individual learning experiences as well as an analysis of structural success factors and institutional framework conditions. Four studies did not provide precise information about their research design.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysed studies refer to a variety of theoretical models to explain, frame, and pedagogically underpin their approaches. Five overarching theoretical approaches can be identified:

(1) Social Capital

Putnam's theory of social capital is most frequently used as a theoretical framework (Putnam, 1993 and 2001). The studies mainly refer to the differentiation scheme of "bonding", "bridging", and "linking" in relation to sport-based programmes: "bonding" refers to strengthening

relationships within homogeneous groups, while “bridging” describes building connections between different social groups. The latter is particularly important for social cohesion, as it enables integrative bridges across different group and milieu boundaries. “Linking” can be seen as a form of “bridging” capital, which includes connections between individuals and institutions (Block & Gibbs, 2017). According to Ekholm (2019), social capital is the “glue” of a society.

(2) Positive Youth Development (PYD)
Studies using PYD as a theoretical framework take a resource-oriented view of children and young people. The aim is to promote psychosocial strengths such as self-efficacy, resilience, hope, and future orientation to enable healthy development and social participation (Holt et al., 2017).

(3) Competence Models
Programmes based on competence models aim to systematically record, describe, and promote the skills and abilities individuals need to successfully cope with demands in various areas of life. A distinction is often made between personal (e.g. self-confidence, emotional regulation), social (e.g. teamwork, empathy), and strategic or methodological competences (e.g. problem-solving ability, goal orientation).

(4) Capability Approach
The Capability Approach focuses on the actual opportunities for individuals to achieve, especially under conditions of structural inequality. It includes educational measures that enable real participation, self-determination, and personal development (Nussbaum, 2011).

(5) Global Citizenship Education and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)
Global Citizenship Education approaches promote critical awareness of global contexts, intercultural understanding, and responsible action. Linked to the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (especially SDG 4.7, 10, and 16), they aim for transformative education for sustainable development.

3.1.2. TARGET GROUP

The analysed programmes are aimed at children and young people aged 6 to 25 years. The following target groups are primarily addressed:

(1) Socially disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people
This group includes children and young people with psychosocial burdens and unstable family backgrounds, young people in precarious life situations, as well as adolescents with limited participation opportunities and/or school disengagement.

(2) Children and young people with a migration or refugee background
This group includes both children and young people who have had to flee their home countries and those of the second or third generation in families with a so-called migration background.

(3) Gender-specific group programmes for girls or boys
These are explicitly aimed at girls/young women or—less frequently—at boys/young men. Several of these programmes combine the gender perspective with migration-related support approaches and thus pursue an intersectional approach.

Some programmes are not exclusively aimed at the specific target groups described but are open to children and young people of all social backgrounds. These programmes mainly aim to create inclusive settings and bring together heterogeneous groups through sport-based programmes.

3.1.3. CONTEXT

The 20 studies published between 2014 and 2025 were conducted in eight different countries: Germany (n = 7), England (n = 4), Sweden (n = 3), Australia (n = 2), as well as the Czech Republic, Italy, Finland, and Turkey (n = 1 each).

Organisational Structures and Sponsorship
Most programmes are based on cooperative sponsorships, often in the form of intersectoral cooperation. The local NGOs and sports clubs implementing the programmes work, among others, in coordination with schools, municipal authorities, youth centres, or foundations. In addition, two programmes are carried out in cooperation with professional clubs (“Football meets culture”, Premier League Kicks). Programmes focusing on promoting employability also cooperate with educational and training programmes (e.g. From Work to Football). Five programmes also cooperate with universities, mainly for programme evaluations (e.g. KICKFAIR).

Programme Setting
Most programmes show a strong social and spatial anchoring: Many interventions use existing municipal infrastructures such as youth centres, school sports halls, or leisure facilities located directly in the participants’ living environment. Several programmes cooperate with local sports clubs, with sports education activities taking place both within the club context and outside institutional sports structures. Some offers are integrated into all-day or afternoon school programmes, and one programme is firmly anchored in regular primary school physical education.

3.1.4. CONCEPT

The analysis of the football studies examined (in 18 out of 20 interventions, football is the central or sole sporting medium) shows that football often serves as a low-threshold "hook". In three programmes, the street football method (football3) is used. In addition, other team sports such as basketball, futsal, or cricket are occasionally offered. Only two programmes explicitly pursue a multisport approach to address a diversity of interests and open up new experiential spaces. Furthermore, the 20 programmes examined differ in terms of educational and social support services, the frequency and duration of sessions, and the form of supervision. Nevertheless, three factors can be identified as relevant for impact-oriented programme design:

(1) Programme Objectives
The objectives of the analysed programmes can be systematised into four overarching categories. The most common objective is the promotion of social participation among children and young people (n = 9). The second most common is psychosocial stabilisation and strengthening of individual protective factors (n = 5), especially for marginalised children and young people. The third category comprises programmes focusing on the development and promotion of personal, social, and strategic action competences (n = 3). The fourth category includes programmes aimed at promoting democratic education and global learning (n = 3).

(2) Non-sporting Content and Educational Components
A central feature of almost all football programmes (n = 19) is the combination of sporting activities with educational, social, or educationally relevant activities. These include, among others, language support, workshops on various topics (e.g. career orientation, life skills), cultural education offers and exchange programmes, mentorship and peer programmes, or school support. These non-sporting components are often an integral part of the programmes.

(3) Supervision and Staffing Structure
Supervision is usually provided by coaches, social workers and educators, volunteer mentors, or peers from the community. In some cases, former participants take on independent roles and are trained as "youth leaders". Supervision by role models, such as former participants, places particular emphasis on continuous and close relationship work and focuses on long-term, reliable support by permanent contact persons. Programmes with a gender-specific focus deliberately rely on gender-sensitive supervision to create safe spaces for girls and establish gender-appropriate role models.

3.1.5. RESULTS OF THE ANALYSED STUDIES ON "SOCIAL COHESION"

The analysed programmes show a wide range of effects in the area of social cohesion. Based on the studies, these can be divided into four dimensions: social relationships, social capital, belonging, and orientation towards the common good (see table in Appendix 1).

(1) SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

The development of supportive social networks is the dominant result (n = 12) of the studies. Many football programmes succeed in building reliable relationships both among participants and with supervisors, which is described as a key prerequisite for trust, bonding, and long-term participation (Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al., 2023). Horizontal relationships with coaches who support participants outside of sport can lead to more positive future prospects (Richardson & Fletcher, 2020).

Acceptance of diversity (n = 10) is particularly strengthened in multicultural settings. In one study, rescheduling match times during Ramadan was cited as a concrete example of acceptance of religious diversity (Pink et al., 2020). The explicit reduction of prejudice was less frequently demonstrated in the studies (n = 4).

(2) SOCIAL CAPITAL

The studies show that football programmes primarily contribute to strengthening "bonding social capital" (n = 11). This refers to close, supportive relationships within homogeneous groups and offers significant potential, especially for children and young people who previously had no or only a few stable social networks or are socially isolated. In contrast, "bridging social capital", i.e. building connections between different social or cultural groups, is less frequently promoted (n = 8). Nevertheless, some studies show that sporting settings can provide suitable conditions for this. For example, Cockburn (2017) and Svoboda et al. (2025) show that multi-ethnic teams in particular help to increase acceptance of diversity and enable mutual recognition. Cockburn's (2016) results also show that "bonding social capital" provides participants with a sense of belonging, while "bridging social capital" opens up new opportunities. "Linking social capital", access to institutional resources, decision-makers, or social power structures, is rarely recorded as an effect (n = 3). This also includes the integration of marginalised children and young people into "normal" sports club structures.

At the same time, studies (including Block and Gibbs (2017)) emphasise that a balanced combination of bonding, bridging, and linking capital is crucial for sustainable social cohesion. This combination can not only promote social support and cultural understanding but also strengthen security and institutional participation, for example through targeted language support, culturally sensitive contact persons, or transitions into education and employment systems (see Szreter, 2002). Programmes that systematically address all three dimensions therefore appear particularly effective for social participation.

(3) BELONGING

A sense of social inclusion was highlighted as a result in nine studies. “Safe spaces” are considered a key prerequisite for participation, especially for marginalised groups. These refer not only to physical spaces but also to symbolically protected contexts in which recognition, security, and dialogical learning processes are possible (Svoboda et al., 2025). However, msome programmes point out that promoting belonging can also have unintended effects, such as reproducing social exclusion mechanisms through demarcation or territorial marking (Parker et al., 2017). Programmes must therefore work to minimise feelings of exclusion and encourage young people to reflect on their role in their local context (Parker et al., 2017).

(4) ORIENTATION TOWARDS THE COMMON GOOD

Solidarity, taking on responsibility, and shared values were explicitly promoted in several programmes, although overall less frequently documented (n = 4). Formats such as “football3” specifically integrate rules, reflection, and value work into sporting activities (Parker et al., 2019). Wirzén & Ekholm (2024) also describe that social cohesion in girls’ programmes is significantly shaped by the relationships between participants, in which moral values such as caring and empathy play a special role. These interactions within the group not only strengthen the sense of community but also embody the independent assumption of social responsibility in terms of shared values.

Apart from orientation towards the common good within the programmes, the results of only two studies show an increase in active participation in community life and an increase in social engagement outside the sporting context. Parker et al. (2019) describe this form of social engagement as “active citizenship”.

3.1.6. RESULTS OF THE ANALYSED STUDIES ON "SOCIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT"

The development of social skills among children and young people plays a central role in programmes aimed at developing social cohesion. However, self-competences and methodological competences are also fundamental abilities for strengthening togetherness in communities. Table 3 provides information on which competences could be promoted in the identified studies.

The results of the studies show that football- and sport-based programmes can promote a wide range of competences among children and young people. Some of the competences identified in the studies fall under the so-called "Future Skills" (Suessenbach et al., 2021). These "Future Skills" (including teamwork, intercultural communication, resilience, and conflict resolution skills) particularly enable children and young people to meet social challenges, actively participate in shaping a sustainable future, and thus contribute to social cohesion.

In many studies, an increase in participants' self-confidence and self-esteem is primarily attributed to the diverse social interactions that take place within a safe and respectful environment in the programmes. On the other hand, development is also promoted through specific educational programmes and workshops, in which the strengthening of competences is explicitly addressed and encouraged.

Another result highlighted in the analysed studies is the development and strengthening of self-efficacy. Morgan et al. (2019) found that this is directly related to an increased sense of belonging: improved self-efficacy led to a "stronger sense of belonging to peers and project leaders." This result illustrates how closely the development of (social) competences is linked to the promotion of social cohesion. The study results also show an improvement in emotional self-regulation and resilience in the area of self-competence. This is attributed, among other things, to the inevitable experience of winning and losing in football, but also to the adherence to shared rules and norms on and off the pitch.

In the context of social skills development, the improvement of (intercultural) communication and teamwork, as well as perspective-taking and the resulting improved intercultural understanding, were particularly emphasised. In this context, maintaining fair and respectful interactions among participants plays a special role. For participants with a migration or refugee background, language acquisition represents an additional means of promoting communication. In some programmes, language skills were promoted through targeted language training or implicitly by agreeing to speak the language of the host country during programme sessions.

In addition to the three dimensions of self-competence, social competence, and methodological/strategic competence, some programmes also addressed the development of social-emotional competences (e.g. Grove & Ermes, 2025; LitCam gGmbH, 2024 & Schwarz, 2018). Social-emotional competences refer to the connection between emotional intelligence and social skills. According to Grove and Ermes (2025), social-emotional competences are central to the development of empathy, conflict resolution skills, and the building of positive social relationships, and are thus key qualifications for social cohesion. The results of Grove and Ermes (2025) show that promoting emotional self-regulation and non-violent communication enables children to deal with conflicts constructively. When children learn to understand and express their own emotions, they develop a stronger awareness of justice, prejudice, and social diversity. This creates a foundation for collective action and mutual responsibility, which are essential for a cohesive society.

Categories	Subcategories
Self-competence	Self-confidence & self-esteem
	Self-efficacy
	Goal orientation
	Emotional self-regulation
	Resilience
	Conflict resolution skills
Soziale Kompetenz	Teamwork
	(Intercultural) communication skills
	Empathy
	Cooperation
	Perspective-taking
Methodological/strategic competence	Networking skills
	Language skills
	Employability

Table 3: Result Dimensions of the Analysed Studies Regarding "Social Skills Development"

3.2. RESULTS OF THE LITERATURE SEARCH

The following section presents the results of the literature search on the five identified topics (participation and engagement, democracy education and youth participation, social integration of migrant children and young people, acceptance of diversity and gender variety, exclusion and discrimination).

3.2.1. PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Children and young people are active in very different places. These can be distinguished according to formal, non-formal, and informal frameworks (Neuber & Golenia, 2021). Formal settings include school, nursery, and all-day care. Non-formal settings include sports clubs and open child and youth work. Commercial sport lies between non-formal and informal settings, while family and spontaneous play on the street or on football pitches are considered informal settings (Neuber & Kehne, 2024). The various settings offer different potentials but also obstacles for participation in sport: Neuber & Golenia (2021) emphasise that the school environment plays a central role. At the same time, however, the specific characteristics of school sport—such as a focus on the body, performance pressure, special learning environments (sports fields, swimming pools, gyms), high social interaction, and different sporting backgrounds of pupils—can present barriers to participation.

The Move for Health Study[1] (2025) showed that socio-economic disadvantages have a significant impact on the participation of children and young people in sport (clubs). The authors conclude:

"Young people from marginalised backgrounds have significantly less access to the positive social and health effects of sport, which is not only due to financial but also to structural and cultural barriers." (Bartsch et al., 2025)

Neuber et al. (2025) describe in their study that children from disadvantaged social backgrounds more frequently report a lack of social relationships, difficulties in social interaction, exclusion, and loneliness.

Barriers to participation are also evident in the membership structures of sports clubs: While sports clubs reach most children and young people outside of school, they are not equally accessible to all. Young people from socio-economically marginalised backgrounds avoid sports clubs for various reasons, such as performance pressure, fear of embarrassment, bullying, or experiences of discrimination (Bartsch and Rulofs, 2024). Family circumstances and private challenges further hinder access and influence young people's priorities.

The longitudinal study by Albert (2017) also shows that the sporting participation of disadvantaged young people is often limited by negative experiences in physical education, a low sporting self-image, lack of information about opportunities, and false assumptions about high club fees. These factors mean that sports clubs are often not perceived as low-threshold offers.

On the other hand, various authors have identified numerous potentials associated with physical activity, play, and sport. They concluded that, in addition to physical development, the social and psychological development of children and young people is also promoted by physical activity, play, and sport, and that these activities are closely linked to experiencing fun and social belonging (Neuber et al., 2025; Bartsch et al., 2025; Göttlich et al., 2025). In particular, the interpersonal contacts and friendships made through sport play a significant role for children and young people (Bartsch et al., 2025).

[1] 28% of respondents named football as their sport (p. 68, Dreiskämper et al., 2025).

Voigts & Haid (2025) describe that young people find it easier to make social contacts through team sports, and that both the sense of community and the physical togetherness in sport are of great importance to many. Burrmann et al. (2025) compared sport-engaged young people with engaged computer users or physically inactive peers and found that sport-engaged young people rate their integration into social networks and their social skills higher than those who are physically inactive.

With regard to the physical development of children and young people, Breuer et al. (2020) call for a stronger pursuit of so-called Physical Literacy as a guiding principle of health-oriented child and youth sport in the Fourth German Child and Youth Sport Report. They emphasise that this would place the development of awareness of the connections between physical activity/sport and (one's own) health, as well as self-efficacy, motivation, and confidence in one's own actions, at the centre of health-oriented child and youth sport, and would promote the creation of active living environments for children and young people (ibid., p. 91).

Burrmann et al. (2025, p. 62) describe that sport plays a significant role in the lives of young people. Around 50% of young people do not want to give up sport under any circumstances or would only do so temporarily to focus on other obligations, while 20% see sport as something secondary and 7% attach no importance to sport.

In addition to active participation in sports activities, voluntary work in sport also plays an important role. In 2019, 39.7% of the population aged 14 and over in Germany were involved in voluntary work. "Sport and physical activity" was the most important social sector, with 9.8 million people (Simonson et al., 2021). According to the Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach (2023), "trust in the system, support for democracy, and the sense of self-efficacy [...] are significantly stronger among those who are engaged, and especially among those who do so in positions of responsibility" (p. 1).

Verweyen (2023) also points out that voluntary work in sport is of great importance for non-formal education, upbringing, and the strengthening of "citizenship" and participation. However, even without a voluntary position, there are numerous situations in everyday sport that offer opportunities for participation and engagement. Verweyen (2023) notes that the active co-design of training on a voluntary basis, for example by asking for wishes and needs or by demonstrating and leading individual exercises, can be used pedagogically to promote participants' self-efficacy. The dsj shows in a guide for multipliers how participation in everyday training can be used pedagogically to practise democratic processes and values and to train participants' engagement (Derecik & Menze, 2018).

The need to open up more spaces for participation is also evident in the results of the current Move for Health Study (Dreiskämper et al., 2025): Particularly marginalised children and young people appreciate being able to participate and try things out in open child and youth work, and for this reason, among others, prefer physical activity offers in open child and youth work.

In order to promote equal participation for all children and young people, migrant organisations and migrant sports clubs also play a central role (Verweyen, 2023).

3.2.2. SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF MIGRANT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

In a post-migrant society, there is increased potential for conflict, as different perspectives, values, and attitudes come into contact and compete for recognition, equal opportunities, and participation. This applies to participation and access to sport just as much as to other areas of society.

A range of functions are attributed to sport in the context of social integration: the specialist literature differentiates between the target perspectives of integration in sport, within sport, and through sport (Verweyen, 2023), although in some cases the differentiation is limited to integration in and through sport (Braun, 2020). "Integration in sport" generally refers to the equal participation of all target groups in sport. At the same time, access to sport is considered a prerequisite for achieving the other target perspectives. "Integration within sport" aims to increase participation opportunities within the sporting context, while "integration through sport" refers to the transfer of competences, experiences, and contacts acquired in sport to areas of life outside the sporting context (Braun, 2020, p. 30; Verweyen, 2023). The latter target perspective, in particular, is difficult to assess and is viewed critically in the professional discourse, as there is a lack of research examining the spill-over effects of integration programmes and measures, as well as the transfer of competences and attitudes to other areas of life (Braun, 2020, pp. 32–33).

At the same time, sport is associated with the societal expectation of making a contribution to successful social integration (Braun, 2020). It should be emphasised that this expectation, as well as the professional and political discourse, is mostly limited to organised sport. Commercial sports offers, informal sports providers, and social enterprises working with sport are rarely included in the discourse (Braun, 2020).

The integrative function of football is argued, among other things, with reference to the reach of the German Football Association (DFB): in Germany, there are currently 24,033 football clubs and 2,367,118 children and young people up to the age of 18 are organised there in 2024 (DOSB, 2024; DFB, 2024). The nationwide programme "Integration durch Sport" ("Integration through Sport") makes it clear that state actors benefit from the resources, expertise, and structures of organised sport when implementing programmes and measures for social integration (Braun, 2020).

However, the simultaneous underrepresentation of people with a migration background in the national average of sports clubs makes it clear that an intentional understanding of integration must be pursued. This contradicts the rhetoric of many sports clubs and associations, which often attribute inherent integrative effectiveness to sport (Verweyen, 2023; Breuer and Feiler, 2025).

Nevertheless, various authors point out that the concentrated communication and interaction situations in the sporting context create a favourable environment for building social relationships and experiencing belonging (Braun, 2020; Gieß-Stüber & Grimminger-Seidensticker, 2023; Verweyen, 2023). These occur not only through direct participation in sports offers but also in the context of voluntary or civic engagement. Olmsedahl et al. (2024) emphasise that, in particular, the acquisition of competences through volunteering provides significant benefits for people with a migration background, which, however, is not yet sufficiently taken into account in the development of measures and programmes. This assumption is also supported by Verweyen (2023), who emphasises that voluntary work in sports clubs has, among other things, positive effects on sociocultural integration.

Despite the arguments in favour of the integrative functions of organised sport, current studies show that the threshold for access to club sport is still higher than for sports offers in all-day programmes or open child and youth work (Bartsch et al., 2025). Sports offers in open child and youth work seem to be particularly important for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Bartsch et al., 2025). Although the motives for participating in sports offers in all-day or open child and youth work hardly differ from those stated by children and young people who take part in club sport, particularly marginalised children and young people appreciate being able to participate and try things out in open child and youth work (Dreiskämper et al., 2025).

The need for intentional design of social integration at the pedagogical level is regarded as an essential prerequisite for successful social integration (Gieß-Stüber et al., 2020; Verweyen, 2023). In addition to context and framework conditions, such as the duration, space for communication and reflection, and jointly negotiated rules of conduct, social integration in and through sport is significantly influenced by coaches and their pedagogical design of sports offers. They play a key role, which requires special competences that are often insufficiently addressed in traditional sports training (Ramseier & Tausch, 2023).

Gieß-Stüber and Grimminger-Seidensticker (2023) emphasise the relevance of experiences of recognition for creating belonging and criticise that, in sport, the experience of recognition is often tied to sporting performance (pp. 135–136). In this context, pedagogical design of sports offers that fosters recognition is particularly relevant, as, on the one hand, the experience of recognition from coaches promotes a positive self-relationship among children and young people, and, on the other hand, mutual recognition among children and young people strengthens a sense of community within the group (Gieß-Stüber & Grimminger-Seidensticker, 2023).

In addition to shaping experiences of recognition, the acquisition of intercultural competence at both the coach and participant level is considered important. Gieß-Stüber et al. (2020) describe intercultural competence as an extended form of social competence that enables those who possess it to deal productively with unfamiliarity and uncertainty. At the same time, the authors emphasise that intercultural competence is not acquired incidentally and not in competitive sports settings. Rather, a diversity-friendly basic attitude, inclusive design of sports offers, and the use of targeted didactic measures are necessary prerequisites for giving space to emerging conflicts, addressing them, and using them as opportunities for intercultural education (Gieß-Stüber et al., 2020; Fast et al., 2025).

3.2.3. ACCEPTANCE OF DIVERSITY AND GENDER VARIETY

Social cohesion in diverse societies requires that difference is not only tolerated but actively recognised and included. The Charta der Vielfalt (2024) defines seven central dimensions of diversity in this context: age, ethnic origin and nationality, gender and gender identity, physical and mental abilities, religion and worldview, sexual orientation, and social background.

Especially with regard to queer young people, football proves to be an ambivalent arena: on the one hand, it offers visibility and social integration; on the other, it also brings stigmatisation and exclusion (Arnold et al., 2023, p. 87). This ambivalence makes the targeted pedagogical design of safe and developmental spaces all the more important. Queer young people cite the lack of such spaces as a reason for their below-average participation in club sport (Krell et al., 2023).

Experiences of empowerment and recognition are central resources for promoting social participation. This requires pedagogical settings that enable trust, self-efficacy, and negotiation. This includes targeted reflection on lines of difference such as gender, identity, and orientation, as well as an attitude of openness and tolerance for mistakes on the part of coaches and trainers (see Novkovic & Rettenmaier, 2024). Football can thus become a social learning space that goes beyond its sporting function, provided that pedagogical principles and diversity perspectives are actively integrated into the setting.

How closely recognition, diversity, and social participation are linked to social cohesion is also shown by the current report of the Bertelsmann Stiftung (2024): alongside stable social relationships and trust in institutions, acceptance of diversity is one of the central prerequisites for a solidarity-based society. At the same time, organised sport still falls far short of adequately reflecting social diversity in its structures (Boenke et al., 2024).

Qualification measures in the form of workshops, lectures, or specialist conferences are essential to impart practical skills and create spaces for reflection (Arnold et al., 2023, p. 106). Engel (2007) distinguishes here between the normative-regulatory “fairness approach”, which primarily aims at rule compliance and anti-discrimination, and the “learning and effectiveness approach”, which understands diversity as a long-term process of organisational development. The latter aims at changing organisational culture and recognises differences as a resource.

3.2.4. DEMOCRACY EDUCATION AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION

In view of the rise of right-wing extremism in our society and the associated hostility to democracy, as well as increasing social divisions, it is becoming ever more important to support children and young people in becoming politically engaged and to enable them to participate (democratically) in society. Despite the growing importance of democratic participation, the results of the SINUS Youth Study 2024 show that political topics and political participation play only a subordinate role in the everyday lives of young people (Calmbach et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the results of a recent study by the Bertelsmann Stiftung (2025) show that, in particular, lonely young people are dissatisfied with democracy and hardly believe that they can bring about social and political change at the local level through their own actions (Heinz, 2025). Loneliness among young people in Germany is widespread—overall, 45% of 16- to 30-year-olds report moderate or severe loneliness. Loneliness among young people should therefore be taken seriously as a risk to democracy, as it weakens trust in democracy and, in the long term, can foster political alienation and radicalisation. It is therefore of central importance to involve young people and offer them opportunities for participation (including affordable and low-threshold leisure and cultural activities as well as open and free meeting spaces for children and young people).

Sport, and especially football, offers various potentials to provide children and young people with opportunities for participation, to practise democracy, to become actively involved in a community and help shape it, as well as to address political topics. These potentials can be divided into three areas of impact:

1. The promotion of democratic competence through joint sporting activity
2. Youth participation in club and organisational structures
3. Political education in the stadium

The promotion of democratic competence through joint sporting activity

Sport offers young people the opportunity to experience self-efficacy and to try out and perceive themselves as active agents in shaping their environment (Ratzmann et al., 2022). Every training session, every decision made as a team is potentially an experience of democracy and a negotiation of togetherness (Quade et al., 2024; Runkel, 2024). Sturzenhecker and Schwerthelm (2016, p. 189) therefore describe sport as a "place of real democratic experience". The results of the SINUS Youth Study 2024 confirm that it is important for young people to have the opportunity to express themselves and be heard in sport, and that they feel they have more say in clubs than in physical education lessons.

However, for sports offers to become places of democratic experience for young people, appropriate opportunities must be actively created. The DSJ describes in its publication "Successful Democratic Participation in Sports Practice" five essential participatory attitudes through which coaches and trainers can foster a democratic environment (Derecik & Menze, 2018):

- **Understanding of roles and transfer of power**
  Rethinking traditional role models and transferring decision-making power and responsibility enables participants to express their own opinions and wishes and to take responsibility for their implementation.

- **Trust**
  Trust in the participants and granting them competences and abilities is an important prerequisite for handing over responsibility and allowing participants to "get on with it" within a certain framework.

- **Voluntariness and patience**
  Participation can only succeed if it takes place on a voluntary basis and if participants are given patience to get involved in decisions or to negotiate them. If participants do not want to get involved, this should also be accepted.

- **Openness to outcomes**
  When decisions are made democratically, different paths and possibilities often emerge than if one person makes them alone; therefore, openness to the decision-making process and to the outcomes is an important prerequisite for genuine participation.

- **Tolerance for mistakes**
  Not everything always goes according to plan. Tolerating mistakes and detours on the part of the coaches is very important so that participants can try things out and learn independently from their mistakes.

Moreover, it is important, through relationship-building, to identify the individual needs and biographically shaped requirements of the participants in order to support them in developing democratic competences that are adapted to their living environment (Novkovic & Rettenmaier, 2024). Football programmes that foster participatory attitudes can create spaces for young people in which they can experience their environment for themselves. These spaces can help them to get to know themselves better, develop their personality, and engage critically with their environment as active, equal co-creators.

Youth Participation in Organisational Structures

The model of nine levels of participation by Richard Schröder (1995), based on the approaches of Roger Hart (1992) and Wolfgang Gernert (1993), provides a framework for classifying the participation of children and young people, making it clear that young people only participate voluntarily when they are actively involved in decision-making processes and work on transparent goals formulated together with adults (Schröder, 1995). An example of youth participation in a sports or football club is the establishment of a youth council or youth advisory board. In these bodies, young people can discuss and decide on matters that concern them (Becker, 2024). For youth participation to succeed, transparent communication, diverse opportunities for involvement without barriers, and collaboration on an equal footing are crucial.

Political Education in the Stadium

The third area of impact in which sport, especially football, offers potential for democracy education is the project "Classroom Stadium" ("Lernort Stadion") of the association Lernort Stadion e. V. Since 2009, low-threshold political education programmes for young people have been conducted in football stadiums at now 29 learning centres. School classes usually attend one- or multi-day educational programmes in the stadiums. The focus of these educational programmes is on enlightenment and maturity, participation and involvement, diversity and sustainability, prevention of extremism and violence, as well as intercultural encounters (Lernort Stadion e.V.). Due to its everyday character, football offers opportunities for democracy learning that aims at acquiring competences and knowledge for democratic, solidarity-based, and emancipatory thinking and action. Socio-political areas of tension and political topics from football, such as debates about human rights in Qatar, the commercialisation of professional sport, police violence, or extremist ultra groups, are used as reference points (Fritz et al., 2024). In the learning centres, the focus is on imparting knowledge and competences in political education. However, there is still a lack of structures for active youth participation that would enable young people to actively practise democracy, as there are currently no opportunities for young people to actively participate as members in the project and at its locations (Fritz et al., 2024).

3.2.5. EXCLUSION AND DISCRIMINATION

Sport is attributed with positive qualities by numerous social actors, especially sports associations and clubs. It is a common assumption that participating in sport, and team sports in particular, promotes social skills. Overall, the rhetoric implies that sport per se contributes to the development of these skills. The "dark sides" of sport are often ignored in the discourse. However, recent scientific studies show that sport is not universally inclusive and social, but that there are also numerous challenges and barriers to and within sport that contribute to its exclusivity.

People with higher social status still participate in sport more frequently than those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This is also reflected in the membership structures of German sports clubs, which are still characterised by a relatively high level of education and income. This is particularly true for children and young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, who attend sports clubs much less frequently than other children and young people (Bartsch et al., 2025).

The reasons for this can be found both at the structural level and in the experiences of children and young people in club life. Access to sport is largely determined by the availability of financial resources on the part of parents (Thole & Hölich, 2014; Burrmann et al., 2025). Nobis & Albert (2018) also point out that the child's education and the educational background of the parents are also decisive factors.

This connection is also supported by current data from the Move for Health study (Bartsch et al., 2025, pp. 120–140), according to which 38.1% of young people whose parents have at most a lower secondary school qualification regularly participate in sport outside of school, compared to 63.9% of young people whose parents have a higher qualification. In addition to these structural aspects and the uncertainty generally associated with entering a new social system, feelings of unfamiliarity due to differences in habitus can make it more difficult to get started in sport. These feelings of unfamiliarity and insecurity can be further exacerbated if marginalised young people have unpleasant experiences in the context of sport.

Data from the current study by Bartsch et al. (2025) also show that socioeconomically marginalised young people in sports clubs more frequently experience physical and social stigmatisation, such as psychological harassment, humiliation, or bullying. This often relates to the physical appearance of the young people. Although only 72 of the young people surveyed in the study stated that unpleasant experiences in the sports club played a role in their leaving the club (Bartsch et al., 2025), further studies indicate that discrimination in sport is not an isolated case. Nobis et al. (2022) found in a study in which they sent fictitious enquiries to over 1,600 football clubs in Germany that a foreign-sounding name significantly reduced the likelihood of being invited to a trial training session (p. 1165). Interim results from the ongoing study "Racism and Anti-Racism in Club-organised Sport" also show that racism is part of everyday life in sports clubs and often has no consequences (dsj, 2025).

In addition to racism, discrimination against women and queer people is also a challenge that football faces. The results of the study by Arnold et al. (2023, p. 92) on reported incidents of discrimination at the reporting office for discrimination in football in North Rhine-Westphalia show that 75% of reported incidents were related to sexist and misogynistic motives, 63% had racist motives, and 48% had queerphobic motives.

Furthermore, in sport and especially in the male-dominated world of football, there is a problem of acceptance in the context of diversity and gender variety (see p. 3.2.3). Empirical findings such as the Outsport study (Menzel et al., 2019) and the Sport for all Genders and Sexualities study (Braumüller et al., 2024) show that queer and trans* people in particular are affected by exclusion: 27% of homosexual, bisexual, and trans people feel discriminated against in football. Most cases of discrimination occur in amateur and grassroots sport, highlighting the need for action even in the lowest leagues.

Sexism is also widespread: 61.7% of women surveyed rate it as strong or very strong in grassroots football, and more than half have already witnessed corresponding incidents. 88.8% of women and 62.2% of men demand more action against it. Racism and homophobia are also perceived as present problems—over 50% of respondents recognise racism in grassroots sport, and two-thirds of LGBTQIA+ supporters perceive homophobia as a clear problem. These structural inequalities can also be understood in normative terms: football is still regarded as a space in which masculinity functions as the "unmarked norm" and everything non-masculine appears as the "marked other" (von der Heyde, 2021).

PART 2

SOCIAL EXPERIENCES, PARTICIPATION AND WELL-BEING IN THE CONTEXT OF FOOTBALL. A SCOPING REVIEW

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1. INTRODUCTION

This literature review addresses the question of how social experiences in the context of team sport, and especially football, shape the well-being of young people. The first section introduces the concept of child well-being within childhood studies. In addition to normative frameworks and children's rights perspectives, both objective and subjective indicators of well-being are discussed. International comparative studies, existing indicator systems, and the political dimensions of well-being and representations of childhood are systematically examined. A conclusion leads into the specific field of sport.

The second section situates well-being in the context of team sport and football. It analyses the extent to which sport can serve as a space for experience and development for children and young people. The third section documents the methodological approach of the Scoping Review. After designing the search strategy and an initial screening of the literature, titles and abstracts are systematically reviewed and relevant full texts analysed.

In the fourth section, the results are synthesised according to five clusters: target group, setting, forms of social experiences, frameworks of well-being, and theoretical references. The overall synthesis across clusters serves to condense the key findings. Building on this, the research question is answered and conclusions for further research are discussed. Finally, additional perspectives from recent German-language child and youth studies (2020–2025) are integrated to expand the international literature with national contexts and empirical insights.

2. CHILD WELL-BEING AS A CONCEPT IN CHILDHOOD STUDIES

International research on child well-being adopts a perspective on childhood that foregrounds childhood as an independent phase of life with specific needs and experiences. In a widely cited handbook on child well-being, Ben-Arieh et al. (2014) outline an understanding of well-being that includes both subjective experiences and objective living conditions. Well-being encompasses aspects of need satisfaction, quality of experience, opportunities for development, and self-actualisation. The term refers to dimensions of a good—and thus implicitly also a bad—childhood, and thus unmistakably introduces a normative perspective into the discussion (Ben-Arieh et al. 2014, p. 1).

This normativity is not marginalised in academic discourse. Rather, it is highlighted as a conceptual strength. Indeed, this creates an argumentative tension that proves productive. The concept of child well-being can be understood both as an analytical tool and as a link between research, policy, and practice. It helps to relate different system logics to one another, thus creating connectivity without abandoning the claim to academic reflexivity. This dual objective creates a space of possibility that links the analysis of social structures with an implicit call for action.

At the centre is always the question of the quality of childhoods. Quality of life appears in this context as a field of interpretation shaped by different theoretical, political, and cultural perspectives. The fact that thinking about the good life cannot be limited to empirically observable conditions becomes clear in the engagement with philosophical concepts. Martha Nussbaum (2000), in this context, argues from an ethical understanding of human capabilities, the Capability Approach. According to Nussbaum, every person should have the real opportunity to pursue their own idea of a successful life. Research on child well-being takes up this idea, but largely refers to the internationally recognised rights of the child. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child forms a central basis for the normative framework, through which child well-being is understood not only as an individual experience but as a socially and legally structured condition.

The combination of subjective experience and objective living conditions points to a theoretically demanding conception. It is about capturing children's living situations and also understanding their significance from the children's perspective. The aim to take both subjective interpretations and structural conditions seriously characterises central lines of international research. The tension between these two poles is seen as a constitutive element that methodologically and substantively challenges the discourse on child well-being.

NORMATIVE FRAMEWORKS, RIGHTS, AND PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDHOOD

The concept of child well-being refers, on the one hand, to a specific description of children's living situations. On the other hand, it is embedded in broader normative and political discourses in which questions of rights, participation, and the social positioning of children are negotiated. Human rights references play a central role in this context. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is often used in research as a normative framework to understand child well-being not as an individually anchored feeling but as a structurally conditioned and legally legitimised category.

Ben-Arieh (2005) already emphasised that, in addition to external conditions of growing up, abilities and scopes for action available to children in everyday life should also be considered. Under the term "life skills", he includes both opportunities for participation and the understanding of children's living environments. This makes it clear that the research perspective cannot remain limited to capturing external circumstances. Rather, it deals with the question of what children do, what they need, how they think and feel, with whom or what they relate, and what contribution they make to their environment. All these questions form central reference points for capturing children's lifeworlds (Ben-Arieh, 2005, p. 577).

In addition to this substantive opening, research also points to a temporal dimension that is significant for understanding well-being. In their joint work, Ben-Arieh and Frønes (2011) emphasise that well-being should be understood as a dynamic concept. It is embedded in social processes, subject to historical and cultural contexts, and cannot be thought of as a static variable. The authors point out that indicators are signs of both processes and states, referring to current conditions as well as future possibilities, to resources as well as their effects. The idea that child well-being can be read as a snapshot is thus expanded by the perspective on processes of development and investment.

This historical and cultural sensitivity is by no means a given in research. The danger of understanding indicators and dimensions of child well-being as universally valid categories is still present. Methodologically, the question arises as to how a context-sensitive approach can succeed without closing itself off to comparability. This challenge is repeatedly addressed in research, especially in the tension between quantitative survey methods and qualitative contextualisation.

Special attention is also paid to the shift in perspective from well-becoming to well-being. Ben-Arieh (2008) and representatives of Childhood Studies criticise the view that primarily sees children as "becomings", i.e. as future adults. Instead, the importance of children's agency in the here and now is emphasised. Children are taken seriously as social subjects with their own rights and life plans. This perspective changes not only the theoretical approach but also methodological procedures. The question of how children actively shape their environment, how they form relationships, and how they process experiences moves to the centre.

It remains striking, however, that a specific dimension of children's existence has so far received only limited attention in research. While children are increasingly perceived as beings of the present, their biographical anchoring often remains underexposed. Even in cases where children's origins—such as experiences of flight—are addressed, this is rarely done with regard to individual pasts. Childhood thus tends to be conceptualised in the mode of the present, while the significance of past experiences is only marginally mentioned. The question of the extent to which children are taken seriously as remembering subjects with their own histories arises in a special way here.

OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE INDICATORS OF WELL-BEING

The empirical measurement of well-being is always linked to the question of how the concept can be translated into measurable dimensions and indicators. It becomes clear that child well-being is not a clearly defined phenomenon but rather appears in the diversity of its theoretical and methodological approaches. Research operates with a variety of dimensions by which indicators are identified and operationalised to map the well-being of children in different contexts. These indicators each follow specific settings and selection processes, which are by no means neutral or universal but refer to certain assumptions about childhood, quality of life, and social participation.

A prominent example of the attempt to measure child well-being at an internationally comparable level is provided by the regularly published UNICEF studies in the State of the World's Children series, and especially the UNICEF Innocenti Report Cards. In the eleventh edition of this series, an index was constructed to capture the well-being of children in wealthy countries (Adamson, 2013). This was based on secondary data evaluated along five dimensions: material well-being, health and safety, education, risk behaviour, and living and environmental conditions. Within these categories, indicators were defined to map, for example, poverty, deprivation, birth and mortality rates, school performance, or environmental pollution.

This form of operationalisation focuses on objective living conditions, with the aim of making internationally comparable statements. Nevertheless, this study also attempts to include children's subjective assessments in the analysis. The combination of objective and subjective data reveals a central methodological challenge in the field. While significant correlations can often be found between the two levels, there are also clear discrepancies. For example, in Report Card 11, a country ranking was created that compared both objective and subjective assessments. The results show sometimes considerable deviations: while Greece ranked near the bottom in the objective comparison, it was among the top countries in terms of subjective life satisfaction. The same applies to Spain. Conversely, the example of Germany shows that good objective conditions do not necessarily go hand in hand with high subjective satisfaction.

These findings lead to fundamental considerations about the relationship between living conditions and subjective quality of life. The reduction to either objective or subjective indicators is increasingly critically discussed in research. One-sided perspectives risk inadequately capturing complex life realities or overlooking structural influences. Children who report a high level of subjective well-being do not necessarily live under favourable conditions. Conversely, the presence of infrastructure, security, or educational opportunities cannot automatically be interpreted as a guarantee of subjective well-being. The question here is how children themselves assess these conditions, what relevance they attach to them, and how these conditions are embedded in their everyday experiences.

This tension becomes particularly clear when focusing on the micro-sociological level. While robust correlations between objective conditions and well-being can be found at the macro level, for example in national comparative studies, the picture is much more differentiated at the individual level. Bradshaw (2019) points out that subjective well-being at this level often proves to be an independent variable that cannot easily be derived from living conditions. He also notes that there are systematic gaps in research, for example regarding the influence of the zeitgeist, sibling relationships, urban spaces, or digital experiences, which could be of considerable importance for child well-being (see Bradshaw, 2019, pp. 227–228).

These considerations make it necessary to develop context- and lifeworld-oriented perspectives on well-being that do not remain stuck in binary oppositions such as objective versus subjective. Instead, it is about capturing the significance of conditions and experiences in their interplay, analysing their mutual influence, and describing the conditions of children's quality of life in their relational constitution. Research here faces the challenge of making the complexity of children's living situations methodologically accessible without abandoning the claim to systematic comparability.

INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE STUDIES AND INDICATORS

The diversity of approaches to capturing child well-being becomes particularly evident when comparing international comparative studies. These projects are not driven solely by scientific interest, but are often closely linked to political steering objectives. The choice of indicators, underlying concepts, and methodological procedures reveals that child well-being is not conceived as a neutral object of observation, but always stands in the tension between scientific analysis, political applicability, and normative framing.

A particularly sophisticated framework model for child well-being can be found in the UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 16 (UNICEF Innocenti, 2020). There, a conceptual framework is presented that is oriented towards Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and models child well-being in zones of influence. At the centre is the child with their individual experiences, perceptions, and patterns of interpretation. The outcomes of well-being are conceptualised both objectively—such as through educational attainment or health indicators—and subjectively—such as through life satisfaction or social connectedness.

The framework is divided into three levels: the "world of the child" encompasses direct experiences and relationships, such as with family members or peers, as well as everyday activities. The "world around the child" refers to resources and networks, including household income, living conditions, and also indirect social contexts such as parental work pressure. The outermost sphere, the "world at large", includes political and societal macro-conditions. This includes national social, educational, or health policies as well as economic and ecological contexts that can influence well-being directly or indirectly.

This three-part system enables a multidimensional analysis of child well-being that goes beyond simple causal models. It allows for the explanation of differences within countries as well as differences between countries. At the same time, the model provides a point of connection for further research by identifying indicators for children's rights, child protection, or safety as areas that have so far been insufficiently considered. The UNICEF study explicitly identifies research gaps, for example in the area of mental well-being, for which there are only limited internationally comparable data. Particularly striking is the lack of robust indicators for child participation and for experiences with violence or protection mechanisms. This makes it clear that central dimensions of children's experiences have so far only been marginally anchored in international comparative research.

Parallel to this theoretical expansion, other survey instruments can also be observed that place greater emphasis on subjective well-being. The Well-being Index of the British Children's Society, for example, combines standardised questions on general life satisfaction with a range of life domains that children themselves have identified as important (The Children's Society, 2010, 2020). Similarly, Bradshaw and colleagues attempt to make subjective assessments of parental relationships, school experiences, and health visible in quantitative designs (Bradshaw et al., 2013). The common denominator of these approaches lies in the effort to establish subjective dimensions as a serious source of knowledge in childhood research.

Large-scale comparative studies such as PISA have also begun in recent years to systematically include the topic of well-being (OECD, 2017, 2019). In addition to performance data, psychosocial indicators such as life satisfaction, learning motivation, sense of meaning, or confidence in one's own abilities are recorded. This expansion points to a growing recognition of the fact that education is conveyed not only through cognitive achievement but also through emotional and social well-being.

Nevertheless, the empirical landscape remains characterised by considerable heterogeneity. The diversity of indicator systems and their theoretical foundations makes consistent comparability difficult, but at the same time reveals the diversity of children's life realities. The proposal by Dex and Hollingsworth (2012) to set the dimensions of relationships, spaces, and the self with degrees of freedom as structural reference points is an attempt to theoretically bind this heterogeneity. Their focus is on those areas in which children can make experience-based judgments and in which research and everyday life are more closely connected.

Overall, it is clear that international comparative studies not only generate descriptive findings but also make normative determinations. They define what is considered relevant knowledge about childhood, which areas of life are regarded as significant, and which voices are heard. The UNICEF model, with its threefold framework, can be seen as an advanced example that combines theoretical ambition, empirical measurability, and political applicability, without fully resolving the ambivalences of the field.

POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF WELL-BEING AND REPRESENTATIONS OF CHILDHOOD

The engagement with child well-being is not limited to the scientific field. Rather, the concept unfolds political impact, which is noticeable both in national and international contexts. To the extent that the well-being of children is measured using indicators, presented in comparative terms, and normatively evaluated, political discourses also draw on it to identify needs for action or to legitimise existing structures. Child well-being thus functions as an interface between empirical description and normative expectation—a concept that both produces knowledge about childhood and feeds it into societal negotiation processes.

In particular, studies that have emerged in the context of international governance contribute to the political visibility of childhood. The UNICEF Report Cards, for example, generate high media attention through rankings and thus influence political decision-making levels. However, as already indicated, the focus of these studies is often on negative aspects of childhood. Indicators such as child poverty, mortality, risk behaviour, or poor environmental quality primarily frame childhood as an endangered phase of life. Betz (2018) points out that this form of representation hardly corresponds to a fundamental shift towards positive representations of children's living conditions, as postulated by the "Child Indicators Movement" (ibid., p. 66).

In educational policy contexts, such as the PISA studies, it is also evident that the focus is often less on successful conditions than on where and how educational policy should be adjusted. The results of such studies serve as indicators of state performance, with positive developments often being less prominently discussed than deficits. The political applicability of the well-being concept here results from its function as a measurement instrument for societal responsibility. However, it can also lead to children's perspectives being instrumentalised to stabilise existing governance logics.

The political significance of the well-being concept is evident in international comparisons as well as at the national level. In social reporting, for example, concepts of successful childhood are explicitly framed normatively. Joos (2018) shows, using the German government's child and youth reports, that childhood there appears as an achievement to be produced, primarily within familial and educational contexts. The state acts as a regulating instance, creating and controlling framework conditions, but less often as an active co-designer of children's quality of life. The question of how responsibility for growing up is distributed is not answered neutrally in these contexts, but is structured along cultural and political patterns of interpretation.

This construction of responsibility is closely linked to the representation of childhood. Good childhood appears as the result of correct upbringing, successful educational biographies, and stable social structures. Bad childhood, on the other hand, is coded in terms of deficits, risks, or burdens. In this duality, normative ideas are reflected about what is considered worthy of protection, conducive to development, or deficient. The concept of well-being thus assumes the role of a boundary concept: on the one hand, it allows for empirical differentiation of children's living conditions, but on the other hand, it also provides normative standards that frame and legitimise political decisions.

Research on child well-being thus moves in a field of tension between emancipatory interest in knowledge and political applicability. The term functions as a resonance chamber for societal ideas about childhood and youth, but is itself also part of those discursive processes in which childhood is repeatedly redefined and negotiated. This ambivalence opens up the possibility of influencing political debates, but at the same time places high demands on a reflexive research practice that is aware of its own normative assumptions and institutional embedment.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Research on child well-being is characterised by high conceptual openness and methodological diversity. Taken together, the different approaches show that it is not a uniformly operationalisable phenomenon, but rather a dynamic and context-dependent field of interpretation. The concept of well-being always refers simultaneously to subjective experiences, objective framework conditions, and normative ideas of a successful life. It is precisely this multidimensionality that gives the concept its applicability in scientific, political, and educational discourses.

At the same time, this openness brings challenges. The multitude of indicators and survey methods makes it difficult to compare studies and makes it clear that statements about child well-being are always tied to the respective theoretical framework and societal conditions. Attempts to establish global standards through international comparative studies reach the limits of cultural translatability. This becomes particularly clear in the discussion about subjective and objective indicators, the relationship between which is still not conclusively clarified.

The framework developed in the UNICEF Report Card 16 makes an important contribution to conceptual development by understanding well-being as the result of complex, interlocking influencing factors. The orientation towards Bronfenbrenner's model enables theoretically grounded contextualisation, but its empirical implementation encounters significant data gaps. The fact that key aspects such as mental health, participation, or child protection have so far only been inadequately captured points to structural gaps in the research field. These gaps are not accidental, but reflect which areas of children's lived reality are made visible in society and which are not.

At the same time, it becomes clear that the concept of child well-being is much more than a descriptive instrument. It contributes to the construction of social reality by normatively charging certain representations of childhood and anchoring them institutionally. The political effects of well-being research are considerable, especially where indicators define scope for action, assign responsibilities, or legitimise access to resources. Research dedicated to this field is therefore responsible for critically reflecting on its own assumptions and for strengthening participatory and context-sensitive perspectives.

For future research, several tasks arise from this. Firstly, concepts of well-being should be more closely aligned with the experiences and interpretations of children themselves, without reducing them to mere survey objects. Secondly, structural conditions should not only be understood as a backdrop, but systematically related to subjective assessments. Thirdly, there is a need for greater sensitivity to social exclusion and blind spots in data collection, especially where certain groups of children are hardly reached.

3. WELL-BEING IN THE CONTEXT OF TEAM SPORT AND FOOTBALL

The question of the well-being of young people becomes particularly significant when examined in relation to those social spaces in which young people have concrete experiences. Organised sport is one such space. It structures time and belonging, creates recognisable patterns of interaction, and is simultaneously embedded in societal expectations and institutional frameworks. Among the many forms of club sport, football stands out as it is both widely available in terms of infrastructure and particularly charged with cultural meaning. In football, physical, emotional, and social dimensions are condensed into a space of experience that is actively shaped, interpreted, and evaluated by the participants. This condensation is evident on several levels.

On the one hand, football has a high institutional presence in almost all regions, which formally enables low-threshold participation for many children and young people. On the other hand, football is associated with dense social expectations that allow for both performance-oriented and community-oriented interpretations. Young people do not experience the football pitch solely as a place of sporting achievement, but as a social resonance space in which recognition, group belonging, status, and emotional regulation are interwoven. Physical practice thus becomes a carrier of social meanings, which are activated in collective action, in comparison with others, in feedback from coaches, and in the resonance of peers. Football thus becomes a condensed place of social reality, where relationships with oneself and with others can unfold in a concrete, embodied form.

The model for framing child well-being proposed in UNICEF Report Card 16 (UNICEF 2020) provides a conceptual framework for analytically capturing these social processes. It distinguishes between the individual lifeworld of the child, the immediate social and material environment, and the overarching structural conditions. Within the football field, these levels can be traced exemplarily: training situations, team dynamics, or competition experiences influence the experience of belonging, visibility, and insecurity. Family support, mobility, financial resources, or club infrastructure structure the possibilities for participation. Societal patterns of interpretation, such as media representations, gender-specific attributions, or political sports funding, frame the symbolic order within which children's experiences are situated.

Against this background, football does not appear as an inherently beneficial place, but as a socially condensed space in which experiences of recognition are articulated just as much as those of exclusion. Whether and how children experience well-being in this context cannot be traced back to individual characteristics or measurable outcomes, but points to complex interrelationships between individual interpretations, social relationships, and structural conditions. The following section will therefore examine how children and young people perceive football as part of their lifeworld, what meanings they attribute to this practice, and how their experiences move within the tension between participation, belonging, and social experiences.

The decision to use a Scoping Review as the methodological approach arises from the nature of the subject. The relationship between well-being and social experience in the context of football has not been theoretically coherently developed nor empirically comprehensively explored. Rather, there are scattered contributions in which sport-related socialisation experiences are only sporadically linked to concepts of child well-being. The state of research is characterised by disciplinary fragmentation, different conceptual approaches, and a multitude of isolated empirical findings.

A Scoping Review offers the opportunity to use this heterogeneity as a starting point for a structured reconstruction. The focus is on making visible thematic concentrations, conceptual shifts, and research practice conventions. The method allows the field to be mapped without prematurely systematising it. It follows an understanding of well-being that is relational, context-sensitive, and processual.

The literature review aims to organise existing research along those questions in which social experiences in football are linked to aspects of child well-being. The aim is to recognise how well-being is used and produced, negotiated, or even questioned as a concept. In this sense, the Scoping Review is intended to provide an orienting approach to the research field and at the same time open up points of connection for more in-depth empirical engagement.

4. SCOPING REVIEW: SOCIAL EXPERIENCES IN TEAM SPORT AND THEIR IMPACT ON YOUTH WELL-BEING

Addressing the research question of how social experiences in the context of team sport, with a particular focus on football, affect the well-being of young people requires a systematic approach to the existing scientific literature. Methodologically, a Scoping Review was chosen for this purpose. This method allows for the mapping and conceptual ordering of heterogeneous and not yet fully systematised research fields. The focus is on making visible theoretical frameworks, guiding concepts, and thematic concentrations. The methodological approach followed a multi-stage structure aimed at achieving the most comprehensive and differentiated selection of relevant contributions possible.

4.1. IDENTIFICATION: CONCEPTION OF THE SEARCH STRATEGY AND INITIAL SCREENING

In the first step, a systematic search profile was developed that corresponded to the central terms of the research question. The starting point was a combined query of four thematic complexes: the target group (young people), the subject area (football or team sport), the level of social experience (relationships, participation, recognition, support, trust, integration), and the outcome (well-being in terms of subjective and social well-being). At the same time, by excluding terms such as “elite”, “professional”, or “league”, it was ensured that the focus remained on non-professional, everyday sport.

The English-language search strategy was as follows:
(Child* OR Youth* OR adolescen* OR “young people”) AND (football OR soccer OR “teamsport” OR “team sport”) AND (participat* OR belong* OR relationship* OR „social inclusion“ OR „social* included“ OR support* OR trust* OR appreciat* OR acknowledg* OR recogni* OR respect*) AND (“well-being” OR wellbeing) NOT (elite OR professional* OR league)

This search logic was implemented in three relevant international specialist databases: Web of Science, PsycINFO, and PubMed. The selection of these platforms was primarily based on which relevant journals and publishers they each cover. The decisive factor was the ability to access relevant publication organs that provide empirical and theoretical contributions to the field of child and youth well-being. For example, leading journals such as the Journal of Child Indicators Research or the Journal of Social Indicators Research can be systematically accessed via specific databases such as Web of Science or PsycINFO. By combining these databases, it was ensured that key journals at the intersection of social sciences, psychology, and health research were comprehensively considered. The database search yielded the following results:

- Web of Science: 138 publications
- PsycINFO: 33 publications
- PubMed: 94 publications

This resulted in a total of 265 entries potentially relevant for the review.

Additionally, a German-language search was conducted to include publications that originated in the German-speaking region and may not have been captured in international databases. For this, the platforms FIS Bildung and Google Scholar were used.

The search formulation was adapted to the language context and was as follows:
(Jugendliche OR Kinder OR Jungen OR Mädchen OR „junge Menschen“ OR „junge Fußballer*“) AND (Fußball OR „Mannschaftssport“ OR „Teamsport“) AND (Partizipation OR teilhabe* OR mitbestimm* OR Zugehörigkeit OR Beziehung OR Integration OR Unterstützung OR Vertrauen OR Anerkennung OR Wertschätzung OR Respekt) AND (Wohlbefinden OR Wohlergehen OR „well-being“ OR „Wellbeing“) NOT (Profifußball OR Profisport* OR Leistungssport*)

This German-language search added:

- FIS Pädagogik: 15 results
- Google Scholar: 114 results

This resulted in a total of 394 hits. After reconciling the results, automated detection of duplicates, and manual review, 82 duplicates were removed. The cleaned number of results was thus 312 contributions, which were transferred to the next screening stage.

4.2. SCREENING: TITLE AND ABSTRACT REVIEW

In the next step, the titles and abstracts of the remaining contributions were reviewed. The aim was to exclude studies that were clearly not related to the subject area of the investigation. A set of exclusion criteria was defined, based on topic, target group, context, and language.

Thematically, contributions were excluded if they primarily dealt with physical health, injury prevention, training-related performance optimisation, or neuropsychological effects of sporting activity. Such approaches, as important as they may be in other contexts, exceed the thematic mandate of this review, which explicitly focuses on social experience and non-physical dimensions of well-being.

With regard to the target group, studies were excluded if their focus was on coaches, adult athletes, people with disabilities (without specific reference to team sport), or fan communities. Contributions that dealt with the perspective of educational professionals or organisational framework conditions without reference to the experiences of young people were also filtered out.

Contextually, studies were not included if their field of investigation focused on school-based physical activity programmes, individual or elite sport, or if no differentiation between team sports was made. Finally, contributions written in languages other than German or English were excluded.

In total, the title and abstract screening excluded:

- 145 contributions from the international databases,
- 110 contributions from Google Scholar, and
- 9 contributions from FIS Pädagogik.

This left 43 publications selected for full-text review.

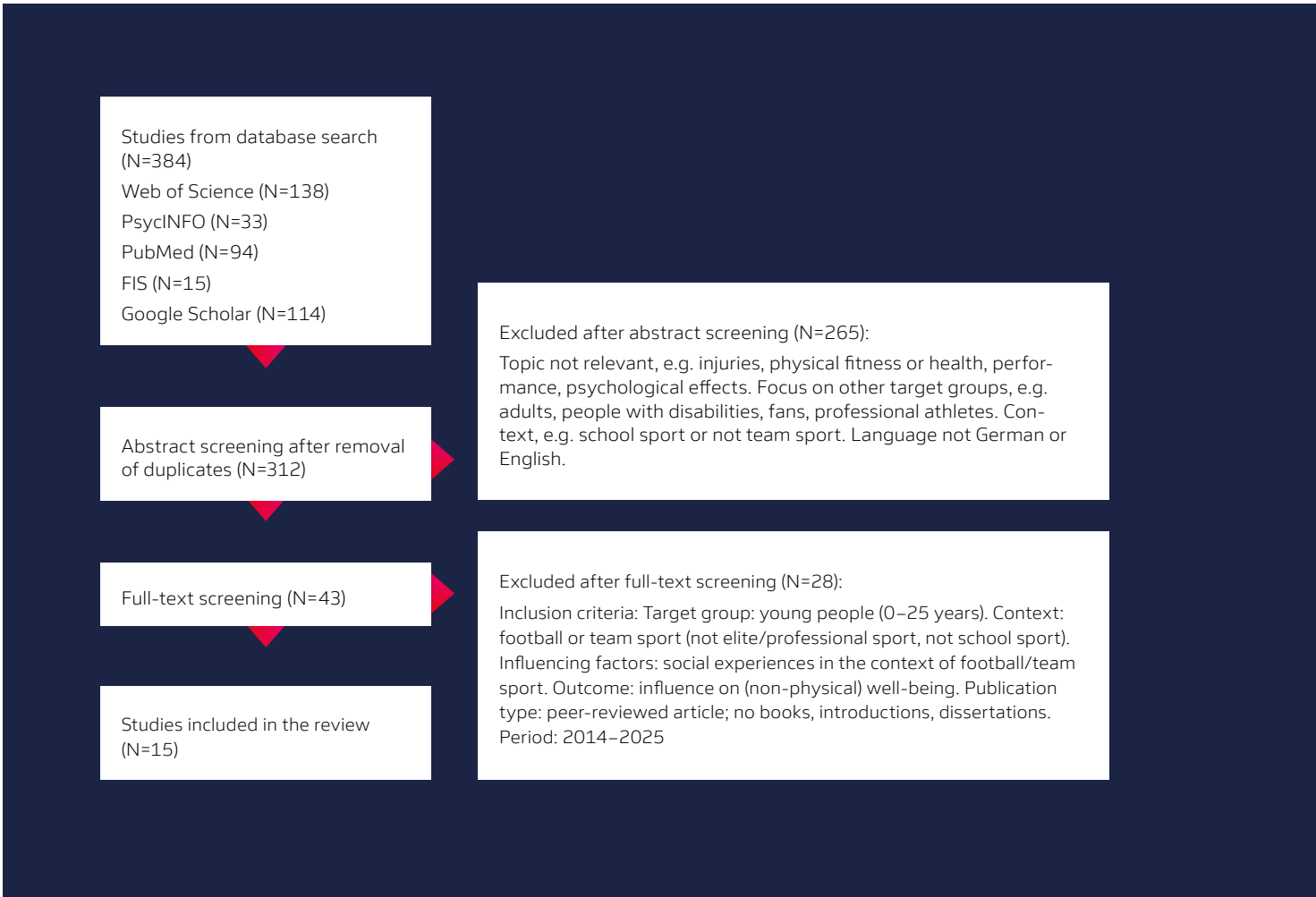
4.3. FULL-TEXT REVIEW: SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY SITUATION

In the third stage, the remaining selection was reviewed based on a complete reading of the texts. Clear inclusion criteria were applied, closely aligned with the formulated research question. These criteria were:

- Target group: Contributions had to explicitly refer to young people aged 0 to 25 years. Studies with broader age groups were only considered if the findings for the target group were differentiated.
- Context: The studies had to treat team sport as a central context, with football either explicitly or within a narrower category spectrum (e.g. ball sports in clubs). Studies on professional, elite, or school sport were excluded.
- Focus: The thematic orientation had to be on social experiences, such as forms of recognition, participation, exclusion, relationship-building, or social support in the sporting context.
- Outcome: The central reference had to be to psychosocial well-being (e.g. subjective life satisfaction, sense of belonging, social security), with a physical-medical focus not being sufficient.
- Publication type: Only peer-reviewed journal articles were included; books, edited volume contributions, forewords, introductions, reviews, or dissertations were excluded.
- Period: Publications had to have been published between 2014 and 2025.

Based on these criteria, 15 contributions were included in the final analysis (see Appendix 3). The remaining 28 studies were excluded, mostly due to a lack of differentiation regarding the age of participants, lack of focus on well-being, or because the context could not be limited to team sport or football.

The following illustration presents the procedure as a PRISMA flow diagram:



The 15 identified studies (see Appendix 3) are characterised by both thematic and methodological heterogeneity. They differ in terms of theoretical framework, disciplinary perspective, research design, and subject of investigation. In order to structure this diversity analytically, the contributions were categorised according to recurring thematic reference points. It proved useful to group the studies into five overarching clusters, which are not strictly separable from one another but do reveal different focal points.

This cluster differentiation does not follow a fixed category system but was developed inductively based on the content of the studies. It allows for the reconstruction of central research directions, conceptual tensions, and empirical focuses without prematurely imposing a normative framework.

The following five analytical fields are central:

- **Target group:** Analyses the age range, sociodemographic characteristics, and diversity dimensions of the groups studied, including the extent to which marginalised perspectives were considered.
- **Setting:** Refers to the location of the sporting activity—e.g. club, leisure group, school, or community-based projects—and their structural conditions.
- **Social experiences:** The focus here is on interactions, relationships, and dynamics within the sporting setting, especially with regard to recognition, exclusion, trust, or belonging.
- **Frameworks of well-being:** This cluster examines how well-being is understood, defined, or implicitly assumed—whether as a subjective experience, psychosocial construct, or normative goal.
- **Theoretical references:** Investigates which theoretical concepts or frameworks the studies are based on—such as developmental psychology models, sociological concepts of childhood, or concepts of agency and participation.

These five clusters serve as a heuristic structure for the comparative analysis of the studies and for relating key findings to the research question formulated at the outset. The aim is not to assign each study design precisely to a single cluster. Rather, the structure makes it possible to highlight different entry points into a complex research field and to work out their respective potential for insight.

5. SUMMARY OF STUDIES BY CLUSTER FORMATION

5.1. CLUSTER 1: TARGET GROUP

The target groups of the studies included in the Scoping Review are broad in terms of age, gender, social background, and other distinguishing features. The diversity of the cohorts studied can be divided into several key categories: chronological age, gender, social or geographical marginalisation, and sporting experience. Each of these dimensions affects the sporting experiences and subjective well-being of young people differently and must be interpreted in connection with the chosen settings and interventions.

Most studies focus on the 12–18 age group, although some include children as young as eight (e.g. Kipp and Bolter, No. 3; Berntzen and Lagestad, No. 1) or young adults up to their mid-twenties (e.g. Johns et al., No. 15). The phase from early to late adolescence is often highlighted in research as particularly sensitive to socio-emotional influences and developmental tasks. Many studies emphasise that, in this phase of life, social belonging, self-esteem, and recognition by peers and adults are central to psychosocial development. Accordingly, adolescent participants in this age group appear particularly receptive to sporting interventions that promote social experiences and well-being.

The gender composition of the samples varies considerably. Some studies analyse mixed groups (e.g. Kinoshita et al., No. 4), others focus explicitly on girls (e.g. Farmer et al., No. 10) or boys (e.g. Balaguer et al., No. 11). While many studies do not discuss gender differences in depth, some address gender-sensitive approaches. For example, Murphy et al. (No. 7) emphasise that performance-related norms in team sports can affect boys and girls differently, especially regarding body image and self-perception. Farmer et al. also show that programmes specifically aimed at girls (with female coaches, safe spaces, and motivating content) can significantly increase sporting participation and psychosocial well-being.

Another key criterion is social and geographical marginalisation. Many studies examine young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, whether in terms of socio-economic status, migration or refugee background, or living in peripheral regions. Rosso and McGrath (No. 13), van der Veken et al. (No. 8), and Johns et al. (No. 15) show that sport-based programmes in these contexts play a special role in social participation and integration. It is important that these programmes do not focus solely on sporting performance but offer participatory and low-threshold access that connects with the life realities of young people. The studies emphasise that marginalised young people often have fewer resources for participation and that targeted measures are needed to minimise exclusion risks.

Some studies focus specifically on young people with limited opportunities for participation or experiences of exclusion. For example, Njelesani et al. (No. 14) analyse, in a Zambian context, how sporting participation is made more difficult by normative attributions, such as gender role expectations or restrictions for young people with disabilities. Here, too, it becomes clear that the construction of target groups and participation opportunities is not neutral but shaped by structural and ideological conditions. The studies call for conscious reflection on who is considered eligible for support and how programmes must be designed to actually reach different groups.

With regard to sporting experience, several studies differentiate between performance-oriented athletes and recreational athletes. Kipp and Bolter (No. 9) and Berntzen and Lagestad (No. 1) compare players with different levels of football experience. Their results suggest that the effects of sporting interventions on well-being can vary depending on sporting socialisation. Young people with intensive prior experience benefit more from recognition by coaches, while less experienced participants may have different needs and expectations of sports programmes.

In summary, the conception of target groups in the studies is very heterogeneous. In addition to classic demographic categories such as age and gender, social situations, cultural affiliations, and sporting biographies play a central role. The studies make it clear that sport-educational interventions are particularly effective when they take the heterogeneity of participants seriously and develop specific approaches that connect with their life realities. For research and practice, this means not treating target groups as fixed categories but as socially and contextually shaped constructs that must be continuously reflected upon and adapted.

5.2. CLUSTER 2: SETTING

The studies compiled in the table show clear heterogeneity regarding the settings in which sport-based interventions and participation formats for young people are located. Three main contexts can be distinguished: organised club sport, school sport (which is organised similarly to clubs in the US context), and community-oriented sport programmes. Each of these contexts brings specific structural conditions, access requirements, and social dynamics that are significant for young people's experiences of belonging, support, and well-being in the sporting environment.

A large proportion of the studies locate sporting activities within organised club sport. This includes, for example, the work of Berntzen and Lagestad (No. 1), González et al. (No. 12), and Balaguer et al. (No. 11), all of which deal with football training within regular club structures. In these contexts, formal hierarchies, institutional rules, and regular training routines are paramount. At the same time, club sport often provides a stable social framework in which long-term relationships with peers and coaches can be built. This stability makes it possible to observe social processes such as recognition, social support, or team cohesion over longer periods. Studies such as those by Kipp and Bolter (No. 3) or Bean et al. (No. 9) show that, in particular, the behaviour of coaches in these settings is central to the experience of autonomy, competence, and social connectedness.

A second important context is school or extracurricular sport. Studies such as those by Bang et al. (No. 5) or O'Flaherty et al. (No. 6) examine the influence of school sports programmes on the psychological well-being and social integration of young people. These settings are special in that they often have greater heterogeneity among participants and are not primarily performance-oriented. The school setting also provides the opportunity to combine sporting activity with educational objectives. In both studies, the sense of belonging to the school community ("school belonging") is identified as a central mediating mechanism between sporting participation and well-being. In contrast to club sport, access here is less exclusive and more closely tied to school infrastructure.

A third type is community-oriented or Sport-for-Development programmes, as described by Rosso and McGrath (No. 13), van der Veken et al. (No. 8), or Johns et al. (No. 15). These programmes explicitly target disadvantaged groups and are often designed with intersectional sensitivity. Characteristic of these settings is a holistic, often participatory approach that uses sport as a medium for social inclusion, empowerment, and community-oriented development processes. The structural conditions in these programmes differ significantly from classic club or school sport: participation is usually voluntary, low-threshold, and more oriented towards the needs of young people. The studies show that it is precisely this voluntariness and flexibility that are central success factors for positive social experiences and subjective well-being.

It is striking that, across the various settings, a tension between structure and flexibility can be observed. While organised sport is characterised by clear rules, fixed hierarchies, and routine processes, community-oriented programmes are marked by openness, participatory design, and greater context sensitivity. The school context occupies an intermediate position: it is institutionally embedded but, through extracurricular activities, also offers scope for creative and inclusive sport-educational approaches.

From a theoretical perspective, these differences are relevant because the possibilities for need satisfaction (in the sense of Self-Determination Theory[2] can differ considerably depending on the setting. While club sport particularly emphasises the experience of competence and structure, community-oriented settings often enable a stronger experience of autonomy and belonging. In school contexts, it is above all social integration through peer groups and teacher relationships that has a positive effect on well-being.

The empirical findings suggest that the setting is not just a framework condition but a constitutive element of socio-emotional experiences in sport. Settings shape the structure of social interaction, frame relationship opportunities, and control access to resources. This has important implications for the design of sport-educational programmes. Interventions aimed at disadvantaged groups should consciously focus on low-threshold, flexible, and participatory settings. At the same time, it is clear that even in organised sport, social spaces for experience can be opened up through targeted training design and reflective coaching, which go beyond pure performance orientation.

Overall, the analysis makes it clear that the setting as an analytical category cannot be considered separately from educational objectives and social dynamics. Rather, it forms the basis for whether and how young people experience social recognition, belonging, and emotional well-being through participation in sport.

5.3. CLUST ER 3: SOCIAL EXPERIENCES

The studies listed in the table show a multifaceted spectrum of social experiences among young people in the context of organised sport. They make it clear that social experiences, both at the micro level of interpersonal relationships and in their structural embedding, play a decisive role in how young athletes construct their experiences in team sport. The studies differentiate between various dimensions of social experience, such as social support, belonging, recognition, trust, participation, and cooperation. These dimensions of experience influence central psychosocial development processes to varying degrees and intensities.

A central theme is the experience of social belonging, which is identified as significant in almost all studies. For example, the study by Owen et al. (No. 2) shows that team sport reduces the likelihood of feeling lonely. Here, it is less about sporting performance and more about shared experience, interaction with peers, and social integration. This effect is particularly pronounced among young people with socio-economic disadvantages, positioning sport as a low-threshold space for integration. The study by Kipp and Bolter (No. 3) also highlights social connectedness as a key component. Coaches who create a supportive, cooperative learning environment and avoid punishment foster a sense of belonging and thus contribute to the psychosocial development of their players.

Numerous studies explicitly locate social experiences in interaction with coaches. Coaches act as central agents of the social environment in sport and significantly influence how young people perceive and experience themselves in team sport. González et al. (No. 12), using a multilevel analytical design, show that the behaviour of coaches—especially their support for autonomy and social connectedness—is crucial for meeting psychological basic needs. The study refers to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), according to which social connectedness, autonomy, and competence are each central psychological needs. Berntzen and Lagestad (No. 1) also emphasise the importance of recognition by coaches. Their intervention design examines how targeted feedback strengthens the feeling of “being seen”, making it an important aspect of social experience. This effect is particularly pronounced for highly involved young people.

[2] Self-Determination Theory is based on the fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and social connectedness. The fulfilment of these needs is considered a prerequisite for the development of intrinsic motivation as well as for well-being and personal development.

In the context of school and the education system, the study by Bang et al. (No. 5) highlights the role of team sport in developing a sense of belonging to the school community. Social experiences in the team, such as trust, shared goals, and mutual support, are understood as resources that transfer to mental health. A similar approach is found in O'Flaherty et al. (No. 6), who show that regular participation in extracurricular sporting activities strengthens peer belonging and social networks, thus having positive effects on socio-emotional competences. Both studies emphasise that social experiences in sport do not act in isolation but are embedded in institutional contexts.

With regard to gender-specific aspects and marginalised groups, the study by van der Veken et al. (No. 8) provides important insights. It analyses a Sport-for-Development project in a Belgian district and shows how social recognition, peer contacts, and trust relationships in team sport can contribute to social inclusion. Here, voluntary participation and the sensitive design of the sporting framework are crucial for successful social experiences. The study argues that social experiences are particularly effective when they are linked to participation and recognition.

Another approach is offered by the study by Johns et al. (No. 15), which examines sport-based youth mentoring programmes in the context of migration and the prevention of violent extremism. Social experiences in team sport—especially trust, identification, and the feeling of being heard—have a stabilising effect on the psychosocial experience of young people. Sport is described as a space in which positive relationship experiences can be made that extend beyond sport itself.

Murphy et al. (No. 7) focus explicitly on the quality of social relationships in team sport in their qualitative study. The young people report that mutual support, pursuing common goals, and the experience of being part of a "we" are crucial for their emotional experience in sport. At the same time, it becomes clear that performance-oriented contexts can also negatively influence social experiences, for example through competitive pressure or problematic body norms. This ambivalence indicates that social experiences in sport are not necessarily positive but depend on the design of the sporting setting.

The tension between supportive and exclusive social experience is also evident in the study by Njelesani et al. (No. 14). It shows how certain groups, such as girls, young people with disabilities, or those from rural regions, are systematically excluded from Sport-for-Development programmes. The study deconstructs dominant ideologies that consider sport to be inherently inclusive and makes it clear that social experiences are also shaped by structural power relations. In this sense, social experience is not only an individual experience but also an expression of social justice or its absence.

Another important aspect is the role of parental support. The study by Kinoshita et al. (No. 4) shows that social experiences are not limited to the immediate sporting environment. Parents also act as significant social agents. Their support for autonomy plays a decisive role in the experience of social connectedness. Combined with the behaviour of coaches, this results in a complex network of social influences that shape the social experiences of young athletes.

In summary, social experiences in team sport are complex and context-dependent. They include interactions with peers, coaches, and other significant individuals and have a significant impact on the subjective experience and psychosocial development of young people. The studies show that social support, belonging, recognition, and cooperation are central components of successful social experiences. At the same time, it is clear that these experiences are not a given but must be actively shaped. Coaches play a key role here. Their attitude, communication style, and ability to enable participation are crucial for the quality of social experiences in sport.

Future research should differentiate more clearly which forms of social experience are particularly effective in which contexts and how they can be specifically promoted. It is also necessary to reflect on how structural conditions, such as access requirements, training culture, or gender roles, enable or prevent social experiences. For sport-educational practice, this means consciously shaping social experiences, for example through cooperative learning forms, cultures of recognition, and inclusive offers. Only when social experiences in sport are understood as an intentional part of educational design can they realise their full developmental potential.

5.4. CLUSTER 4: FRAMEWORKS OF WELL-BEING

The studies examined show that well-being in the sporting context is understood and conceptualised in different ways. While some studies interpret subjective well-being as general life satisfaction, others focus on specific facets such as mental health, vitality, or resilience. What they have in common is that well-being emerges as a relevant outcome of socially embedded sporting experiences. For a sound analysis, it is necessary to understand both the theoretical foundations and the measurement instruments used.

A central theoretical framework is provided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) according to Deci and Ryan. This theory assumes that well-being is based on the fulfilment of three psychological basic needs: autonomy, competence, and social connectedness (relatedness). In several studies, SDT serves as a reference framework for analysing sport-related well-being. For example, González et al. (No. 12), using a multilevel longitudinal design, show that coach behaviour perceived as autonomy-supportive has a positive effect on the fulfilment of basic needs and thus on the psychological well-being of young football players. Here, well-being is operationalised via subjective vitality, complemented by a counter-perspective on ill-being, measured in the form of burnout symptoms. Balaguer et al. (No. 11) also use the SDT framework to analyse the influence of coach behaviour on the experience of autonomy, competence, and social connectedness. Their results confirm the correlation between the fulfilment of basic needs and higher subjective well-being across several measurement points.

A related approach is taken by Kipp and Bolter (No. 3), who focus on motivational climate and its effects on psychosocial well-being. They do not use a standardised scale to measure well-being, but instead refer to dimensions such as goal setting, helpfulness, and respect, which are linked to personal and social development goals. Psychosocial well-being here is understood through social connectedness and perceived autonomy in the team sport context. This approach, while not directly psychometric, is theory-driven and allows for a differentiated examination of the developmental processes of young athletes.

Other studies take a more psychometric approach. For example, Bean et al. (No. 9) use the Flourishing Scale, an instrument for measuring subjective well-being that includes both cognitive and affective dimensions. The scale asks about, among other things, sense of purpose, social relationships, and engagement. This study shows that perceived social support and autonomy are associated with a higher score on the Flourishing Scale and also increase young people's commitment to sport. Farmer et al. (No. 10) also evaluate well-being using standardised scales, but in conjunction with physical performance data. Their intervention programme for girls shows that social inclusion, self-confidence, and motivational support can improve psychological well-being.

Mental health as an aspect of well-being is the focus of several large-scale quantitative studies. Bang et al. (No. 5) examine the influence of team and individual sport on depressive symptoms. They find that team sport in particular helps to reduce depressive symptoms, mediated by an increased sense of belonging to the school community. The perspective of "school belonging" functions here as a mediating variable between sporting activity and psychological well-being.

O'Flaherty et al. (No. 6) use a similar model. They also locate well-being in the area of socio-emotional health, which is influenced by peer belonging, integration, and cultural capital.

The perspective on well-being is expanded in qualitative studies to include subjective and contextual aspects. Murphy et al. (No. 7) show that well-being is shaped not only by sporting performance but above all by the experience of self-worth, resilience, and meaningful social relationships. The young people report that, in particular, supportive group experiences, trust, and the feeling of being part of a whole contribute to emotional stability. At the same time, the results indicate that performance-oriented contexts can impair well-being, for example through body image issues or comparisons within the team.

In studies focusing on marginalised target groups, well-being is often understood as the result of successful social participation. Rosso and McGrath (No. 13) and van der Veken et al. (No. 8) argue that sporting interventions aimed at participation and recognition promote well-being through social inclusion. This form of well-being is conceived less as an individual psychological phenomenon and more as a community-based one. It includes trust, belonging, taking on roles, and the feeling of "mattering". Johns et al. (No. 15) also take up this idea in the context of sport-based prevention programmes against radicalisation. They show that sporting settings foster trust and identification and thus contribute to psychosocial stability.

Berntzen and Lagestad (No. 1) place the dimension of social recognition at the centre. Their intervention design compares training with and without coach feedback. In addition to mastery, pleasure, and satisfaction, they also measure the construct of "being seen", which stands for the experience of social perception and appreciation. This form of well-being points to the importance of relational affirmation and has a significant effect on various psychosocial outcomes, especially among highly involved young people.

A special case is the study by Njelesani et al. (No. 14). Here, well-being is explicitly discussed using the concept of occupational justice, which aims at social justice in relation to participation in everyday activities. The study shows how sport-based programmes in Zambia can create exclusion and negative effects on well-being through selective access and ideological attributions (e.g. who is considered "eligible for support"). This perspective makes it clear that well-being also depends on structural conditions and that inequalities can be reproduced.

Overall, it can be stated that the studies examined display a broad conceptual diversity. Well-being is understood both as an individual and as a relational phenomenon. It encompasses psychological, social, emotional, and health-related components. Theoretical approaches range from Self-Determination Theory and Positive Youth Development to socially critical perspectives such as occupational justice. The scales and concepts used are correspondingly heterogeneous, which limits comparability but at the same time does justice to the complexity of the subject.

For future research and practice, this highlights the need to conceptualise well-being in a differentiated way. A clear identification of the definitions and measurement instruments used is just as necessary as the contextualisation of results with regard to target groups, sports, and institutional settings. Only in this way can it be understood under which conditions sporting participation actually contributes to the well-being of young people and which barriers need to be considered. At the same time, it becomes clear that sport-educational interventions can specifically address different dimensions of well-being, whether by promoting self-worth, social inclusion, or psychological stability. What is crucial is the conscious design of the social environment in sport, which offers young people space for recognition, autonomy, and belonging.

5.5. CLUSTER 5: THEORETICAL REFERENCES

The theoretical foundations of the studies examined in the Scoping Review vary considerably in terms of scope, depth, and integration into existing academic discourses. Some contributions are based on established psychological and developmental models, while others take a more pragmatic approach, drawing on specific key terms or concepts. Overall, there is an approximation to sport-educational, psychological, and social science theoretical frameworks that address both individual and structural factors.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan is particularly prominent. This theory assumes that well-being and motivation result from the fulfilment of three psychological basic needs: autonomy, competence, and social connectedness. Several studies adapt SDT for the sporting context. González et al. (2017) use it in a multilevel longitudinal study to examine how coach behaviour influences psychological basic needs. Their results show that social connectedness—in other words, the feeling of belonging to the team and coach—plays a central role in subjective well-being. Balaguer et al. (2018) also draw on SDT and analyse how perceived autonomy support from coaches, via motivational mechanisms such as intrinsic motivation, affects the well-being of young footballers.

A related theoretical approach is found in the work of Kipp and Bolter (Nos. 3 and 9), who focus on the concept of motivational climate. This perspective complements SDT with a context-specific view of the quality of interaction between coach and athlete. In particular, mastery and performance climates are distinguished. In a mastery climate, individual learning is emphasised, while a performance climate focuses on performance comparisons. The studies show that a mastery-oriented climate, which promotes cooperative learning processes and positive social relationships, is associated with higher psychosocial well-being and responsibility. While this theoretical framework is closely related to SDT, it places greater emphasis on the situational character of motivational processes.

The paradigm of Positive Youth Development (PYD) is used as a theoretical framework in several studies. PYD assumes that young people need resources to develop positively. These resources exist both at the individual level (e.g. self-esteem, motivation) and in the social environment (e.g. supportive relationships, participation). In the study by Kinoshita et al. (2023), PYD is used as an overarching concept to analyse the role of social support and autonomy support from coaches and parents. The “Thriving” model here refers to a dynamic interaction between environmental conditions and individual development. Camiré and colleagues (not directly in the table, but contextually relevant) have already integrated PYD into sporting settings in earlier work. Van der Veken et al. (2020) draw on PYD elements without explicitly using the term. Instead, they focus on concepts such as social inclusion, role-taking, and empowerment, which are compatible with the PYD approach.

Some studies adopt theoretical perspectives that go beyond the individual level and address social or societal dimensions. This is particularly evident in Njelesani et al. (2015), who work with the concept of occupational justice. This perspective emphasises the importance of fair opportunities for participation in everyday activities, including sport. The study analyses how social inequalities (e.g. due to disability, gender, origin) are reproduced through ideological narratives and organisational structures in Sport-for-Development programmes. Here, occupational justice is understood as a normative guiding principle for social justice and enables a critical reflection on access conditions and power relations in sport.

Another socially critical approach is offered by the study by Rosso and McGrath (2016), which draws on concepts from Community Development Theory and the theory of social determinants of health. This theoretical framework allows physical activity to be analysed not primarily as individual behaviour, but as an expression of socially embedded patterns of action. Empowerment and cultural fit function here as key concepts for understanding the impact of alternative football programmes in disadvantaged CALD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse) communities. In this case, the theoretical approach is practice-oriented but normatively charged, as it focuses on structural barriers and social inequality.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological-systems model, as also used in the UNICEF studies, is implicitly found in various works. Murphy et al. (2022) use terms such as social connectedness, self-efficacy, and resilience to describe well-being in a context-sensitive way. Even if no coherent theoretical model is named, the perspective is socio-ecologically oriented. Individual experiences are always related to social constellations and institutional framework conditions. This also applies to Johns et al. (2014), who highlight the social cohesion potential of team sport in the context of prevention programmes against radicalisation. Trust, identification, and group belonging are understood here as psychosocial protective factors that can contribute to resilience. The theoretical framework is based on concepts of social integration and collective efficacy, with sport-based interventions functioning as vehicles for social participation.

A pragmatic use of theory is evident in the large-scale quantitative studies. Bang et al. (2024) and O'Flaherty et al. (2022) draw on constructs such as "school belonging" or "school connectedness" without embedding them comprehensively in theory. Nevertheless, these terms can be linked to sociological theories of social capital or ecological developmental psychology. In these models, belonging to a community is considered a protective factor for psychosocial health. However, the theoretical connection here often remains at a conceptual level and is not explicitly modelled or tested.

In summary, the theoretical references of the studies can be divided into three main groups: psychological theories of motivation and need satisfaction (SDT, motivational climate), developmental psychological and educational approaches (PYD, Thriving), and societal and socially critical perspectives (occupational justice, community development, social determinants of health). While some studies are explicitly theory-driven, in other cases the use of theory remains descriptive or normative.

This heterogeneity offers both potential and challenges. On the one hand, it makes it possible to examine sporting experiences from different perspectives and thus to promote a multifaceted understanding of development and well-being. On the other hand, the lack of conceptual uniformity makes systematic comparability of study results more difficult. For future research, it would therefore be advisable not only to name theoretical models but also to systematically integrate them into research designs and include them empirically.

5.6. INTERIM CONCLUSION: AN OVERALL SYNTHESIS ACROSS CLUSTERS

This synthesis integrates the key findings from the five thematic clusters: target group, setting, forms of social experience, types of well-being, and theoretical references. It serves as a discursive approach to the overarching research question: under what conditions does participation in sport, in the context of football, influence the social well-being of young people? The analysis aims to link theoretical frameworks, empirical constellations, and contextual differences in such a way that the complex interplay of structure, subjectivity, and practice comes into focus.

The starting point is the observation that target groups should not be thought of as homogeneous collectives, but must be differentiated along socio-demographic, cultural, and biographical lines. The studies analysed make it clear that age, gender, migration background, and socio-economic status are not merely statistical variables, but mark social dispositions that significantly shape access to and the quality of sport-related experiences (see studies 2, 5, 6, 14, 15). Children and young people from marginalised social backgrounds do not automatically experience football settings as spaces of opportunity, but depend on specific institutional arrangements that provide recognition, security, and scope for action. Programmes that take these prerequisites into account show significant effects on both subjective and relational well-being.

The next step focuses on institutional settings. These mark the places of sporting practice and frame the social orders of interaction in which meanings of belonging, participation, and recognition are negotiated. The studies differentiate here between school-based (studies 5, 6), club-based (studies 1, 3, 4, 9, 11, 12), and community-oriented contexts (studies 8, 10, 13, 14, 15). While club sport is often characterised by performance orientation and selective access, school and community-based programmes show greater potential for inclusion, sensitivity to difference, and psychosocial effects. What is decisive here is less the institutional label and more the concrete social design of relationships, participation, and structures of recognition.

The forms of social experience can be reconstructed along several dimensions. Central motives are the experience of connectedness, trust, recognition, and cooperation. These experiences do not arise automatically through participation in sport, but require pedagogically framed and relationally coordinated arrangements. Studies dealing with motivational climate, team cohesion, or feedback processes (studies 1, 3, 4, 9, 11, 12) show that social recognition by coaches and peers can have short-term effects on motivation and engagement. In the longer term, these experiences help to stabilise the sense of social connectedness and self-efficacy. At the same time, some studies (studies 7, 14) point out that performance-oriented frameworks or normatively shaped body ideals have the potential to foster experiences of exclusion or self-doubt.

With regard to the types of well-being, a heterogeneous picture emerges. The studies examined operate with different theoretical and empirical conceptualisations, ranging from subjective vitality to psychological stability and social integration (e.g. studies 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12). Well-being is increasingly understood as a relational and context-dependent phenomenon. This means that well-being is not understood solely as an internal state of the individual, but is significantly shaped in its emergence and maintenance by the social relationships and structural conditions in which people

live. Particularly powerful are those approaches that analyse well-being as a processual experience in interaction with social structures. This perspective focuses on how well-being is generated through the quality of social interactions, experiences of belonging, and the possibility of active participation in social life. In this understanding, well-being functions as an indicator of successful social participation, as it expresses that individuals experience recognition, support, and scope for action in their social relationships.

The theoretical references are differentiated along different disciplinary traditions. Particularly striking is the relevance of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which identifies the psychological basic needs for autonomy, competence, and social connectedness as constitutive for motivational and welfare-related processes (studies 3, 4, 9, 11, 12). Many studies draw on this paradigm to model the effects of coach behaviour, participation, and social climate. In addition, concepts such as Positive Youth Development (study 4), School Belonging (studies 5, 6), flow and self-efficacy (study 7), or occupational justice (study 14) are added, which are oriented towards developmental psychology, educational theory, or social critique. The diversity of theoretical approaches points to an epistemic openness of the field and calls for reflexive and explicit theory-building to ensure connectivity and analytical precision.

Taken together, all clusters make it clear that sporting settings in the context of football should not be regarded as neutral spaces of experience. They are permeated by social expectations, normative frameworks, and institutional logics that can either foster or hinder the experience of belonging, recognition, and self-efficacy (see studies 1, 4, 7, 10, 13). The impact on the social well-being of young people depends largely on how these spaces are designed, moderated, and made structurally accessible. Studies that focus specifically on socially disadvantaged groups (studies 8, 13, 14, 15) show particularly clearly that participation in sport requires political, social, and cultural sensitivity.

Football and team sport potentially offer powerful spaces of experience in which social recognition, personal development, and psychosocial stability can be enabled. This presupposes that the social conditions of these experiences, and especially those along the clusters identified, are understood in their interdependence and are shaped accordingly. Only then can the question of the contribution of participation in sport to the social well-being of young people be answered in a well-founded way.

6. ADDITIONAL PERSPECTIVES FROM GERMAN-SPEAKING CHILD AND YOUTH STUDIES 2020–2025

The literature review presented here supplements the findings of the Scoping Review with empirical insights from representative youth studies published between 2020 and 2025. The selected period largely excludes pandemic-specific findings while also taking into account the fact that the COVID-19 crisis placed a particular strain on the well-being of young people. The aim of the analysis was to reconstruct statements about the significance of sport, especially football, in the lives of young people, as well as about the subjective and social dimensions of their well-being.

The Bertelsmann study on the needs assessment of children and young people (Steinhauer et al., 2024) highlights, in two key graphics, the subjective importance of physical activity and participation in sport. While mobile phones and mobile internet are by far the most frequently mentioned indispensable items, hobby and sports equipment as well as items of emotional value also occupy relevant positions. The importance of sport becomes even clearer in the context of a healthy life: here, almost 90 percent of the children and young people surveyed state that sport and physical activity are rather important or absolutely necessary for them. This subjective assessment points to a high intrinsic importance of physical activity for well-being and marks sport as a central area of need for young people.

The 17th Child and Youth Report of the Federal Government (2024) reinforces this assessment and points to the importance of sport for personality development, social participation, and the transmission of values. However, it also emphasises that opportunities for participation are unequally distributed. In particular, social background, gender, and access to infrastructure prove to be significant selection criteria. The MOVE FOR HEALTH study, funded by the BMFSFJ, highlights that the extent and institutional connection of sporting activities among children and young people vary greatly, with socio-economic inequalities playing a central role.

The qualitative study “Children’s Perspectives on Health and Educational Participation” by Kämpfe and Layer (2024) provides further indications of the subjective importance of sport in the everyday lives of young people. In narrative interviews, children report, among other things, using football as a strategy for coping with negative emotions. In these accounts, football appears as a space for emotional regulation and social stabilisation, for example through contact with friends or the opportunity to process stress physically. At the same time, individual vignettes show that sport can also be associated with sanctions, for example when school behaviour is disciplined by banning football. This makes it clear that access to sport can also be restricted by educational control and is subject to normative expectations.

The SINUS Youth Study (Calmbach et al., 2024) offers a milieu-specific differentiated analysis of the significance of sport and especially football in the lives of young people. It shows that sport plays a central role in almost all youth milieus, but is associated with different meanings. While, for adaptively pragmatic, consumer-materialistic, and precarious milieus, social connection, recognition through sporting achievement, and "letting off steam" are at the forefront, post-materialist and "expeditive" young people place greater emphasis on the health and mental aspects of physical activity. Sport serves as a vehicle for coping with stress, self-optimisation, or social integration, with football being the preferred activity especially among boys from less educationally privileged backgrounds. Girls, on the other hand, more often express distance or neutral attitudes towards football and sometimes explicitly criticise the gender-specific dominance in the football context.

The chapter on sport also reports that sporting activities often take place within family contexts and have intergenerational effects. Football thus has the potential to function both as a social bonding element and as a place of subjective self-efficacy and public recognition. Particularly positive experiences are highlighted in connection with competition successes, group experiences, or physical self-efficacy. At the same time, young people also discuss reasons for discontinuing football involvement. In addition to time constraints and changing life circumstances, it is above all a lack of social connection, conflicts within the team, and poor relationships with coaches that lead to withdrawal. These statements point to the relevance of relational dynamics for the continuity of sporting participation.

In summary, it can be stated that sport, and especially football, holds high subjective significance in the lives of young people. However, this significance is framed differently depending on the social milieu. Sport can function as a resource for social integration, recognition, and well-being, but is also structurally selective, gender-differentiated, and embedded in institutional power relations. The analysis of current youth studies thus confirms the findings identified in the review and underscores the need to design sport-educational programmes in a way that is sensitive to differences, participatory, and oriented towards subjective needs.

These additional findings make it clear that a deeper understanding of young people's sporting experiences—especially in football—is not only theoretically justified but also empirically necessary. A study that examines these dimensions from the perspective of the children themselves can build productively on these insights and help to close existing research gaps.

PART 3

DISCUSSION, RESEARCH GAPS AND RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

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1. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS OF THE LITERATURE STUDIES

The literature review presented here addresses two overarching questions: 1. To what extent do (team) sports (especially football) have the potential to promote social cohesion among children and young people, and 2. how do social experiences in the context of team sports (especially football) shape the well-being of young people? The two aspects analysed—social cohesion on the one hand and the well-being of young people on the other—show both a certain consistency and a degree of ambivalence.

The consistency is evident in the fact that the analysis of the relevant studies demonstrates that social experiences in the context of team sport, and especially in football, are intricately linked to the social well-being of young people. This connection is manifested in the way that the social, institutional, and subjective dimensions of experience interlock. The observed effects of social interactions—such as the experience of belonging, trust, or recognition—are context-dependent, situationally mediated, and shaped by structural conditions such as the behaviour of coaches, access opportunities, and group culture.

Participation in football has a positive effect on social well-being when involvement is not merely understood as participation in a physical activity, but as a socially framed space of experience characterised by stable relationships, practices of recognition, and dialogical communication. The studies consistently indicate that the feeling of being seen and respected is a central resource for psychosocial stability.

The well-being that arises from such contexts should therefore be understood as a relational construct. It emerges from the interplay between individual perceptions, social relationships, and institutional framework conditions. Studies that work with concepts such as Self-Determination Theory or Positive Youth Development particularly emphasise the interplay of autonomy, competence, and social connectedness. These psychological basic needs function as a heuristic tool for modelling the dynamics between social experience and well-being. The contribution of sporting practices to well-being results less from physical training than from the opportunity to experience social recognition, take on responsibility, and be embedded in structured relationship contexts.

This contribution appears particularly significant in contexts where young people operate with limited social resources. Studies examining programmes for disadvantaged young people show that football settings can have a compensatory function. However, this function only occurs if the structural and pedagogical conditions are participatory, resource-oriented, and relationally sensitive. Football can then become a place where social inequality is not reproduced, but transformed into reflective recognition.

At the same time, a certain ambivalence becomes apparent: especially in performance-oriented contexts or in groups with normatively shaped requirements (e.g. regarding gender or physicality), there is a risk of social exclusion or self-devaluation. In addition, various access barriers (social and cultural obstacles such as language barriers, family priorities) become evident, which particularly hinder girls' access to football programmes. Since access to clubs is often more difficult for disadvantaged and marginalised target groups, some of the identified studies have developed programmes specifically for these groups. However, it is apparent that these can sometimes produce stigmatisation effects, for example through "labelling" by others or the risk of (self-)stigmatisation of participants. Moreover, these programmes often lack connectivity, and the transition to further educational settings or sports clubs often does not succeed, as structural barriers (including membership fees, mobility) remain.

The following discussion will further elaborate on the various potentials of football-specific approaches.

1.1. PROMOTING SOCIAL CAPITAL AND BUILDING SOCIAL SKILLS THROUGH FOOTBALL

The results clearly show that football programmes, in the context of social capital, primarily contribute to strengthening "bonding capital"[3] (see Part 1, p. 3.1.5). This refers to close, supportive relationships within homogeneous groups and offers significant potential, especially for children and young people who previously had no or only a few stable social networks or who are socially isolated. At the same time, studies emphasise that a balanced combination of bonding, bridging, and linking capital is crucial for sustainable social cohesion. This combination can not only foster social support and cultural understanding, but also strengthen security and institutional participation, for example through targeted language support, culturally sensitive contact persons, or transitions into education and employment systems. Programmes that systematically address all three dimensions therefore appear particularly effective for social participation.

Some programmes are not exclusively aimed at the specific target groups described, but are open to children and young people of all social backgrounds. These programmes mainly aim to create inclusive settings and bring together heterogeneous groups through sport-based programmes.

It is interesting in this context that social capital is strengthened on the pitch, but this does not lead to active participation in community life or an increase in social engagement outside the sporting context—in other words, it does not result in "active citizenship".

The results of the Scoping Review conducted by Petry et al. also show that football- and sport-based programmes can promote a wide range of skills among children and young people. Some of the competences identified in the studies (self-esteem, self-efficacy, emotional self-regulation, and

[3] Putnam's theory of social capital is characterised by the differentiation of three types of capital: "bonding", "bridging", and "linking". "Bonding" refers to the strengthening of relationships within homogeneous groups, while "bridging" describes the building of connections between different social groups, and "linking" creates connections to institutions or organisations (e.g. outside of sport).

resilience) fall under the so-called “Future Skills” (Suessenbach et al., 2021). These “Future Skills”—such as teamwork, intercultural communication, resilience, and conflict resolution skills—particularly enable children and young people to meet social challenges, actively participate in shaping a sustainable future, and thus contribute to peaceful social cohesion.

In particular, the strengthening of social-emotional skills among children and young people is central to the development of empathy, conflict resolution skills, and the building of positive social relationships, and thus key qualifications for social cohesion.

However, for football- and sport-based programmes to achieve the development of skills at the level of children and young people, certain framework conditions must be met (see Part 1, p. 3.1.7): It is not just participation, but above all the socialisation processes triggered by building relationships that lead to the development of social capital and the acquisition of the necessary “Future Skills”. Participation and co-determination, low-threshold access, and embedding in the living environment of children and young people are central success factors. In addition, a multidimensional programme design (including non-sporting elements such as language support, theatre visits, job application training, or art/culture workshops) and anchoring in the social environment are important success factors when it comes to strengthening social cohesion.

In addition to the success factors outlined, there are a variety of hurdles in the implementation of activities, programmes, and projects (see Part 1, p. 3.1.8). The following three aspects are particularly noteworthy: stigmatisation effects for marginalised target groups, lack of human resources, and insufficient theoretical foundation or lack of evaluations:

(1) Since access to “regular” sports clubs is often more difficult for disadvantaged and marginalised target groups, programmes are developed specifically for these groups. However, it is apparent that these can sometimes produce stigmatisation effects, for example through “labelling” by others or the risk of (self-)stigmatisation. Moreover, these programmes often lack connectivity. The transition to sports clubs or further educational settings often does not succeed, as structural and social barriers (e.g. membership fees, mobility) remain.
(2) Lack of resources, which lead to structural and institutional barriers. These include infrastructural resources such as suitable sports facilities, human resources, and financial resources. In particular, a lack of human resources (including the availability of qualified staff—especially female coaches—and ensuring staff continuity).
(3) Insufficient theoretical foundation and lack of evaluations. A central deficit of many programmes and projects that aim to strengthen social cohesion through football lies in the insufficient theoretical foundation and evaluation. As a result, measures often rely on superficial rhetoric instead of using findings from scientific studies and theoretical insights.

The following section deals in detail with the discussion of the results of the literature analysis of German-language specialist literature on the potential of (team) sports (especially football) in the identified Action Areas:

1.2. THE POTENTIAL FOR SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF MIGRANT AND/OR REFUGEE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

As described in Part 1, p. 3.2.2, in Germany, sport in general—and football in particular—is expected to achieve successful integration of migrant and/or refugee children and young people. This expectation is fuelled, among other things, by organised sport itself, which claims to have an inherent integrative effect (Verweyen, 2023).

However, children and young people with a migration background are significantly underrepresented in sports clubs nationwide. The existing barriers to participation are much higher for this target group than, for example, for participation in all-day sports programmes or in open child and youth work (Bartsch et al., 2025). This is precisely why migrant children and young people particularly value these offers. In public and political discourse, however, the potential of integration services provided by child and youth welfare organisations is often only marginally considered, as they lack lobbying power and visibility (see position paper of the S4D Network Germany).

Football—when guided in the right pedagogical setting—enables children and young people to experience belonging and recognition. What is crucial—just as with the acceptance of gender variety and diversity—is the targeted reflection on lines of difference regarding (family) origin. In practice, however, the discourse must also be conducted with the so-called majority society (or receiving community). Social integration can only succeed if it takes place in mutual interest—otherwise, social power structures are maintained or even reinforced.

1.3. THE POTENTIAL FOR PROMOTING ACCEPTANCE OF GENDER VARIETY AND DIVERSITY AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

(Football) clubs are not only places of sporting activity, but also social spaces in which children and young people reflect the dimensions of diversity and negotiate belonging, recognition, and social positioning. They therefore have the potential to contribute to a socially established culture of acceptance of sexual and gender diversity beyond the clubs themselves. At the same time, organised sport still falls far short of adequately reflecting social diversity in its structures (Bellmann, 2024).

Football—when guided in the right pedagogical setting—enables children and young people to experience trust, self-efficacy, and negotiation. What is crucial—just as with the integration of migrant children and young people—is the targeted reflection on lines of difference such as gender, identity, and orientation, as well as an attitude of openness on the part of coaches and trainers. Football can thus become a social learning space that goes beyond its sporting function, provided that pedagogical principles and diversity perspectives are actively integrated into the setting.

Diversity in leadership is not merely symbolic, but measurably increases organisational effectiveness and capacity for innovation (Lee & Cunningham, 2018; Wicker et al., 2022). Civil society organisations that are gender- and diversity-sensitive also have fewer personnel and financial problems (Wicker et al., 2022). Diversity therefore requires not only individual openness, but also structural framework conditions such as anti-discrimination policies, inclusive language, or participation formats. Only when diversity is understood as a cross-cutting task can organised football live up to its role as a driver of social change.

1.4. THE POTENTIAL FOR PROMOTING DEMOCRATIC CAPACITY AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Football offers a wide range of potential to provide children and young people with opportunities for participation, to practise democracy, to become actively involved in a community and help shape it, as well as to address political issues (see Part 1, p. 3.2.4). These potentials can be divided into three areas of impact: the promotion of democratic competence through joint sporting activity, youth participation in club and organisational structures, and political education in the stadium.

However, for sports programmes to become places of democratic experience for young people, appropriate opportunities must be actively created (Quade et al., 2024). It is also important, through relationship-building, to identify the individual needs and biographically shaped requirements of participants in order to support them in developing democratic competences that are adapted to their living environment (Novkovic & Rettenmaier, 2024). Football programmes that foster participatory attitudes can create spaces for young people in which they can experience their environment for themselves. These spaces can help them to get to know themselves better, develop their personality, and engage critically with their environment as active, equal co-creators.

1.5. HOW CAN PROJECTS/PROGRAMMES BE SUCCESSFULLY IMPLEMENTED?

The results of the studies analysed as part of this research, from the two Scoping Reviews conducted, reveal various success factors that support the successful implementation of (football-specific) projects and programmes to improve the social well-being of young people and thus promote social cohesion. These can be categorised into the following six dimensions:

1.

Quality of Relationships and Trustworthy Reference Persons

Long-term, stable relationships with mentors, coaches, or group leaders form the basis for trust, bonding, and personal development. Reference persons with biographical proximity to the target group are particularly effective, as they serve as authentic role models. Social pedagogical professionals, teachers, and peer leaders play central roles in providing support, identity formation, and emotional security. Above all, the quality of the relationships that young people experience in football is crucial. Appreciative feedback and the feeling of being seen strengthen young people's well-being (Berntzen & Lagestad, 2021), and a cooperative, non-punitive learning climate fosters a sense of belonging (Kipp & Bolter, 2020). In migration-related mentoring programmes, trust and identification also prove to be psychosocial protective factors (Johns et al., 2014). Richardson & Fletcher (2020) further emphasise that, unlike other studies, they do not assume an automatic increase in social capital and thus an improvement in social mobility simply through participation in football programmes. They stress that it is not participation alone, but above all the socialisation processes triggered by building relationships, that lead to the development of social capital and social mobility.

2.

Participation and Co-creation

Many programmes enable young people to take an active role in shaping activities—for example, as tournament organisers, mediators, or peer coaches. Participation formats such as football3, in which the rules of the game are negotiated together, promote responsibility, ownership, and social negotiation processes. The targeted involvement of participants also increases motivation (Ganter et al., 2021). Research on Sport-for-Development settings confirms that voluntariness and participatory frameworks promote social inclusion and well-being (van der Veken et al., 2020; Rosso & McGrath, 2016; Johns et al., 2014).

3.

Low-threshold Access and Accessibility

Successful programmes are characterised by free participation, flexible entry formats, and embedding in the living environment of children and young people (e.g. school, open youth work). They actively address access barriers, for example through language-sensitive offers, accompanied transitions into clubs, or gender-appropriate structures. It is evident that embedding in schools is more low-threshold and also reaches more heterogeneous groups (Bang et al., 2024; O'Flaherty et al., 2022). Creating inclusive settings through sensitivity to different diversity characteristics (e.g. halal food, female coaches, gender-segregated offers) supports the engagement of marginalised groups. Community programmes in particular show that low-threshold access and context sensitivity are central success factors for positive social experiences (van der Veken et al., 2020; Rosso & McGrath, 2016).

4.

Multidimensional Programme Design

The combination of sporting activity, social learning, and supplementary educational work increases effectiveness. Non-sporting elements such as language support, theatre visits, job application training, or art/culture workshops expand development opportunities and are crucial for promoting social cohesion and developing a wide range of skills. Sport-for-Development programmes show that football serves as a medium for inclusion, empowerment, and community-oriented development, and that this multidimensionality in turn strengthens belonging, role-taking, and psychosocial stability (van der Veken et al., 2020; Rosso & McGrath, 2016).

5.

Anchoring in the Social Environment and Institutional Cooperation

Integration into local networks consisting of schools, municipalities, youth work, and civil society partners can ensure sustainability and social mobility. For example, meetings between programme supervisors and teachers can improve pedagogical work with young people and better address their needs (D'Angelo et al., 2021). Programmes also benefit from all-day school structures and existing relationships of trust. "Change agents" such as community coaches act as bridge-builders between the programme, participants, and their living environment. To prevent isolation effects in the sense of a "us-versus-them" mentality, strong anchoring in the social environment is of central importance.

6.

Pedagogical Quality and Reflective Further Development

The pedagogical and sport-didactic qualification of professionals is key to quality assurance. Autonomy support, appreciative feedback, and the creation of a mastery-oriented, cooperative climate are empirically linked to belonging, motivation, and well-being (Berntzen & Lagestad, 2021; Kipp & Bolter, 2020; Balaguer et al., 2018; Gonzalez et al., 2017). Reflection phases, feedback cultures, and formative evaluation approaches contribute to continuous adaptation.

1.6. WHAT CHALLENGES EXIST?

The studies analysed as part of this research, from the two Scoping Reviews conducted, provide insights not only into success factors but also into existing challenges that have arisen within the programmes. These can be divided into four areas:

1.

Access Barriers for Participants
The previously mentioned access barriers to football programmes (especially in clubs) and the stigmatisation effects (labelling, (self-)stigmatisation of participants) that particularly affect marginalised children and young people primarily present a challenge for the design of offers and programmes. An essential aspect in this context is also the often lacking connectivity (transition to further educational settings or sports clubs, e.g. membership fees, mobility). A central challenge remains the cultural fit between programme logic and the living environment of young people: Only if offers are experienced as part of their social reality—not as an external intervention—can sustainable engagement and participation be achieved.

2.

Deficits in Cooperation and Networking
Despite the use of diverse cooperative sponsorships for programme implementation, the studies show that there is sometimes a lack of coordination between the various stakeholders. The lack of communication and collaboration between schools, parents, clubs, social work, and local authorities can impair the holistic impact and social integration. Höglund and Bruhn (2024, p. 42) emphasise that activities such as Midnight Football certainly have the potential to strengthen social capital in segregated neighbourhoods. However, this only succeeds if other stakeholders also get involved. Only then can “bonding” capital between homogeneous participant groups and “bridging” capital between heterogeneous groups develop.

3. Structural and Institutional Barriers as well as Discrimination

Scientific studies show that there are numerous challenges and barriers that contribute to the exclusivity of football offers. Data from the current study by Bartsch et al. (2025) show that socio-economically marginalised young people in sports clubs more frequently experience physical and social stigmatisation, such as psychological harassment, humiliation, or bullying.

In addition to racism, sexism and the discrimination of women and queer people, as well as homophobia, are challenges that football faces. These experiences are often discussed in elite sport, but in recreational and grassroots sport they usually remain unspoken. Discrimination and structural inequalities can also be understood in normative terms: football is still regarded as a space in which masculinity functions as the "unmarked norm" and everything non-masculine appears as the "marked other" (von der Heyde, 2021).

Furthermore, the literature repeatedly points out that there are structural and institutional barriers, mainly due to a lack of resources. These include infrastructural resources, human resources, and financial resources. The lack of human resources refers, on the one hand, to the limited availability of qualified staff (especially female coaches) and, on the other hand, to the difficulty of ensuring staff continuity. As already emphasised, coaches and leaders play a special role in building a supportive social network. However, this potential is at risk if participants' reference persons change frequently. The lack of financial resources is often associated with project-dependent funding logic, and short project durations impair the long-term planning and structural anchoring of inclusion approaches and thus their sustainable impact.

4. Evaluation and Impact Measurement

A central deficit of many programmes lies in insufficient evaluation and theoretical foundation. Often, there is a lack of robust data, systematic impact analyses, and transparent evidence of the underlying theoretical models. This not only makes external validation difficult, but also hinders the strategic further development and transferability of successful approaches.

Overall, it becomes clear that the effectiveness of sport-educational football programmes depends above all on the structural, cultural, and institutional framework conditions on the one hand, and the quality of the relationships experienced on the other. It is therefore crucial to understand programmes not only as leisure activities, but especially as (social) educational development spaces with long-term responsibility, reflexivity, and structural anchoring.

2. RESEARCH GAPS

Within the literature analyses presented here, a wide range of findings on the potential of football with regard to social cohesion and the well-being of young people were identified. However, the study also reveals areas where research gaps exist. Six identified research gaps are listed in the following section.

1. **The upbringing and living environment of children and young people have changed significantly (digitalisation, individualisation, body orientation, etc.), so up-to-date and reliable data are needed.**

Only a few recent reports and studies reflect the profound changes in the living environment of children and young people in recent years. The Move for Health study (Dreiskämper et al., 2025) is the only current and representative study of child and youth sport in relation to current topics (including mental health & the potential of physical activity, sports clubs as attractive environments for children and young people, challenges and success factors for including socio-economically marginalised and sport-distant groups). The Fourth German Child and Youth Sport Report (Breuer et al., 2020) addresses these topics, but does not present its own empirical findings. The last major longitudinal survey on the effects of youth sport dates from 2002 (Brettschneider et al., 2002), and the last survey on physical activity and sport behaviour among children and young people from 2013 (Grgic & Züchner, 2013).

2. **The multidimensional perspective (intersectionality) of social inequalities is insufficiently considered in the existing studies.**

In order to design inclusive football offers for all, a critical reflection on barriers is needed, as this is precisely where there is potential to create more access and participation. In today's society, these barriers are mostly multidimensional, so it is necessary to consider the interactions of factors of social inequality (Nobis and El-Kayed, 2019). Among others, gender assignment, education, special needs, migration history, refugee experience, or family employment status influence children's and young people's access to football offers.

3. **The creation of equitable access to sport is not sufficiently the focus of existing studies.**

That so-called marginalised children and young people have more difficult access to football offers is evident from the data and statistics of clubs and associations. Fair access to sports spaces and physical activity offers is crucial to give all children and young people the opportunity to benefit from the social effects of sporting activity. To achieve this, low-threshold offers, intersectional approaches, and systematic further development of municipal spaces for physical activity are needed, which reduce social inequalities and make physical activity accessible to all (Bartsch and Rulofs, 2024).

Moreover, little research has been conducted on how marginalised groups can be integrated into existing football offers, and even less on the exclusion mechanisms themselves. Instead, there are a multitude of football-specific offers within child and youth welfare that address only marginalised groups—which may contribute little to overall social cohesion. To overcome exclusivity and design inclusive offers for all, a critical reflection on the barriers and challenges that prevent increased access and participation is needed.

4. **There is a lack of research on so-called spill-over effects and the transfer of social skills or "future skills" learned in football.**
These literature studies make it clear that there are only a few studies that provide information on the extent to which social skills and so-called future skills experienced and learned in sport can be transferred to everyday actions. There are many findings that underline the social value of sport-based programmes, but there is a lack of national and international findings that examine the specific programme conditions and mechanisms that, for example, can produce more active forms of civic participation (active citizenship[4]) and thus promote participation in society.

5. **There are only a few studies that examine the responsibility of coaches/trainers in football with regard to social cohesion.**
The literature studies conducted make it clear overall that improved integration (optimised "onboarding") and an open culture of offers can help to strengthen social cohesion. In particular, the quality of pedagogical support by coaches at the emotional, interpersonal, professional, and methodological-didactic level plays an important role in the participation of marginalised young people. Experiences of support, appreciation, protection, and care are central aspects. The role of coaches and their pedagogical attitude has been discussed several times, but rarely examined from their own perspective.

6. **Central deficits of many programmes are, on the one hand, a lack of theoretical foundation and, on the other hand, insufficient impact assessment**
Many programmes and projects that aim to promote social cohesion through football lack reference to underlying theoretical models and a corresponding impact logic/"Theory of Change". In addition, there is a lack of robust data and systematic impact analyses; instead, reach at the target group level is cited as an indicator of a measure's success. These deficits not only make external validation more difficult, but also hinder the strategic further development and transferability of successful approaches.

7. **In the field of well-being research, there is a lack of qualitative, in-depth analyses of young people's subjective perspectives on social experiences in football.** In particular, children under the age of 14 are underrepresented.

8. **Furthermore, the concepts of social well-being are so far theoretically heterogeneous and empirically operationalised in different ways.** A systematic conceptualisation that integrates psychological, social, and institutional dimensions is still lacking.

[4] "Active citizenship" primarily refers to critical engagement that aims at active participation in shaping society and taking on social responsibility.

3. RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

The numerous studies and empirical data underline the need for research in order to make the already identified potential of football for promoting the social well-being of young people—and thus for strengthening social cohesion—more visible in the future and, at the same time, to "learn from" successes. Based on the research gaps identified above, selected perspectives for future scientific studies are outlined in the following section.

1. PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

The literature studies conducted make it clear that there is a persistence of normative exclusion mechanisms in sports clubs, which not only reflect existing social inequalities but may even reinforce them in the future (see Part 1, p. 3.2.1). In order to prevent further social division, appropriate countermeasures must be taken and the great potential of football for social cohesion should be even better utilised in the future. The continuation of programmes developed specifically for the target group of "marginalised children and young people" in open youth and social work should therefore be subject to critical analysis, as these programmes have so far paid little attention to the stigmatisation effects they produce (attributions and (self-)stigmatisation). In addition, these programmes often lack connectivity, and the transition to sports clubs or further educational settings rarely succeeds, as structural and social barriers (e.g. membership fees, mobility) remain.

To strengthen such football offers, targeted further development of municipal spaces would be necessary. A comprehensive public concept for education, upbringing, and care in municipal spaces is essential for this. The focus should be on the targeted development of spaces for physical activity and sport, support for socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and the involvement of sports clubs and/or school working groups as part of all-day care (Schröder et al., 2025). Future measures and programmes should also be more closely oriented towards the living environment of children and young people and use the dynamic experimental field of the social environment as a "Living Lab" (Moustakas et al., 2024). The aim is to develop realistic, medium- and long-term strategies and methods that can be flexibly adapted to the changing needs and challenges of the social environment. In this context, urban and street sports could play an important role, as, for example, 3x3 basketball and street football offer particularly good opportunities to get young people interested in physical activity in a low-threshold way. Street football is flexible, requires little equipment, and can take place in a wide variety of public spaces, making it particularly accessible. Its community-centred and peer-to-peer approach appeals to the social motives of young people, as friends are often part of the activities and joint learning as well as mutual support are at the forefront.

Within the framework of scientific monitoring of existing offers in municipal spaces (e.g. Safe Hub Berlin) or through the development of new pilot studies (e.g. Rheinflanke in Cologne), the effects achieved (including transfer effects) in terms of promoting social cohesion can be examined.

It would also be conceivable to explore, in an exploratory and theory-driven way, how, for example, children (aged 8–14) process social experiences in the context of organised club football, which factors promote or hinder the experience of recognition and belonging, and how these experiences affect their subjective well-being.

2. DEMOCRACY EDUCATION AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION

As the SINUS Youth Study has shown, today's young people attach great importance to having opportunities for participation (see Calmbach et al., 2024). The literature provides clear evidence that sport and football offers can be places of democratic experience for young people, but appropriate opportunities must be actively created (see Part 1, p. 3.2.4). This includes, among other things, rethinking traditional role models and transferring decision-making power to young people, combined with trust and patience. Football programmes that foster participatory attitudes can create spaces for young people in which they can experience their environment for themselves. These spaces can help them to get to know themselves better, develop their personality, and engage critically with their environment as active, equal co-creators. For youth participation to succeed, transparent communication, diverse opportunities for involvement in decision-making, and collaboration on an equal footing are crucial. An example of this is the Youth Advisory Board of the DFL Foundation, through which the organisation has committed to giving young people a permanent voice. In the context of a longitudinal accompanying study, the processes of change could be recorded and the potential for promoting democracy could be identified. Such a pilot study could help ensure that youth participation at various organisational levels of football is increasingly used as an instrument of democracy education.

3. SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH REFUGEE AND MIGRATION BACKGROUNDS

The previously favoured emphasis that social cohesion is achieved through cultural adaptation to preconceived and majority norms, abilities, and identities is no longer tenable, as social inclusion and integration are conceptually fixed in such a discourse and social relationships serve cultural adaptation (see p. 3.2.2). Currently, the discourse on "cultural diversity" in football is not being addressed in detail. However, it is of great importance for social cohesion that the living environments, ways of thinking, and patterns of action of children and young people with a migration background and/or refugee experience receive more attention and that they can actively participate in social processes. Belonging is primarily created through recognition, i.e. mutual recognition of diverse cultural practices (language, food, clothing, etc.) supports social cohesion in society. The results of the Scoping Review show that, in particular, multi-ethnic football teams help to increase acceptance of diversity and enable mutual recognition. In order for this perspective to be given greater consideration in the development of programmes and projects, it would be conceivable to conduct a qualitative study using biographical interviews with migrant young people.

In addition, an impact study of the programme "Willkommen im Fußball" ("Welcome to football"), supported by the DFL Foundation, which enables young refugees to access sport through low-threshold offers, could provide findings on the integration performance of this approach.

4. ACCEPTANCE OF DIVERSITY AND GENDER VARIETY

Wherever team sports are played, social spaces are created in which children and young people reflect the dimensions of diversity and negotiate belonging, recognition, and social positioning. There is therefore potential here to contribute to a socially established culture of acceptance of sexual and gender diversity (see Part 1, p. 3.2.3).

Acceptance of diversity is a central prerequisite for a solidarity-based society. In future studies, measures to improve the representation of different dimensions of diversity, especially in football offers, could be developed and scientifically monitored as part of monitoring activities.

5. EXCLUSION AND DISCRIMINATION

In addition to racism, sexism and the discrimination of women and queer people, as well as homophobia, are challenges facing our society (see p. 3.2.5). These experiences are often discussed in elite sport, but in recreational, grassroots, and amateur sport they usually remain unspoken. Discrimination and structural inequalities can also be understood in normative terms: football is still regarded as a space in which masculinity functions as the “unmarked norm” and everything non-masculine appears as the “marked other” (von der Heyde, 2021).

To raise awareness about exclusion and discrimination, a variety of measures are carried out in the form of campaigns, etc., but less is done at the level of action and implementation. Recently, however, measures under the label “allyship” have become increasingly widespread. This refers to the process by which (privileged) members of society ally themselves with the discriminated group and actively support them, for example through inclusion and appreciation. The effects of such measures could be scientifically monitored in the form of a qualitative study.

The perspectives outlined for future studies are initial ideas for expanding the academic discourse on the potential of football to strengthen social cohesion. In this context, it also seems important to ensure dialogue between academia and practice through appropriate formats. In particular, the findings that the implementation of programmes often lacks theoretical foundation as well as evaluation and impact studies highlight the “theory-practice gap”. The “Denkfabrik” (“think tank”) format conducted by the DFL Foundation is a suitable instrument that could be further expanded in the future to promote dialogue between practice and academia, so that scientific findings also lead to concrete measures and so that political actors and decision-makers regarding funding recognise that complex social processes can rarely be influenced by “simple messages” (Kauer-Berk, 2023, p. 80).

4. CONCLUSIONS FOR A SOCIETAL DEBATE

The two discussions presented here lead to a consistent yet ambivalent finding: football (and team sport as a whole) has considerable potential to promote the social well-being of young people and thus contribute, among other things, to social cohesion.

However, this potential does not unfold automatically. It depends on a target group- and setting-sensitive design, the quality of social relationships, as well as clear theoretical orientations and robust evaluation. At its core, it becomes clear that where belonging can be experienced, relationships are reliable, and participation is taken seriously, spaces for development are created that strengthen individual resources and build social bridges. Where performance norms, exclusion mechanisms, and resource deficits dominate, effects remain isolated or are even reversed. From this dual insight, three interlinked guiding concepts can be derived, which can serve as a bridge from empirical evidence to societal debate: belonging, Future Skills, and Active Citizenship.

First, the main lines of both discussions should be summarised:
Wilmes, working along the clusters of target group, setting, social experiences, frameworks of well-being, and theoretical references, develops a detailed map of the conditions under which participation in sport becomes psychosocially effective. The heterogeneity of target groups—determined by age, gender, social status, migration experience, disability, or sporting biography—forms the enabling conditions for successful interventions and must be addressed sensitively. Clubs, schools, and community-oriented programmes structure relationship experiences differently: while organised club sport offers stability and training routines, school-based and community-anchored formats often provide low-threshold, participatory access. Across all settings, the quality and attitude of pedagogical action—especially of coaches and reference persons—the fulfilment of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, social connectedness), and the avoidance of performance- and body-normative exclusion mechanisms are decisive—the access to and retention in sport should not depend on performance or bodies. Well-being in football thus appears as a relational phenomenon: it arises where recognition, reliability, and participation can be experienced, and extends beyond sport into school, family, and community contexts.

Petry, in her literature review, complements this discussion by shifting the perspective towards societal connectivity. She locates football programmes explicitly in the field of social capital and shows: many offers primarily generate bonding—that is, strong ties within relatively homogeneous groups—while bridging (connections across differences) and linking (connections to institutional resources and decision-making levels) are less often systematically realised. The promotion of social-emotional skills (including self-esteem, self-efficacy, resilience) and cooperative attitudes is demonstrable, whereas the transfer into active social engagement often fails to materialise.

Success factors are stable, trusting relationships, genuine participation in design, accessibility, multidimensional programme design, anchoring in the social environment, and pedagogical quality. These are contrasted by recurring challenges: risks of stigmatisation in target group-specific formats, scarcity of resources, structural and institutional barriers (including experiences of discrimination), as well as insufficient theoretical foundation and evaluation.

Bringing together both literature analyses, **three guiding concepts** can be introduced that bundle and advance both strands of discussion:

I. **Belonging** refers to more than the subjective feeling of "being part of it": it is a relationally produced state that arises from recognition, reliability, and shared meaning-making, and is tied to concrete social orders. The studies show that belonging is the central mediator between participation and well-being—in clubs through long-term relationships and clear roles, in schools through integration into school communities, in the community through low-threshold, participatory practice. Without the development of a sense of belonging, sustainable competence development is not possible, and without accessible, reflective structures, a sense of belonging cannot be built. For society, this means that those who organise belonging also organise opportunities for participation—or exclusion.

II. **Future Skills** encompass those personal, social, and cultural competences that enable young people to deal productively with uncertainty, difference, and complexity: teamwork and conflict resolution skills, taking responsibility, intercultural communication, self-regulation, resilience, problem-solving, and cooperation skills. Team sport and football prove to be privileged fields of practice for acquiring these skills, but only if learning opportunities are actively created. Relevant aspects here are cultures of feedback and recognition, cooperative learning arrangements, phases of reflection, and links to non-sporting educational opportunities. It is also about actively promoting Future Skills, as they cannot be "trained on the side". They arise above all where pedagogical quality, time, and continuity are present—and this is where active intervention can take place.

III. **Active Citizenship** finally shifts the focus from ability to action, in that social and democratic competences are developed and, through them, social responsibility can be promoted and assumed. Football programmes initially increase social capital on the pitch, although this does not automatically translate into more civic engagement outside the pitch. A sense of belonging and bonding to the club is the first step, to which the requirement for structural, pedagogical, and institutional bridges is attached. Active Citizenship therefore does not just mean "willingness to engage", but the concrete involvement of young people in shaping processes on the ground, in clubs, schools, neighbourhoods, and communities.

These three concepts are compatible with both strands of discussion and at the same time illustrate the task of transformation. Belonging is the social ground, Future Skills are the growing roots, Active Citizenship is the visible crown that extends into the public sphere. Where the ground is fragile, roots remain shallow. Where roots are not nurtured, the tree bears no fruit.

From this triad, five conclusions can be drawn, which are to be understood both in terms of research and social policy:

1. **Belonging must be actively shaped.**
Evidence from various studies makes it clear that belonging does not arise from the sport itself, but from relationship work and practices of recognition. Coaches and pedagogical professionals are the central multipliers of relationships, and their attitude towards participation, tolerance of mistakes, body and performance norms determines inclusion or exclusion. For practice, this means that training and further education also require social pedagogical and diversity-sensitive profiles, as well as supervision and spaces for collegial reflection. For research, this means that we should systematically record relationship cultures and link them to effects on well-being and retention.

2. **From Bonding to Bridging and Linking.**
Many formats generate internal group strength, but interfaces to heterogeneous groups and to institutional decision-making levels are rarely organisationally considered. What is needed are co-operation architectures that systematically create transitions, for example between open youth work and clubs, between school and neighbourhood, between project and municipal structure. This can reduce risks of stigmatisation, increase connectivity, and create opportunity structures for Active Citizenship.

3. **Future Skills are developed in didactically rich, multidimensional arrangements.**
The proven competence gains depend on reflection, diversity of roles, and co-creation—and explicitly not on the amount of training. Formats such as football3, peer leadership, mediative roles, or project-based tasks (tournament organisation, public relations, neighbourhood cooperation) can be core elements for this. They link sporting practice with language education, culture, political education, and career orientation, and translate experiences into actionable schemas.

4. **Active Citizenship requires institutional openness and real co-determination.**
Democracy is not just "practised", it is actively created in statutes, committees, decision-making processes, and cultures of dealing with mistakes. Clubs and organisations that implement youth parliaments, youth representatives with voting rights, project-related budgets, or co-moderation of meetings create learning spaces where responsibility can be tried out in a protected environment. What is crucial here is above all the real scope for decision-making; all too often, participation formats result in symbolic involvement. Experiences of co-determination, co-creation, and ultimately self-efficacy can be bridges to becoming involved in shaping the neighbourhood or taking on responsibility.

5. **Without resources, protection from discrimination, and reliable evaluation, effects remain invisible.**
The hurdles outlined in the literature analyses, such as staff turnover, gender- and migration-sensitive gaps in provision, or experiences of discrimination, are not marginal phenomena—they are structurally determined and are also part of sport. The aim is to take this into account and to find a successful way of dealing with it. Prerequisites for this would include continuity, diversity in leadership positions, anti-discrimination policies, gender-sensitive practice, and stable funding logics.

From a research perspective, the synthesis of both literature analyses suggests that future studies should ...

... work in a target group- and setting-sensitive way with comparable concepts of well-being and belonging,

... explicitly record transfer paths from sport to civic engagement (e.g. participation trajectories, bridging roles, linking structures),

... establish evaluation standards that integrate theory, process, and impact levels.

In this sense, football becomes a place not of distraction, but of negotiation. Here, belonging is created, conflicts are addressed, responsibility is shared. If we take these potentials seriously, we turn movement into participation and team sport into social work!

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APPENDIX 1:
RESULT DIMENSIONS OF THE ANALYSED STUDIES REGARDING "SOCIAL COHESION"

Dimension	Subdimension	Explanation	References	Frequency
Social Relationships	Building supportive social networks	Development of stable, reliable relationships that provide emotional, social, or practical support.	2, 3, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20,	12
	Building new friendships	Formation of new friendships, also outside one's own peer group.	1, 3, 9, 11, 13, 16, 19, 20	9
	Acceptance of Diversity	Openness towards different cultural, social, or ethnic backgrounds within the group or community.	4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18	10
	Reducing prejudice	Reduction of negative stereotypical ideas towards other groups through personal encounters and shared experiences in team sport.	4, 14, 17, 19	4
Social Capital	"Bonding" capital	"Bonding" capital means developing relationships and networks with people from similar backgrounds who are part of the same community.	2, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10,11, 16, 18, 19, 20	11
	"Bridging" capital	"Bridging" capital means developing relationships and networks with people from different backgrounds.	2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 14, 16	8
	"Linking" capital	"Linking" capital is a variant of "Bridging" capital and includes connections between individuals and institutions.	2, 5, 13	3

Dimension	Subdimension	Explanation	References	Frequency
Belonging	Sense of belonging/social inclusion	Subjective feeling of being part of a community and being accepted, often associated with emotional security and identification.	2, 5, 13	3
	Safe space & protected spaces	Safe spaces where children and young people can develop freely.	1, 3, 6, 10, 13, 14, 16, 19, 20	9
Orientation towards the Common Good	Solidarity	Willingness to support others, prioritise common interests over individual advantages, and stand up for each other.	1, 6, 17, 20	4
	Taking responsibility	Taking on social roles and duties in the team or group.	4, 15, 17, 20	4
	Shared values	Development and communication of shared norms, attitudes, and beliefs, e.g. regarding fairness, team spirit, or respect.	17, 19	2
	Active Citizenship	Increase in social engagement and active participation in community life—within and outside the sporting context.	4, 15	2
	Rules & Norms as a Learning Field for Social Behaviour	Practising adherence to and co-creation of social interactions.	4, 19, 20	3
	Improved Team/ School Climate	Positive changes in the social climate of groups or educational institutions.	16, 17	2

APPENDIX 2:
RELEVANT STUDIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SCOPING REVIEW (PETRY ET AL.)

No.	Study	Aim of the Sports Programme	Target Group (Number of Participants, Gender, Social Background)	Context (Country & Region or City; Programme Organisation/s)	Concept (e.g. Sport, Frequency, Duration, Non-sporting Activities, Supervision)
1	Açıkgöz et al. (2022)	Promoting social inclusion of young people through football programmes in socially disadvantaged regions	Approx. 40 young people (15–19 years), male, geographically isolated regions	Turkey, Tunceli & Ankara; Local NGO in cooperation with the Turkish Ministry of Youth and Sport, vocational training centres	**Learning Life with Sport and From Work to Football Field:** Weekly football training & tournaments; excursions; seminars (e.g. on fair play and drug prevention)
2	Althoff et al. (2018)	Promoting social participation and local networking of girls through football programmes	Approx. > 4000 children and young people (6–17 years) weekly, female, 2/3 of participants have a migration background	Germany; Cooperation between local NGO, foundation and schools	**Kicking Girls (now futbalo girls):** Weekly football clubs with tournaments; football camps; coach training for older participants
3	Appelqvist Schmidlechner et al. (2021)	Psychosocial stabilisation of socially disadvantaged children and young people through long-term sport-based mentoring programmes	Approx. 800 children and young people (6–18 years), mixed gender, socially vulnerable groups at risk of marginalisation	Finland, 14 municipalities; NGO	**Icehearts:** Long-term mentoring (up to 12 years) + team sport (e.g. floorball); holistic support by trained mentors; individual and school support
4	Biester & Ress (2020)	Global learning and intercultural exchange through street football and education programmes for greater social cohesion	Disadvantaged young people (no age given), mixed gender	Germany (40 locations) and international partner NGOs (10 countries)	**Football-Lernen-Global & KICKFAIR:** Street football (football3); education concept based on SDGs; international learning partnerships and exchange programmes; youth leader training; peer-based projects and value education in schools and NGOs
5	Block & Gibbs (2017)	Social inclusion of children and young people with refugee backgrounds	Children and young people (no age given), mixed gender, mainly disadvantaged group with refugee background	Australia; NGOs, local authorities, schools and sports clubs	Three models compared: short-term programmes or events, permanent programmes, integration into regular sports clubs; individually different: football, basketball, cricket, Australian football and/or no specific sport; non-sporting aspects e.g. mentoring, literacy programme

No.	Study	Aim of the Sports Programme	Target Group (Number of Participants, Gender, Social Background)	Context (Country & Region or City; Programme Organisation/s)	Concept (e.g. Sport, Frequency, Duration, Non-sporting Activities, Supervision)
6	Cockburn (2016)	Promoting identity formation and social cohesion through multi-ethnic football and cricket teams	Children (10–11 years), male, participants with and without migration background	England; cricket and football clubs	Weekly training in regular club operations; long-term participation; promoting inclusion and social capital through everyday contacts in the team; "white British" coaches
7	D'Angelo et al. (2021)	Promoting social inclusion of disadvantaged young people through sport-based programmes	Children and young people (11–15 years), mixed gender, 75% Italian of several generations, 25% Italian second generation, mainly from marginalised social contexts	Italy, Province of Milan; three grassroots sports clubs and schools	Two weekly football training sessions of 90 min and 10 hours of transversal workshops (cooking, music, etc.); multi-stakeholder project with supervision by football coaches, educators, psychologists and close cooperation with teachers
8	Ekholm (2019)	1. Football for Inclusion (FFI): Social inclusion and promotion of cross-cultural friendships through football 2. Sport Program (SP): Activation of inactive children and opening up new perspectives through sport	1. Children (8–12 years), mixed gender, no specific background 2. Young people (11–16 years), mixed gender, mainly from vulnerable contexts	Sweden	1. **FFI:** Sports clubs in cooperation with schools and municipal leisure authority 2. **SP:** Social enterprise in cooperation with sports clubs, schools and municipal education authority
9	Gieß-Stüber et al. (2018)	Promoting integration, participation and social mobility through sports offers for refugee children and young people	Weekly approx. >250 children and young people (no age given), mixed gender, mainly marginalised groups with refugee and/or migration background	Germany, Freiburg; cooperation between a foundation, university, schools and sports clubs	**Kick für soziale Entwicklung:** Football clubs at schools & local tournaments; cultural activities; specific girls' programme, supervised by trained club leaders and mentors
10	Grove & Ermes (2025)	Strengthening personal protective factors of children and promoting social cohesion through the combination of sport and social-emotional learning	Children (6–11 years), mixed gender, no specific social background	Germany; cooperation between an NGO and primary schools	**Bunter Ball:** Over four years, 1x weekly 90 minutes combining sport, social-emotional learning and reflection phases by trained teachers; creating a trusting and open learning atmosphere

APPENDIX 2:
RELEVANT STUDIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SCOPING REVIEW (PETRY ET AL.)

No.	Study	Aim of the Sports Programme	Target Group (Number of Participants, Gender, Social Background)	Context (Country & Region or City; Programme Organisation/s)	Concept (e.g. Sport, Frequency, Duration, Non-sporting Activities, Supervision)
11	Höglund & Bruhn (2024)	Promoting social integration and preventing criminal behaviour among marginalised young people	Approx. >100 young people (13–16 years) per evening, mixed gender, marginalised groups	Sweden, suburban region of a medium-sized city; local sports clubs	**Midnight Football:** 2x weekly football/basketball at weekends in the evenings, combined with long-term relationship building by "leaders"; linked with youth centres; summer football camps outside the city
12	Krüger & Gebken (2018)	Social, linguistic and cultural integration of children and young people with refugee backgrounds	Children and young people (8–20 years); mixed gender, but mainly male participants, focus on participants with refugee background	Germany, Essen; cooperation with the Institute for Sports and Movement Science at the University of Duisburg-Essen and the Institute for German as a Second and Foreign Language, schools, local sports clubs and migrant sports clubs, community accommodation and the city of Essen	Four project modules: 1) Low-threshold self-organised football in the social environment, 2) Movement and language support for children and young people, 3) Open football offers in cooperation with organised sport and 4) Qualification of educational staff for language support in football
13	LitCam gGmbH (2024) & Schwarz (2018)	Promoting linguistic, social, emotional and intercultural competence development through language training, football training and cultural activities	Approx. 2700 children and young people (8–14 years), mainly groups with special needs	Germany (23 locations); cooperation between professional football clubs, foundations and schools	**"Football meets culture":** 2× weekly football training (social pedagogical orientation); 1× weekly German language support with football reference (literacy); cultural activities (museums, theatre, etc.); final tournament
14	Morgan et al. (2019)	Promoting positive psychological capital to improve the social inclusion of at-risk young people through sports programmes	Approx. 80 young people (13–19 years), mixed gender, young people classified as "at risk"	England, three locations: West Midlands, South West, South East; cooperation with organisations offering education and training programmes and/or employment opportunities	**Sporting Youth:** Depending on location, different focuses: boxing, multisport or football-based programmes; weekly sessions; no performance-oriented sport focus
15	Parker et al. (2019)	Citizenship development and promoting employability through sports programmes to combat crime and anti-social behaviour	Young people (13–19 years), mixed gender, marginalised and "at risk" groups	England, London; local sports clubs	**Sporting Youth:** Combination of sports (mainly football, basketball, cricket), workshops (e.g. aggression management), exchange trips; run by professionals from youth work and sports education

No.	Study	Aim of the Sports Programme	Target Group (Number of Participants, Gender, Social Background)	Context (Country & Region or City; Programme Organisation/s)	Concept (e.g. Sport, Frequency, Duration, Non-sporting Activities, Supervision)
16	Pink et al. (2020)	Skills development and promoting employability through football and education programmes	Mainly male young people (16–25 years) with migration and refugee background (28 participants) & students (28 participants)	Australia; cross-sectoral cooperation: university and NGO	**Kicking Goals Together:** Combination of football competitions and "skill-up" workshops (e.g. communication, networking, job applications, work culture) in weekly sessions over 8 weeks per semester
17	Rees & Seiberth (2015)	Development of personal, social and strategic action competence through a holistic educational approach with street football	Young people (17–25 years), mixed gender, participants with and without migration background	Germany, Baden-Württemberg and Brandenburg; cooperation between a local NGO and schools	**KICKFAIR education concept:** street football, supplemented by project areas such as peer-to-peer mentorship, team organisation, youth leadership and global learning programme
18	Richardson & Fletcher (2020)	Promoting social inclusion and strengthening the agency of young people through football as a "hook"	Young people (12–19 years), male, marginalised groups, mainly with migration background	England, London; sports clubs and foundations of the Premier Football League	**Premier League Kicks:** Football as a "hook"; mentoring by community development coaches (former participants); workshops (CV, job applications, first aid); events
19	Svoboda et al. (2025)	Promoting life skills and social relationships through football for marginalised young people (indirectly: social cohesion)	Children and young people (8–18 years), mixed gender, marginalised groups, mainly children and young people from the Roma community	Czech Republic, Olomouc region; leisure and youth centres	**Fotbal pro Rozvoj & Fair Play Football League:** Since 2006, weekly football training with the football3 method and monthly tournaments; thematic workshops (e.g. youth leadership); pedagogically supervised by social workers
20	Wirzén & Ekholm (2024)	Promoting moral socialisation and sense of community in girls' football groups to improve social inclusion	Approx. 45 girls and young women (6–19 years) with migration background	Sweden, three socially disadvantaged districts in medium-sized cities; sports clubs	**Girl's Football Community:** Football and futsal offers in girls-only groups; weekly 1h; reflection phases; pedagogically supervised by female senior and junior leaders

APPENDIX 3:
RELEVANT STUDIES INCLUDED IN THE SCOPING REVIEW (WILMES)

No.	Author(s)	Year	Title/Source	Country/ Region	Target Group	Setting	Sport	Research Question
1	Berntzen & Lagestad	2025	Effects of coaches' feedback on psychological outcomes in youth football: an intervention study	Norway	95 young people aged 14 to 18	Organised sport	Football	How does coach feedback influence the experienced well-being, sense of competence, enjoyment, satisfaction, development, feeling of being seen, and motivation of football players?
2	Owen et al.	2024	Sport Participation Trajectories and Loneliness: Evidence From the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children	Australia	Children and young people aged 8 to 21	Organised sport	Team and individual sport (comparison)	How does coach feedback influence well-being, sense of competence, enjoyment, satisfaction, development, feeling of being seen, and motivation of football players in two groups?
3	Kipp & Bolter	2024	Motivational climate dimensions predict youth soccer players' psychosocial well-being over time	USA	161 football players, 8 to 13 years, 92 boys and 68 girls	Organised sport	Football	How are sport participation trajectories related to loneliness among young people, and do these relationships differ by sport and individual characteristics such as gender, language, weight, quality of life, or place of residence?
4	Kinoshit et al.	2023	Creating sport environments for youth to thrive: understanding the mechanism to intentions to continue sport and subjective well-being	Japan	159 young people in sport, average age approx. 16	Organised sport	Team sport	Which coaching mechanisms in youth sport influence motivation and well-being of young athletes, and how does motivational climate affect psychological needs and social responsibility?
5	Bang et al.	2024	Team and individual sport participation, school belonging, and gender differences in adolescent depression	USA	4,751 young people, grades 7 to 12 (approx. 12–18 years)	Organised school sport	Team and individual sport (comparison)	How are supportive behaviours of coaches and parents related to thriving and subjective well-being in sport, and how do they promote the intention to continue participating in sport?

No.	Author(s)	Year	Title/Source	Country/ Region	Target Group	Setting	Sport	Research Question
6	O'Flaherty et al.	2022	Do extracurricular activities contribute to better adolescent outcomes? A fixed-effects panel data approach	Australia	3,885 young people aged 12 to 15	Organised sport	Team and individual sport (comparison)	How does participation in team and individual sports at school influence depressive symptoms in young people after one year, and what role does school belonging play?
7	Murphy et al.	2022	Self-Esteem, Meaningful Experiences and the Rocky Road Contexts of Physical Activity That Impact Mental Health in Adolescents	Ireland	58 students aged 16 to 18	Organised sport	Team and individual sport (comparison)	Which contexts of physical activity and sport have a positive effect on mental health and well-being?
8	van der Veken et al.	2020	"To mean something to someone": sport-for-development as a lever for social inclusion	Belgium	58 students aged 16 to 18	Sports programme	Football	How are physical activities in leisure time related to subjective well-being in different contexts, and which aspects provide protection against psychological stress?
9	Kipp & Bolter	2020	Motivational climate, psychological needs, and personal and social responsibility in youth soccer: Comparisons by age group and competitive level	USA	387 children (8–10 years) and young people (11–13 years) in football	Organised sport	Football	Which conditions and mechanisms promote social inclusion and well-being among socially disadvantaged young people through sport-for-development projects with team sport, especially football?
10	Farmer et al.	2020	Gaelic4Girls—The Effectiveness of a 10-Week Multicomponent Community Sports-Based Physical Activity Intervention for 8 to 12-Year-Old Girls	Ireland	120 girls aged 8 to 12 from rural and suburban clubs	Sports programme	Football	How does motivational climate through coach behaviour influence the psychological and social well-being of youth football players of different ages and performance levels?

APPENDIX 3:
RELEVANT STUDIES INCLUDED IN THE SCOPING REVIEW (WILMES)

No.	Author(s)	Year	Title/Source	Country/ Region	Target Group	Setting	Sport	Research Question
11	Balaguer et al.	2018	The Importance of Coaches' Autonomy Support in the Leisure Experience and Well-Being of Young Footballers	Spain	360 boys in football, 11 to 13 years	Organised sport	Football	What effects does a sport-based intervention programme have on physical activity, motor skills, and psychological well-being of 8- to 12-year-old girls compared to traditional training and a control group?
12	González et al.	2017	A test of basic psychological needs theory in young soccer players: Time-lagged design at the individual and team levels	Spain	725 boys, 11 to 14 years, from Spanish football schools	Organised sport	Football	How does perceived autonomy support from coaches, via the fulfilment of psychological needs and intrinsic motivation, affect the subjective well-being of young football players over a season?
13	Rosso & McGrath	2016	Promoting physical activity among children and youth in disadvantaged South Australian CALD communities through alternative community sport opportunities	Australia	117 programme participants aged 9 to 16	Sports programme	Football	Which factors enable disadvantaged CALD communities [culturally and linguistically diverse communities] to participate in health promotion through sport?
14	Njelesani et al.	2015	"Sport-for-Development: A Level Playing Field?"	Zambia	12 young people and young adults, 18 to 27 years	Sports programme	Football	How do beliefs about sport and the programme itself shape inequalities in participation in sport-for-development programmes?
15	Johns et al.	2014	"More Than a Game": The Impact of Sport-Based Youth Mentoring Schemes on Developing Resilience toward Violent Extremism	Australia	Young people and young adults, approx. 15 to 25 years, with migration or refugee experience	Sports programme	Football	Which ideological beliefs influence the participation of young people in sport-for-development programmes in the football context in Zambia?

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