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An ethnographic study of early talent identification and selection processes among young boys in club football

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AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF EARLY TALENT IDENTIFICATION AND SELECTION PROCESSES AMONG YOUNG BOYS IN CLUB FOOTBALL

BY
CHRISTIAN MEEDOM WRANG

DISSERTATION SUBMITTED 2022

AALBORG UNIVERSITY
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CV

Christian Meedom Wrang graduated with a master's degree in Sports Sciences from Aalborg University in 2017. In 2014, he obtained a bachelor's degree in Sport Sciences with a minor in Music from Aalborg University. Throughout his studies, Christian played sub-elite handball and coached different senior handball teams.

Since his graduation in 2017 he taught pupils from grade 1-9 in Physical Education and Music at a primary school. After a successful grant application to the Danish Ministry of Culture together with Sine Agergaard, Niels N. Rossing, Luc J. Martin, and Jean Côté, he started his PhD project in 2018 at Aalborg University. Christian has been teaching different courses at the bachelor's level and served as course responsible for a course on teams and team-based work. He has further supervised several student projects at the bachelor's level.

Before the PhD project, Christian published his bachelor's project on the relative age effect in handball together with his fellow students and supervisors, Dan S. Karbing and Niels N. Rossing.

ENGLISH SUMMARY

Increasing professionalization and adulteration of children's sport has led football clubs, academies, and federations to systematically identify talent and select children at earlier and earlier ages. The purpose of this PhD thesis was to explore the significance of early talent identification and selection processes for children's understanding and negotiation of their identity. An initial systematic scoping review of talent identification and selection processes in football identified that the dominant research interest was centered on optimizing the processes, largely overlooking children's perspectives. Consequently, this PhD thesis is based in 1.5 years of fieldwork in a suburban football club in Denmark to explore 10–11-year-old boys' experiences of talent identification and selection processes—comprising a combination of those considered to have been 'selected' and/or 'unselected'.

Using Jenkins' perspectives on the interaction between external categorization and internal identification processes, it became evident that the football system's skill-level division (in A-, B-, and C-groups) was a salient feature in the boys' understanding and negotiation of their identities. Further, the boys that were selected to an extracurricular training program displayed an emerging athletic identity with an exclusive focus on football and largely refrained from exploring other aspects of their identities.

In sum, taking an ethnographic approach, this PhD thesis contributes empirical insight into the significance of early identification and selection practices for the

everyday lives of children. Further, the theoretical perspectives on social identification processes applied in this thesis contribute to research on talent identification and selection processes by highlighting how salient the skill-level division of football is for young boys' identification of themselves and others. Lastly, the findings amplify the need for stakeholders to be aware of the meaning that young boys attribute to being good at sports (football), but also the potential consequences of early selection practices for the lives of children.

DANSK RESUME

En stigende professionalisering og voksenstyring af børne- og ungdomsidræt viser sig bl.a. ved, at fodboldklubber, -akademier og -forbund systematisk identificerer talentfulde spillere i en tidligere og tidligere alder. Formålet med dette ph.d.-projekt var at udforske betydningen af sådanne tidlige talentidentifikation- og selektionsprocesser for børns forståelse og forhandling af deres identitet. Et systematisk scoping review af talent identifikation og selektionsprocesser i fodbold kortlagde at den eksisterende forskning primært har fokus på at optimere processerne igennem hvilke sportsledere, trænere, m.fl. udvælger og udvikler unge talenter, imens børnenes oplevelser af disse processer i høj grad var overset. Som en konsekvens heraf, blev denne ph.d.-afhandling baseret på 1,5 års feltarbejde i en forstadsklub i Danmark for at undersøge, hvordan 10-11-årige drenge oplever talent identifikation og selektionsprocesser— med inddragelse af både udvalgte og ikke-udvalgte børns oplevelser.

Ved brug af Jenkins' perspektiver på interaktionen mellem ekstern kategorisering og interne identifikationsprocesser, blev det klart at fodboldsystemets opdeling baseret på færdighedsniveau (i A-, B- og C-grupper) var et fremtrædende træk ved drengenes forståelse og forhandling af deres identiteter. Derudover udviste de drenge som var udtaget til et ekstra træningsprogram en fremvoksende atletisk identitet med et eksklusivt fokus på fodbold, og undlod i væsentlig grad at udforske andre aspekter af deres identiteter.

Ved at tage en etnografisk tilgang bidrager afhandlingen med empirisk indsigt i betydningen af tidlige identifikation og selektionspraksisser for børns daglige liv. Desuden bidrager de valgte teoretiske perspektiver på sociale identifikationsprocesser i denne afhandling til forskningen om talent identifikation og selektionsprocesser ved at udpege, hvor fremtrædende niveauinddelingen af fodbold baseret på færdigheder er for unge drenges identifikation for dem selv og andre. Resultaterne forstærker nødvendigheden af, at interessenter retter opmærksomheden mod de potentielle konsekvenser tidlige selektionspraksisser kan få for børns liv.

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I would also like to thank my family for your constant support and belief in me. A special thanks to my parents for giving me a life with sports and music, and my brothers for the ever-present opportunity to compete! And to my grandparents for creating a strong family. You have all shaped who I am – thank you.

Most of all, I would like to thank my own small family, Maria, and our two boys, Aske and Elmer, for the joy, laughter, and unconditional love you bring to my life, and for always being there.

FOREWORD

This PhD process started with a joint project proposal, curiosity, and a genuine interest in exploring talent identification and selection processes. This interest is primarily due to the fact that this topic is receiving increased attention, with institutionalized attempts made to predict future performance of players at a very early age around the world. Yet, it is also due to the fact, that I have experienced some of these processes in the context of Danish handball myself. As a youth player (aged 13), I was selected to participate in regional training camps, where some were promoted to centralized talent camps and further to youth national teams. I played with peers that progressed through the Danish handball system and with others that stopped playing along the way. As such, I remember experiences that are closely related to what I have encountered in my work with this PhD.

Sport has brought me so much joy, friendship, hair-raising moments, challenges and obstacles, wins and losses, that have all become part of my body and who I am. Through the process of synthesizing this thesis, I was reminded of key situations in my own upbringing in handball. I remember one time, where a friend of mine and I went to the local public pool a sunny, summer day during school holidays. We met one of his friends whom I only knew by name. She obviously did not even have that connection with me, as she asked my friend who I was. “That’s Wrang!” he said. She replied: “Ah, he’s that handball player.” I clearly remember thinking if that was how other people saw me—as a handball player? I remember thinking that it was fairly cool to be identified as that, while also thinking that I’m so much more. Nevertheless, it may serve as an example of how categorizations from

others may give rise to identity reflections about who you are when you least expect them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis involves the exploration of the intersection of children's identity formation and talent identification and selection in sports. It sheds light on how children who are exposed to early talent identification and selection practices experience these processes, and how they actively engage in identification processes in this context. Notably, this orientation follows an aspiration to better understand these processes and practices from the children's perspectives rather than delivering knowledge directed towards performance optimization. Indeed, this PhD thesis contributes to the field of research in talent identification and selection within youth sports using social identity theory and ethnographic fieldwork among children to turn attention to the significance of talent identification and selection practices within sports systems for the everyday lives of children.

Around the world, systems are put in place by sport federations and clubs to identify talent among young athletes at increasingly earlier ages (Baker et al., 2020; Johnston et al., 2018; Lidor et al., 2009; Mann et al., 2017). This is even more pronounced in the most played team sport world-wide, association football (soccer). Here, national federations and high-profile clubs with youth academies systematically identify and select talented players as young as 8 years of age (e.g., Clarke et al., 2018; Dugdale et al., 2021; Güllich, 2014; Larkin & Reeves, 2018; O'Connor et al., 2016; Sweeney et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2020). The assumption that talent can be predicted at young ages is leading clubs to widen and intensify their search for talent, and by extension, results in increased competition for talented players between clubs (Ford et al., 2020). Further, a growing economic interest in

football has made profitable sales of talented players—or 'marketable assets' (Richardson et al., 2004)—an important and integral part in managing youth academies and talent systems (Relvas et al., 2010).

Systems have been developed for identifying and selecting young football players in several European countries. In Germany, the national football federation has identified the top 4% of all U12 players and provided them with extra weekly training at regional training sites (Höner & Feichtinger, 2016). In 2012, the English Premier League introduced an Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) to guide talent development programs of clubs and academies. The EPPP framework explicitly emphasizes that players at category 1 academies[1] should expect to train 4 hours per week at U5 and gradually rise to 8 hours per week at U11 (*Elite Player Performance Plan*, 2012). In addition, it is explicated in the plan that players can be identified as talented and recruited (selected) to academies at the U9 level.

Early talent identification and selection practices are also present in Denmark, where the 2004 revision of the law on elite sports[2] marked a change towards neo-liberal policy (Ibsen et al., 2013; Storm, 2012). Accordingly, the elite sports institution, Team Denmark, prioritized their support to sport federations based on, among others, their sporting results. Talent identification and development efforts became more systemized and centralized, which is novel considering the

[1] The English academies that operate under the EPPP are ranked from category 1 academies (highest) to category 4 academies (lowest), depending on, among other things, the coaching and support system available for the players to be enrolled in.

[2] Kulturministeriet (2004) Eliteidrætsloven [Law of elite sport] (https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=157954) – retrieved 15.06.2022

historical traditions for talent to develop in decentral and unsystematic ways in Scandinavian sports (Bergsgard et al., 2009; Houlihan & Green, 2008).

One example of an initiative where the sport federation developed a systematic approach to talent identification and selection among children is the Danish national football associations' (DBU) "TOP-Center"-initiative. In 2018, the national FA (DBU) introduced 29 regional TOP-Centers, which annually have identified approximately 1,800 young boys (aged 10-12 years) from affiliated local clubs. One reason for this initiative was to optimize player development before the age of 13, to qualify the level of play and training in local club environments, and to mitigate practices conflicting with the official values of DBU (i.e., early transfers from local clubs to elite clubs)[3]. The purpose of the regional TOP-Centers is thus to allocate, what DBU has described as 'players with special prerequisites' with an extra high-quality weekly training session, while ensuring their continued affiliation to their local club (Rossing et al., 2022). Further, through the establishment of trust, cooperation, and sharing of knowledge between the TOP-Center club and affiliated local clubs, DBU expects to create a ripple effect to counteract early transfers of players from smaller local clubs to larger elite clubs.

The extra weekly training session at the TOP-Center may provide beneficial developmental opportunities for the selected players while maintaining affiliation to their local club. Yet, the opportunities of becoming and remaining selected as a football player may also increase the level of specialization for the

[3] (https://www.dbu.dk/boern-og-unge/talentudvikling/talentudvikling-drenge/projekt-top-center/baggrund-for-projekt-top-center/beslutning-og-forloeb/) – retrieved 15.03.2022

children involved. Hence, the initiative is interesting when considering that research has emphasized that later specialization is important for athletes to achieve senior elite levels of performance and reduce risks of dropout and burnout (Côté et al., 2007; Côté, Horton, et al., 2009; Côté & Vierimaa, 2014). Indeed, the Top-Center initiative represents a novel approach to early talent identification within the Danish sport system that deserves further attention.

1.1. PROJECT OBJECTIVE AND CONTRIBUTION

The aim of this thesis was to shed light on how early talent identification and selection processes intersect with children's understandings of themselves and others. Thus, the overarching research questions were: How do young soccer players experience processes of early talent identification and selection practices in club football, and what significance do these processes hold for children's understanding and negotiation of their social identity?

To answer these questions, the current project applied the British anthropologist Richard Jenkins' theory on social identity (Jenkins, 2014). This approach contributes novel theoretical perspectives for the field of research on talent identification and selection. Perspectives that provide opportunity for analyzing how the categories that the sport system uses to identify and divide children according to their talent and skill-level interweave with how the children themselves negotiate their social identity. Further, the current project is based in ethnographic fieldwork and thereby contributes to a methodological development in which attention is diverted from the adults' (i.e., coaches, sport managers, and parents) perspectives on

talent development. Rather, this project set out to approach an understanding of how children experienced early talent identification and selection processes as part of their everyday lives with a view to not only the young players who are selected (to the Top-Center initiative), but also to those not identified as talented.

1.2. LIST OF PAPERS

This thesis is comprised of the following three papers:

1. Christian M. Wrang, Niels N. Rossing, Sine Agergaard & Luc J. Martin (2022) The missing children: a systematic scoping review on talent identification and selection in football (soccer), European Journal for Sport and Society, 19:2, 135-150, DOI: 10.1080/16138171.2021.1916224

2. Christian M. Wrang, Luc J. Martin, Niels N. Rossing & Sine Agergaard (revise and resubmit) How do young athletes experience selection and non-selection? An ethnographic study of talent categorization and identification processes.

3. Christian M. Wrang, Niels N. Rossing, Luc J. Martin & Sine Agergaard (under review) Football is life! An ethnographic study of talented children's identification processes.

CHAPTER 2. STATE-OF-THE-ART

In this section, I present relevant literature on talent identification and selection, alongside former research that has considered children's perspectives on sport systems. This will introduce prior knowledge, which has inspired me during the process of gathering and creating, as well as analyzing my material, alongside situating the findings of this PhD thesis in relevant contexts. In the following section, I also illuminate gaps in our collective knowledge and argue for why identity issues and talent identification and selection are processes with clear intersections that can make up an important duo in youth sport research.

2.1. TALENT IDENTIFICATION AND SELECTION

Several terms and concepts have been used to describe and investigate processes of identifying talented athletes (e.g., detection, identification, promotion, selection, recruitment). Some of these terms are introduced as interrelated, and some are used interchangeably in the literature. However, it is worth noting what attempts have been made to provide relevant and useful differentiations between these concepts.

In the field of talent identification and development in sport, and in the context of football in particular, Williams and Reilly (2000) offer one such distinction that has acted as a foundation for the work within this field. Based on conceptualizations from previously published scientific texts (Regnier et al., 1993; Williams & Franks, 1998), they distinguished between talent detection, identification, selection, and development (Williams & Reilly, 2000). They described *detection* as the process of matching an individual with the sports domain

within which he/she exhibits talent. That is, the focus is on detecting individuals that are not yet engaged in a certain sport, but who could be considered talented if they were. *Identification*, on the other hand, refers to "the process of recognizing current participants with the potential to become elite players" (Williams & Reilly, 2000, p. 658), by predicting future performance based on tests and analyzes of performance characteristics within different disciplines (e.g., physiological or psychological tests). *Development* refers to the process and environments within which athletes learn new skills and develop, as both human beings and players, to exhibit later elite performance (Williams & Reilly, 2000). Lastly, *selection* refers to "the ongoing process of identifying players at various stages who demonstrate prerequisite levels of performance for inclusion in a given squad or team" (Williams & Reilly, 2000, p. 658), in addition to the selection for playing time.

The distinction between development, identification, and selection processes (e.g., Abbott & Collins, 2004; Williams et al., 2020) serves to clarify the range from the daily practice of football designed to develop individuals (the actual football practices and skill development), to processes designed to identify and select players (try-outs, and the practices and objectives of scouts and recruitment staff). Such variety in practices has led some researchers to argue that these processes are separate entities (Larkin & Reeves, 2018; O'Connor et al., 2016). Accordingly, identification can be seen to precede selections in the way that we identify someone as talented or skillful before deciding to select them for a team. However, once selected to and performing at a certain team or level, this will influence later identifications of the athlete (the same implies de-selections). In this

sense, the processes of identification and selection, which are in focus in this PhD thesis, may be examined as interrelated processes.

In the widely cited articles by Williams and colleagues (Williams et al., 2020; Williams & Reilly, 2000), the authors review and divide the literature on talent identification and development into four disciplinary domains (physical, physiological, psychological, and sociological) that are considered "potential predictors of adult high performance in soccer" (2020, p. 6). In their follow-up review of studies that applied a multidisciplinary approach and longitudinal designs, they concluded that the twenty years of research resulted in "some predictors now hav[ing] prognostic validity for selection from adolescence to adult performance levels" (Williams et al., 2020, p. 6). At the same time, they pointed out that while there has been progress in the field, there seems to be no valid method of predicting future performance levels in childhood and early adolescence (Williams et al., 2020).

2.2. EARLY TALENT IDENTIFICATION AND SELECTION

The research literature on talent identification and selection processes are associated with different developmental approaches. From one perspective, Ericsson emphasized development through deliberate practice and early specialization necessary for the attainment of elite level performance (Ericsson et al., 1993; Ericsson & Lehmann, 1996). The many hours of deliberate practice to acquire later elite level appears to justify early talent identification and selection practices within sport systems. From another perspective, Côté emphasized development through

deliberate play and early sport sampling with later specialization to facilitate healthy athlete development without sacrificing elite performance (Côté et al., 2007; Côté, Lidor, et al., 2009). According to this perspective, less training at early ages followed by later specialization is found to be beneficial for athletes in different sports (Güllich et al., 2022; Moesch et al., 2013).

As a combination of the two developmental approaches, Ford and colleagues (2009, 2012) proposed an early engagement hypothesis to explain that successful youth football players accumulate more hours undergoing both deliberate practice and play in football (their primary sport), and minimal time in other sports compared with their less successful peers. However, these studies have predominantly investigated the developmental trajectories leading to elite performances and failed to highlight potential pitfalls associated with such trajectories. While the TOP-Center seems to balance early talent development while also considering the possible barriers, it operates in a field with no or little prior knowledge about the consequences hereof.

Researchers have noted that early talent identification and selection practices may have potential negative consequences for youth athletes' physical health and psycho-social development (Redelius, 2020; Rongen et al., 2018). Several issues related to talent identification and selection complicate the processes, such as short-term priorities of youth coaches and teams (i.e. winning now is more important than developing later elite performers) or that an increased competition for talent subverts a focus on long-term athlete development (Baker et al., 2018). Further, relatively few football players end up being repeatedly selected for

progression through a talent system. For example, 232 players were selected to the Danish U16 national team between 1991-2006. Of these, 3% ended up debuting at the senior national team and 29% failed to progress to the U17 national team (Christensen et al., 2008). A recent study found that being selected to a youth national team before U19 was insignificant as a predictor for attaining senior 'super elite' level (i.e., being selected to senior national team or playing Champions League or European League games; Herrebrøden & Bjørndal, 2022)

In Germany, Güllich (2014) reported that football players debuting early in an academy team (e.g., U10-11-12) were less likely to reach the first Bundesliga and more likely to play below the second Bundesliga at the senior level, and vice-versa. With players experiencing less than 50% probability of progressing more than three years though the talent system (national teams and the German club academies), Güllich (2014) argued that the systems function more as *selection* systems (that the collective of players debuting on the senior national team and Bundesliga had been continuously selected and de-selected throughout their youth), rather than a *promotion* system (that players were selected early into and progressed through the different stages of the system). These scenarios led researchers to suggest that talent can be 'wasted' as coaches and recruiters wrongfully (de)select athletes in or out of talent systems (Johnston & Baker, 2020). As a consequence, after stakeholders have gradually driven the age by which players are identified and selected from late adolescence down towards childhood, researchers have proposed that such practices should be re-positioned (Larkin & Reeves, 2018; Lidor et al., 2009).

2.3. CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES

Whereas the perspectives from coaches and recruitment staff on talent identification and selection processes have been brought forward (see e.g., Christensen, 2009; Johansson & Fahlén, 2017; Jokuschies et al., 2017; Larkin & O'Connor, 2017; Lund & Söderström, 2017; Roberts et al., 2019), little is known about the perspectives from the athletes under study (Pitchford et al., 2004). In talent research generally, and research in football particularly, longitudinal studies with children and youth have been advocated to further our knowledge (Baker et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2020). Additionally, a large proportion of research in football has been devoted to studying the few talented players at the expense of those involved in mass participation (Faude, 2018). Importantly, this has occurred with only limited research investigating the children's perspectives on football and talent systems.

One exception of a study that included the children's perspectives on grassroots football, is O'Gorman and Greenoughs' (2016) study with English mini soccer. They explored children's experiences with playing U10 mini soccer (reduced version of football preparing children for the adult 11-a-side game) and documented experiences of the in-game incidents (e.g., of a tackle or foul, O'Gorman & Greenough, 2016). They found that children preferred to experience competition in the form of rivalry between themselves and neighbor-clubs over 'win-at-all-cost' behaviors exhibited by parents and coaches. In comparison, Eliasson (2015) showed how children, their parents, and coaches were 'in different sports worlds', as she reported a clash between their different beliefs and expectations towards grassroots football. Children valued a social logic and friendships with teammates and peers,

and the parents expressed a fostering logic and cared for their own child's best interest. The coaches primarily drew on a sporting logic focusing on skill development.

Few empirical articles have investigated the children's accounts and experiences of identification and/or selection processes; however, some efforts have been made. For example, Lindgren and colleagues (2017) found that 10-11 year-old children in Swedish recreational team sports understood coaches' selection practices through two juxtaposed discourses; participation/inclusion-oriented (coaches seek to distribute playing time equally irrespective of skill-level) and performance/exclusion-oriented (coaches select the athletes that will improve the chance of winning). They concluded that most of the children's motivation for doing sports aligned with the participation/inclusion-oriented discourse (which corresponds with previous findings; Bailey et al., 2013). Further, the work of Kilger and colleagues (Kilger, 2017; Kilger & Börjesson, 2015; Kilger & Jonsson, 2017) investigated how youth athletes experienced and verbally managed selection practices in Swedish youth sport. Youth athletes 'talked' or managed conversations with coaches at national team selection camps by using and reproducing different shared talent stories to show 'selectability' (Kilger, 2017). In those same conversations, young athletes were found to perform as eligible for selection by showing gratitude without flattery, telling about their time in sport to show development, progress, and potential, and showing knowledge about what awaits the selected athlete (Kilger & Jonsson, 2017). In sum, research has shown that athletes

experience, and value certain kinds of selections differently and actively manage their own appearance as eligible for selection through different talent-narratives.

A branch of research has explored practices of English football academy systems. Recently, Mills and colleagues (2014) investigated 16-18 year-old players' perspectives on developmental environments in English academy football. They highlighted that the academies overall were found to be of good condition with sufficient support staff (e.g., physiotherapists, coaches, sport psychologists), but also with the potential to improve the emotional support and the understandings of the athletes' world view. Clarke and colleagues (2018) showed how five young boys (aged 11 years) experienced being enrolled into an English football academy and how selection to the academy came to signify talent and became an important part of the boys' identity. The players expressed the need to continuously improve and used professional players as role models to compare themselves with, imitating their everyday practices to show commitment and effort. The authors suggested that as the athletes conformed to the academy culture, they were left in a position unable to challenge norms and expectations, and had fewer opportunities to develop identities outside of football (Clarke et al., 2018).

As several other relevant examples, Champ and colleagues (2020) concluded that the professional football culture residing in the academy setting prompted athletes to develop strong single-minded identities centered on football if they wanted to succeed. Webb and colleagues (2020) retrospectively investigated senior professionals' experiences with progressing through an English academy, and highlighted that the criteria used to identify and select talented athletes varied across

leagues and clubs partly depended upon changing first-team managers and club philosophies. Also, Mitchell and colleagues (2021) recently surveyed 16-18 year-old English players across the four academy leagues to investigate the quality of their development environment. A general finding across leagues was that the academies only to a limited degree supported the development of a balanced life, gave emotional support and aided athletes in structuring their lives both in- and outside football (Mitchell et al., 2021). When considering the previous research examples, it appears that young athletes experience being selected into academies as decisive for the development of their identities, and that talent is interpreted differently across playing levels and partly dependent on manager and club philosophies. Further, it seems that these systems only to a limited degree support the young athletes in building broad identities and balanced lives.

During the last twenty years, it has only seldomly been pointed out that we are missing the children's experiences in sport research (Pitchford et al., 2004), and others have noted that the focus from sport organizations primarily is directed towards the select few (Malina, 2009). Athletes' perspectives on talent development environments, with all its related practices (identification, selection), is still an underdeveloped string of research. Although some studies have explored how young athletes experience, for example, selection to academy settings in English football and being identified as a talent, further work emphasizing total age-groups of athletes' perspectives would expand our understanding of the significance of identification and selection practices also in other institutional contexts.

In sum, the focus in research is seldom on athletes' experiences of selection processes. Additionally, and serving as a decisive venue to exploring talent identification, there is a dearth of knowledge pertaining to how children and youth experience the initial enrollment and begin their 'sport-life' in such systems. Moreover, how identification and selection processes are experienced by those selected, de-selected, and non-selected as talented, would provide researchers and practitioners with valuable knowledge of how these practices potentially affect children's everyday lives.

2.4. TALENT IDENTIFICATION AND IDENTITY

During the last twenty years, increased attention has been given to social identity in research in youth sport (Bruner, Dunlop, et al., 2018; Cameron, 2004; Martin et al., 2017, 2018). For some time, athletes' identity issues were highlighted (Heyman, 1986), indicating that sports and identity are two highly linked concepts. Weiss (2001) suggested that sport *"forms a social subsystem in which different types of identity reinforcement or social recognition are possible"* (Weiss, 2001, p. 393). Accordingly, the prominent status of sport in society makes it a possible venue for forming identities.

Traditionally, researchers have acknowledged athlete development as a complex process with the environment and peer interactions serving as key elements (Gagné, 2005; Hackfort, 2006; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). The same factors seem to be crucial when establishing and creating identity, as social groups and interactions have been suggested as key elements of establishing identities (Jenkins,

2014; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For example, athletes having a strong perception of membership on youth teams are associated with enhanced personal and social development (Bruner et al., 2017), and both personal and social dimensions influence athletes' feeling of being an athlete (Stephan & Brewer, 2007). Further, research has shown that selection status, and de-selection in particular, has consequences for a young athletes' level of identification with the athlete role (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Thus, such findings point out that engagement in groups and social relations are significant elements for a young persons' creation of their social identities.

A crucial concept within scientific research in sport is athletic identity. This concept refers to *"the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role"* (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237). This has been investigated using the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS), whereby respondents rank their identity as an athlete in comparison with other identities. Results have shown that athletes identify more strongly as athletes during adolescence compared with early adulthood (Brewer et al., 1993), and that exclusive cultivation of this role may lead to athletic foreclosure (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). Athletic foreclosure refers to the process whereby one solely pursues a career within sports, rather than exploring other identities and interests in life.

Upon de-selection, many athletes find their perceived athletic identity disrupted, leading to anxiety and depression (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Although Yannick and Brewer (2007) investigated the experiences of retired Olympians through interviews, most literature on athletic identity quantitatively investigates the

degree to which one identifies as an athlete, and thus neglects investigating experiences of athletic endeavor in a qualitative and prospective manner. This qualitative methodology has recently been sought by researchers (Collins et al., 2018), encouraging this PhD thesis to further pursue such an approach.

New memberships within groups (e.g., the group of TOP-Center players) ensuing talent identification and selection processes, affect those individuals, as groups memberships are considered defining for our identification processes (Jenkins, 2014). For example, research has shown that being caught between the U18 team and senior first team left players feeling 'rootless,' as it challenged the possibility of creating strong relationships with members in either group (Champ, Nesti, et al., 2020). Further, we have little knowledge about the significance of external categorizations of players as being talented or 'having special prerequisites' following with such group memberships. In addition, this thesis contributes to the gap arising from the fact that whereas a few studies have examined how players experience early talent identification (e.g., Clarke et al., 2018), to my knowledge, none have investigated experiences of such processes for both selected and not-selected players.

CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Below, I introduce how I have worked from the scientific standpoint of symbolic interactionism, as well as the theoretical framework that has informed the analyses. I will also elaborate on the notions of social identity and athletic identity, which have become critical for informing my methodological work and they analysis of my material.

3.1. ORIGIN OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

The scientific stance in this thesis was inspired by interactionist scholars such as Herbert Blumer and Charles Cooley, who in turn drew upon a pragmatic stance taken by the American sociologist George Herbert Mead (Jacobsen, 2017). They, among other sociological scholars, formed the approach of social interactionism throughout the first half of the twentieth century (Fink, 2015; Jacobsen, 2017). An interactionist approach implies an understanding of how human life and society are shaped through human interaction, and is concerned with the study of human group life (Blumer, 1969; Fink, 2015; Jacobsen, 2017). It is not considered a paradigm or tradition, but rather an approach, perspective, or framework (Jacobsen, 2017).

Interactionism has been practiced in many variations during the years in attempts to distinguish one's own direction of the interactionist approach; however, as the Danish sociologist Michael Jacobsen describes, the only withstanding and widely accredited approach is the symbolic one (Jacobsen, 2017). The American

sociologist Herbert Blumer's famous book *Symbolic Interactionism – perspective and method* (Blumer, 1969) marked his place in the history of interactionist scholars as the founder (or inventor, Puddephatt, 2017) of symbolic interactionism (Jacobsen, 2017; Plummer, 2007).

3.2. A SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST APPROACH

Blumer (1969) described symbolic interactionism as resting on three premises:

> The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them… The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. (Blumer 1969 p. 2)

The 'things', that human beings act towards based on meaning, can be physical objects (e.g., a football or shirt), other humans (e.g., teammates, parents, coaches), categories (e.g., talent or special prerequisites), institutions (e.g., local club, TOP-Center), guiding ideals, activities of others, and situations an individual encounters in everyday life (Blumer, 1969). A basic assumption is that the meaning that these 'things' have for individuals is central and rightful, and should not be viewed as embedded in the things or the behavior (Blumer, 1969). Meanings are, as considered by Blumer, social productions created through interactions, and constituted by the acts of others towards yourself in relation to the thing ('things' also include human

beings). Meaning is thus a central premise for all human interaction and life in general.

Meanings are not only a social interactive production, but also *a process of interpretation* (Blumer, 1969). This process consists of two steps; first, becoming aware of the things that are meaningful to you through communication with yourself, which Blumer calls an *internalized social process* (Blumer, 1969). Second, the meaning is interpreted contingent on the situation and transformed into actions. Processes of interpretation are what make this interactionist approach 'symbolic'; the actions become symbols of different meanings (Mead, 1934). Our meanings and actions complement each other according to the context in which we find and put ourselves. The world is by Blumer, considered as appearing *here* and *now* (Blumer & Morrione, 2004, p. xi), much like Mead's understanding of the world as always changing (Jacobsen 2017). This characterizes social life from a symbolic interactionist's view as situational, relational, contextual, dynamic, and processual.

Based on the above raised points, individuals act and define actions based on their meanings of things, making it possible for two different persons to act differently towards the same thing because they assign a different meaning to that thing. These meanings and actions may then in turn alter based on the interactions we have with ourselves, other things and individuals in other contexts or situations. This constantly ongoing process of symbolic interaction—involving both actions and interpretation of actions—is understood as not only the bearing bricks of society, but society itself: *"Human society is to be seen as consisting of acting*

people, and the life of society is to be seen as consisting of their actions" (Blumer, 1969, p. 85).

This view on society and individuals therein raises some methodological considerations, concerning what to look for when you embed yourself in the field of inquiry. Blumer argues that people and groups exist in actions, and that we may act singly, collectively, or on behalf of a group, which therefore also makes actions the starting point for any empirical study of society, groups, or individuals (Blumer 1969). Thus, actions and the meanings that we attach to actions should be the main subject of interest when conducting research with a symbolic interactionist approach.

3.3. THE INDIVIDUAL AS SOCIAL

How we experience ourselves and define who we are, are processes that are closely linked with the actions we exert on the social world and the meanings interpreted from those actions. Mead's conceptualization and distinction between 'self', 'me', and 'I' has been a major contribution to Blumer's and other symbolic interactionists' conceptualizations (Puddephatt, 2017).

Mead himself was influenced by among others Charles Cooley (Fink, 2015; Mead, 1934). Cooley described how individuals and society are inseparable and exist as a collective. What is an individual if not part of a society, and what is a society if not consisted of individuals? We have no separate existence, and we are woven into society through both our hereditary ties and as members of social groups. The term 'social' is not an antagonist to individual, since human life,

perceived by Cooley, is fundamentally social, making each individual a part of the collective human life (Cooley, 2017). Cooley stated that individuals are a product of society in the sense that we draw upon our heredity and are formed socially through communication. It is through communication in our social life, understood as individuals' face-to-face encounters[4], that our self and identity are formed.

Cooley thinks of the 'self' as a socially formed rendition of 'I' and 'me'. He outlined an idea of the self as dependent upon our own imagination of appearance towards others and how they interpret and judge this appearance, in relation to our own 'self-feeling' (Cooley 1964). This idea was termed the 'looking glass self,' which refers to the act of looking at ourselves from others' perspectives. That is, reflections on how we believe that others see us, which is highly in line with Blumer's third premise for symbolic interactionism entailing a process of interpretation.

Mead drew upon Cooley's thoughts of the self as a socially dependent imagination of oneself and others (Mead, 1930). The self, according to Mead, is developed through our imagination and interpretation of others in the mind simultaneously with and dependent upon others interpretation of me and is thus social. As Mead (1930) writes: *"... the imagination cannot exist in experience as the imagination of a self, but must exist as an imagination within which both self and the other have their origin and development"* (p. 696).

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[4] Cooley's proposition was based on the beginning of 1900s' society. In todays' society, we encounter one another in more ways than face-to-face, as technologies plays a vital role in our social infrastructure.

Mead (1934) describes the self as consisting of the subjective 'I' which reacts to actions of others, and the objective "me" which is the inner-representative of others thoughts of myself. This, Mead (1934) says, makes us able to talk to ourselves as we would talk to other people, and put ourselves in the place of other individuals. Our consciousness of our self is essentially an ongoing conversation between the 'me' and the 'I.' Blumer was inspired by Mead in this regard, presumably since he was his student (Puddephatt, 2017), and basically drew upon the same stance as Mead. Blumer stressed that the self was not a structure, an organization, or something we have, but rather a process of continuously maintaining and developing aspects of the self through actions, and thus something we become (Blumer, 1969).

3.4. JENKINS' PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL IDENTITY

Identity is often thought of as something we all have; as a (rock solid) thing, we possess (Scott, 2015). However, when identity is viewed with a symbolic interactionist approach as a process, it becomes more inconstant and dynamic. It goes from 'identity' to 'identification,' and becomes dependent upon our own interpretations of the interactions we engage in. We not only think about how to behave in accordance with how we see ourselves, but we also consider what others think of us. We mirror ourselves in others' actions towards us (Cooley, 1964; Mead, 1934). This is an ongoing process throughout our lives, which is dependent on our interactions with others in various groups, collectives, and institutions (Jenkins, 2014).

In reconceptualizing social identity in line with a symbolic interactionist perspective, and with focus on the interplay between individuals and institutions, I will build on the British sociologist Richard Jenkins (Jenkins, 2014):

> Cognition and consciousness may seem to be some distance from identity. An interactional view of (the) mind is, however, vital for an understanding of identification. The self is unimaginable without mental processes, and vice versa. Identity without selfhood is similarly implausible. Both mind and selfhood must be understood as embodied within the routine interaction of the human world, neither strictly individual nor strictly collective. (Jenkins, 2014, p. 61)

Although Jenkins describes himself as influenced by many different sociologists, anthropologists, and philosophical thinkers (especially George H. Mead, Erving Goffman, and Fredrik Barth), this passage in his book emphasizes the importance of interactionist thoughts for his conceptual framework and understanding of identity.

Jenkins (2014) suggests that the human world (society) is consistent of three orders – the individual, interactionist, and institutional order. The first order refers to the fact that we all are unique embodied individuals, who have thoughts about ourselves, things, and other human beings. The second order refers to the fact that since we have thoughts about others, so do they about us. We interact with each other, and assess the communication we have, in order to act upon our interactions. The third order refers to the human characteristic of always gathering in groups or

collectives, based on similarities and differences. All three orders are connected and present at the same time, and they all contribute to the way we create identities.

Jenkins perspective on social identity resembles Mead's perspective on the 'self.' Our identity is, in line with the self, built upon reflexive processes through which we characterize how we are similar with and different from others. Although Jenkins believes there is both an internal and external part of the identity, he sees no point in trying to hermetically enclose one from the other or separate the two. The dialectic between the internal and external is not to be viewed as a sequence where one comes before the other, but rather to be described as a process of simultaneity, in which we are always moving towards the next thoughts, words, or encounters. As such, we communicate by presenting our thoughts towards others, and simultaneously interpret what they present for us.

The ongoing dialectic between how we identify ourselves, and the thoughts about how we imagine others identify us, is what Jenkins terms the *internal-external dialectic*. The internal part consists of thought about ourselves, and how we present ourselves for others. The external part consists of other people's identification presented for us, and how we imagine that others think about us. Both parts play an active role in determining who we and others are.

In addition to our identities being social based on interactions and an internal-external dialectic, it is also to be viewed as a process. We are constantly negotiating who we are with others. We do not begin from scratch every time we interact with others, but we bear our past actions and thoughts with us as a part of the negotiation of ourselves. Jenkins puts this process perfectly into words, by

saying that *"the mind and the self are perpetually in motion… They are perpetually in a state of 'becoming', even if what becomes is similar to what has been"* (Jenkins, 2014, p. 71). Becoming (someone) does not necessarily imply change. For an athlete, heading for practice tomorrow, as they have done for as long as they can remember, is also a choice of keeping a given sport in their life and part of who they are. Not changing is an active cementation of their perceived identity, and thus they are still always *becoming*.

3.4.1. GROUPS AND CATEGORIES

The internal-external dialectic implies social encounters with other individuals (Jenkins, 2002). We may organize ourselves with people we like, resemble, or feel similar to, and stay clear of people from whom we feel different. The similarity perceived within a collective, for example, university-students involves the fact that they attend a university, and can distinguish them from all individuals not attending a university. Thus, collectives are based on similarities and differences between people, and are defined by both features. Although individuals and collectives differ by the fact that individuals are embodied persons whereas collectives are not, Jenkins argues that the processes of identification may be similar in both.

Jenkins writes about groups and categories as two forms of collectives, which are based in *"similarity among and between a plurality of persons"* (Jenkins, 2014, p. 105). The basic distinction between the two types is that in groups, members mutually recognize their memberships, while members do not necessarily know they are a part of categories. We create group identities in the process that

Jenkins calls *collective internal identification*, implying an identification between group members based on similarities. In turn, categorization is a process of *collective external identification*, which is a forceful omnipresent part of everyday life often appearing in institutional practices. Categorizations are always a potential intervention in people's lives (Jenkins, 2000, 2014). When categorizing an individual as something, this categorization necessarily influences the way we (inter)act towards and think of that person, and thus the individuals' identification process. In this case, the categorization of some children as talented (or not), may potentially alter the identification of themselves and others.

3.4.2. IDENTITY AND CHILDHOOD

During childhood in particular, social identities are in a state of becoming while also being highly sensitive to categorization by others and various external factors. Jenkins (2014) devotes a chapter in his book to this matter, with the following key points: If selfhood is the primary internal identity, then 'human-ness' is the primary external, which is highly sensitive to categorization by others and various external factors. You are born as a boy or a girl (in most cases), affiliated with a certain ethnicity, into a family with specific practices, history, norms, and values, given a name—meaning that everyone is in the state of *becoming* when only a few minutes old. If born and raised in Denmark, you may become 'Danish', speak Danish, learn the Danish culture, and so on. All these factors are part of a collective categorization by others, and at the beginning, primarily from parents. Our early primary identification of who we are, and our kinship, is robust to change and significant for

our selfhood and future identification. As early as 1.5-3 years of age, children begin to identify themselves through the internal-external dialectic described earlier, and from middle-childhood (4-6 years of age) to adolescence, the primary context within which identification takes place shifts from being the parents to peer-groups (Jenkins, 2014; Poole, 1994).

In this thesis, the focus is on 10–12-year-old boys and their peer-group (primarily teammates), since they form the primary context in which identification occurs. At this age, identities are increasingly in need of negotiation since children move from a relatively fixed context of family-ties to a more unpredictable context with new relationships. It is also at this age that things like self-presentation, reputation, hierarchy, and status become perpetually negotiated (Jenkins, 2014; Poole, 1994). Using Jenkins' approach, I was capable of shedding light on the ways in which identification processes are negotiated in *relations* between players (and in relations with their coaches and parents). I specifically used the individual, interactional, and institutional order to explore how external categorizations of players into different institutional categories were experienced, understood, and negotiated by the boys themselves. Considering talent identification and selection as processes that involve individual and collective identification of oneself and others (Jenkins, 2014), I investigated how these processes were experienced within peer-groups of children.

3.5. ATHLETIC IDENTITY

With the interest of providing answers to the research question regarding what significance talent identification and selection processes hold for children's understanding and negotiation of their social identity, in this case, how strongly they identify as a footballer, is crucial. Thus I also drew on conceptualization of athletic identity that was developed and devoted to studying *"the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role"* (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237). Authors have suggested that a (symbolic) interactionist approach to the study of athletic identity can bring focus to how sport functions as a venue for athletes to experience recognition, successful achievements, and self-esteem (Sparkes, 1998; Weiss, 2001).

Athletic identity has been conceptualized as consisting of three related constructs that combined indicate a strong athletic identity: social identity, negative affectivity, and exclusivity (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001). Social identity refers to how strong an individual considers themselves an athlete, and negative affectivity refers to negative emotional experiences associated with doing poorly in sports or becoming injured. Exclusivity refers to a consolidation of the athlete role at the expense of the individual not pursuing or exploring other interests (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001).

The literature on athletic identity supplements Jenkins' concept of social identity in demonstrating that a strong identification with the athlete role potentially excludes other possible identities. When this happens, individuals may engage in (athletic) identity foreclosure, essentially neglecting other interests and groups to

identify with, and rather focus exclusively on sport (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Brown & Potrac, 2009).

CHAPTER 4. METHODS

4.1. ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK AS RESEARCH DESIGN

Ethnography is described as a highly suitable methodological approach when conducting interactionist studies (Atkinson, 2015; Atkinson & Housley, 2011; Fink, 2015; Jacobsen, 2017). The Chicago-tradition of interactionism acted as the off-set for Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinsons‘ conceptualization of ethnographic fieldwork in their seminal book *Ethnography* (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Here, the authors claim that to study and understand the relations that we act upon in a given setting, we must embed ourselves in the field. Only when we do so, can we get a sense of how and why individuals in that field interact and interpret these interactions:

> The primary aim should be to describe what happens, how the people involved see and talk about their own actions and those of others, the contexts in which the action takes place, and what follows from it (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, p. 7).

Based on these points, I found ethnography suitable for answering the research question of how young football players experience processes of early talent identification selection practices, and what significance these processes hold for children’s understanding and negotiation of their social identity. Further, in this ethnographic field study, different qualitative methods were used in alignment with the observation that the combination of multiple methods and consistent presence in the field can provide a broad and nuanced insight (Darbyshire et al., 2005).

In ethnographic fieldwork, the researcher works to obtain an embedded and accepted position from which he/she both shapes and studies the field (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This requires a personal, embodied, intellectual, and even emotional commitment from the researcher to the lives of others (Atkinson, 2015), calling for this interaction to be immensely ethical in itself. The embeddedness of the researcher in the field, makes the process of the fieldwork and the subsequent presentation hereof an expression of both the views of the participants and the interpretation of the researcher (Creswell, 2007). As John Law describes it (1994), there can be no separation of the 'researcher' from the 'social'. As such, it makes little sense to talk about pure ethnography as completely separated from autoethnography (although I recognize them as two different genres), since what is presented in the articles on the children's experiences, is also shaped by and a story of my presence in the field. John Law describes the process of ethnography and writing, as just another process of ordering (which I believe that symbolic interactionists and Richard Jenkins would agree, as simply another way of categorizing everyday life):

> I could pretend that there was no interaction between what I observed and myself as observer. But, as I've indicated, I believe that this would be wrong because ethnography is also a story of research – and in some measure a tale about the conduct of the ethnographer as well. And, though perhaps in a smaller way, it is in addition about the way in which the ethnographer acts upon her subject-matter (Law, 1994, p. 4).

With that in mind, I will continue the description of my way into ethnographic fieldwork, by contemplating the method itself.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) state that to take an ethnographic approach, researchers must: a) embed themselves in the daily lives of the individuals under study, b) gather material from multiple sources, c) work with an unstructured collection of material, d) focus on few cases to facilitate in-depth studies, and e) analyze and interpret the meanings of human conduct. The 'unstructured data collection' had implications for my research design in the sense that, I may have attempted to plan the overall structure of the study, but unforeseen events and incidents (such as cancelation of practices or changes following Covid19-restrictions) changed those plans along the way. Furthermore, the material must be collected with respect to the nature of the empirical world (Blumer, 1969), meaning that awareness must be paid to how I possibly shaped it with presupposed categories. The material, analysis thereof, and final synthesis thus consists of both the participants' expressions alongside my presupposed categories and interpretations emerging through the fieldwork (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

4.1.1. FIELDWORK WITH CHILDREN

When conducting fieldwork with children, there are different issues to be aware of (ethical considerations will be elaborated later). I put special emphasis on participating, since this possibly limits the perceived distance between me, as an adult researcher, and my research participants, the children (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998). I was aware that I could not become a 'football child.' I could, however,

attempt to create interactions with the participants that resembled their mutual relationships more than the relationship they shared with their coaches and parents. Participation was improved when I was allowed to take part in the children's exercises on the field (e.g., by playing alongside the children or acting as an assistant for them during exercises), instead of acting as a coach or assisting the coach and thus furthering the divide between us. Despite these precautions, the asymmetrical division of power between us continued throughout the fieldwork.

Although there was nothing covert about this PhD project, I tried to 'blend in' at the training sessions to minimize the distance to the participating children, making me at times appear less like a researcher and more like a participant. For instance, wearing football clothes, bringing a drinking bottle, and generally appearing different from the coaches was crucial in terms of distancing myself from that particular (powerful) position. In other words, this process aligned with what Goffman (1959) called 'the presentation of self', and implies a performance directed towards how we want others to perceive us. This also forms part in the internal-external dialectic (Jenkins, 2014) where individuals try to control what other people think of them. However, we cannot be certain that others interpret and validate the impression of ourselves as we expect or want them to.

To encourage an interpretation of me as a reliable, decent person, I would also engage in everyday conversations with the children, parents, and coaches, which prompted valuable information. Also, relevant experiences and skills related to the subject field are considered aiding features (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), providing the opportunity to both establish close relationships and to 'give'

something back to the milieu. Hence, my own experiences and skills as an elite youth athlete and a primary school teacher also formed part in the production of material.

During the fieldwork, my role in the field shifted over time given the changing perception of my presence by the children and their significant others. Initially, I took a role similar to laymen with a curious approach and yet still with an observing eye, while further striving for being perceived as an 'acceptable incompetent' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The fact that I am an adult, sporty-looking (my rendition), male, in a football context, may have reassured the children to identify me as competent within this particular setting. Therefore, I pursued the children's acceptance of me as incompetent in relation to how they experience football; after all, they will always be the experts on their own experiences. In other words, I attempted to become an accepted incompetent child, knowing that I probably was perceived as a (somewhat) competent, adult footballer.

As the fieldwork expanded and developed, so did the dialectic between roles as observer and participant. My overt, known role as a 'researcher' and initial role as outsider in relation to the field, eliminated the possibility of becoming a complete participant[5]. During the fieldwork, my role, and the children's interpretation of it, gradually transformed from a primarily external to an internal group member, and as such from primarily observer to participant, without

[5] Hammersley and Atkinson (2019), and Gold (1958) describe the dialectic between observer and participant as consisting of four roles ranging from "Complete participant", "participant-as-observer", "observer-as-participant", to "complete observer".

becoming a 'complete' of either. Accordingly, my role establishes itself in the continuum between both observing and participating, and a significant task became to navigate between when to put special emphasis on one role over the other.

However, as Fine and Sandstrom (1988) put it: *"... the adult participant observer who attempts to understand a children's culture cannot pass unnoticed as a member of that group"* (p. 13). Through engaging in positive interactions, affective relationships, and staying out of direct authority over the children, one may approach the role of a friend. Without affective relationships, an observer merely collects descriptive material, instead of approaching the children's point of view, which the role of a friend supports (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988). The ultimate validation of a successful being in the field, would be if I experienced what Fine did, when one boy reported to another: "You can tell Gary. He's one of the boys" (Fine and Sandstrom, 1988 p. 23). I experienced similar situations, as I for instance was called "Chrelle" by the boys, when they verbally and physically included me in the group of players, and when one boy expressed that: "it's strange… you're like a child but with a beard."

4.1.2. MULTI-SITED FIELDWORK

Based on the thought that multiple related sites could be explored differently but still complement the same research question, and informed by the increasing mobility between sites, the American anthropologist George Marcus conceptualized multi-sited fieldwork as an ethnographic approach (Marcus, 2011). From this perspective, the field of inquiry in this PhD project is the interplay between talent identification

and selection processes and children's identification processes, and different geographic sites are chosen in order to study such processes. Investigating the field of inquiry across sites such as the TOP-Center, the local club, family homes, and in moving across sites such as in car-trips from the player's homes to football practice sites, this ethnographic PhD project has become multi-sited in its essence. The sites are not only different in terms of geography but also in context, contributing to the focus in multi-sited fieldwork on the interrelations between the sites.

The primary sites of investigation were one local club site and the regional TOP-Center with which this club was affiliated. The population size of the community in which a local club is embedded may influence athletes' chances of becoming identified as talented (Côté et al., 2006), and the proximity to bigger clubs that provide training of talents may also play a role (Rossing et al., 2018). However, since the aim of this project was to shed light on how early talent identification and selection processes intersect with children's understanding of themselves and others, and not the variation of this between clubs, one club and one TOP-Center were chosen. In the trade-off between depth and breadth of investigation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), the emphasis here is on depth. Focusing my attention and investing my time in one club allowed me to establish credible relationships and engage in interactions, which further made it possible to follow the children and their families in their homes.

The chosen club was a typical suburban club that was located relatively close to their regional TOP-Center, which increased the likelihood that several players would be selected to the TOP-center. The clubs' U9 (players born in 2010,

becoming U10 in the 2019-2020 season) constituted a relatively large group of players, and became the group of boys that I chose to follow. Following this age-group allowed me to generate material regarding children's first experiences of talent identification and selection processes, since the TOP-Centers are the earliest systemized setting by the Danish football federation (directed towards U10-12 players).

When choosing sites, the aspects of accessibility, possibility and time was also influential since it should be practically achievable. The overall ethnographic research design originally consisted of approximately 1.5-years of fieldwork beginning April 2019 and ending in September 2020. However, due to Covid19-lockdowns, this period was repeatedly interrupted and prolonged, eventually ending in August 2021. During this period, I followed weekly practices of the specific age-group in the local club through two full seasons, starting from the point of time when players in the group were selected to the TOP-Center, and further on to the reselection or deselection of players to the subsequent TOP-Center seasons.

4.1.3. ACCESSING THE FIELD

I gained access to the club by sending an e-mail to the club administration with an abstract of this PhD project and further by phone explaining my aspiration to conduct the research at their club, which they approved (see letter to the club in Appendix A). I provided my criminal-conviction-check for the club administration, since this is a requirement for adults affiliation. The club administration put me in contact with the coaches of the age-group I was particularly interested in working

with. I then had a face-to-face meeting with the main coaches, letting them know who I was and how I intended to conduct the research, to also get their approval for the project. The process of obtaining the children's as well as their guardian/parents' approval is described in section 4.2.5.

My approach had the character of what Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) would call open research, in the sense that everybody at the settings knew that I was a researcher. I used what Fine and Sandstrom (1988) called a shallow cover, when presenting the research purpose for coaches, parents, and players. This entailed making my structural role as a researcher overt and explaining that I was interested in observing, following, and interviewing the children, without mentioning in detail that I was interested in *talent identification* processes, but rather interested in the role football played for the boys' identity formation. I chose this relatively vague way of explaining what the research was about to ensure that I was not reproducing or shaping the emerging themes the children wanted to share. This was for example effectuated with omission of the words 'talent' and 'selected' when describing the research.

During the fieldwork, I spent approximately 180 hours in the club, 6 hours in focus-group interviews, and 55 hours following six boys using a go-along procedure. Beneath is an outline of the elements from and timing of my fieldwork (Figure 1). The different methods will be described in the subsequent sections.

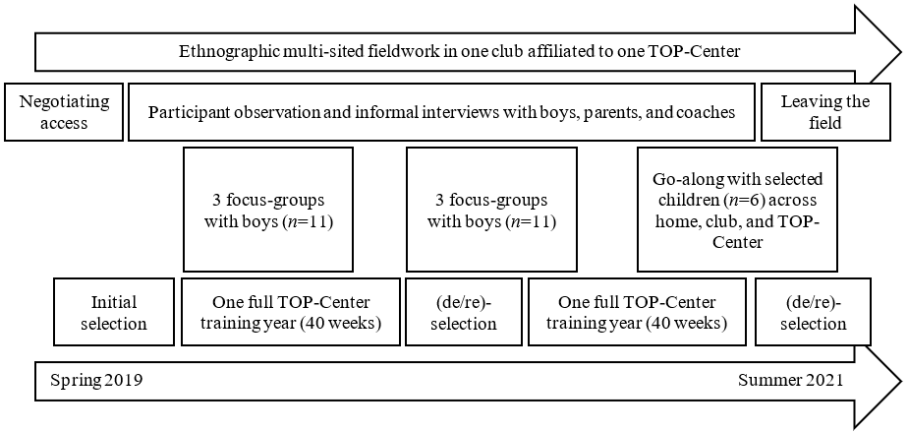

Figure 1: Overview of ethnographic fieldwork

4.2. METHODS IN THE FIELDWORK

4.2.1. PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

In alignment with a symbolic interactionist approach, features from an interpretive research paradigm (Thorpe & Olive, 2016) were used as a background for the observation conducted during the fieldwork. I sought to understand participants' experiences and interpret the meanings they acted upon, based on an ontology with multiple meanings arising from different contexts, relations, and interactions. Throughout my use of participant observation, I focused on the different actions, interactions, and social relationships engaged in by the children.

Some activities, which possibly contributed to the understanding of the children's identification process, were actions such as confrontations, both physically and verbally. Others could be: Did they dress differently? Did they do different things during or after an activity? Who showed up together? Who helped each other with the water bottles or other related equipment? Relations between the

child and peers demonstrated themselves when the children were hugging, high fiving, pushing each other away, helping each other up after a rough tackle, and in how they spoke to each other. Did they shout at each other, gesticulate to get the ball, or encourage each other?

The observational guide was based on Spradley's (1980) model of social situations in an attempt to structure my focus on the social situation. Spradley outlined how social situations happen at a certain *place*, with *actors* doing some sort of *activity* (Spradley, 1980), and the observations thus entailed describing these three elements of the social situation. Further, my observations was followed by note-taking in accordance with Thorpe and Olive (2016) suggestion to record observations under two headings – substantive field notes and additional field notes. The former refers to events, conversations, and things that have happened, whereas the latter refers to interpretations and opinions towards those actions and events (Thorpe & Olive, 2016). The field notes were mainly written immediately after the fieldwork to avoid loss of focus or distracting the participants during fieldwork. In total, the observations and field notes comprised 120 handwritten A4 pages and 130 dictaphone audio recordings of verbal notes (i.e., self-talk, 'verbal notes' about informal interviews and talks).

Social situation	Place	Actors	Activities
e.g., football practice	e.g., football field, school, home	e.g., children, peers, parents	e.g., doing an exercise, preparing for practice, drinking water (break)
Substantive field notes		**Additional field notes**	
Max and Oliver are standing in line waiting for their turn and discusses how good the new kid Martin is. Max: "Do you think the new one, Martin, is good?" Oliver: "Yes, but I can tell he is new."		Max and Oliver categorize Martin as good, but new. It appears to me as if they want to place him socially within the group. Max asks Oliver to shape their shared meaning about Martin.	

Table 1: Observation framework inspired by Thorpe and Olive (2016).

Informed initially by the theoretical perspective on social identity, I was especially focused on those activities that would provide me with insight into who the children grouped themselves with, how differences and similarities between the children were expressed, and how they went about identifying and categorizing each other through for example, conversations (like the example in Table 1 above). As such, my focus when conducting participant observation was shaped by the theoretical background described previously.

4.2.2. GO-ALONG

Since my fieldwork sought to approach the children's perspective, I also followed the go-along procedure for ethnography (Kusenbach, 2003; Smith & Sparkes, 2016). The go-along procedure suggests following subjects in different places during their everyday lives (Kusenbach, 2003), emphasizing the importance of the meaning of physical space and context. Kusenbach (2003) points out limitations of the two main

methods of ethnography (observation and interview) and emphasizes the importance of place in overcoming conditions related to these methods. When observing individuals in their natural settings, they usually refrain from commenting on why they do certain things. In addition, when interviewing individuals, it normally occurs in an artificial setting, refrained from the natural setting in which daily life occurs.

The go-along procedure endeavors to combine both methods in going alongside participants to enrich the contextualization of the material, by observing and interviewing in natural settings:

> Fieldworkers accompany individual informants on their 'natural' outings, and – through asking questions, listening and observing – actively explore their subjects' stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment. (Kusenbach, 2003, p. 463)

This approach must always (like participant observation and interviewing) be understood as an orchestrated arrangement regardless of the aspiration of retrieving participants' experiences and interpretations in natural settings. Go-alongs are particularly helpful when enlightening how individuals are entangled into interactions and relationships across sites.

To be more specific, I conducted go-alongs with six boys, of whom five were selected to the TOP-Center and one aspired to be selected in the future. I selected these children in particular to follow club players for whom talent identification and selection processes may form a significant part of their everyday lives. The boys were accompanied in their home settings, and while travelling

to/from and participating in training sessions at both the TOP-Center and/or local clubs (see Table 2 on page 45). A total of 55 hours was spent with the boys during go-along procedures.

4.2.3. FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEW

Brinkmann (2016) views the interview as a social practice and a context in itself. Indeed, we (interviewer and interviewee) bring our history and ourselves into the interview, making it more than a product of the 'here and now,' but also more than a neutral way of retrieving the interviewee's experiences of his or her own being in the world. It is rather a codetermined process where the awareness of the context is crucial for understanding the 'product' (Brinkmann, 2016). The focus-group interview is characterized as suitable for bringing the different and sometimes opposing perspectives by the participants forward, and bring forward the interplay between the participants as they actively produce and negotiate shared meanings as part of the dialogue (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011). This resembles my focus on understanding identification processes as ongoing social practices, and the focus-group interviews thus served as a venue for exploring the children's accounts in a context with multiple interactions. Also, children have been found to prefer group interviews compared with individual interviews (Hill, 2006). Combined, focus-group interviews were deemed appropriate for approaching forward the children's perspectives.

In the beginning and towards the end of the fieldwork, I sought to further my understanding of the selected and non-selected players' experiences through

focus-group interviews. When conducting focus-group interviews with children, one can advantageously use different child-customized practices to enhance engagement and approach the children's meanings (Morgan et al., 2002). These interviews had a character of being minimally structured, with the goal of understanding the boys' thinking, letting them talk to each other and follow their leads on topics of interest (Morgan, 2001). All interviews were conducted in the club's cafeteria building sitting in a lounge set around a table—a place they had occupied as a team several times before. The boys were provided with a comfortable environment where they were likely to discuss their variety of experiences, although this also depends on the interrelated status and power relations between each participant (Hill, 2006).

The interviews were conducted with 19 different boys in total (with four boys participating in two interviews) spread over six interviews with four participants per interview (despite one interview, where only three participated due to a late drop-out). Considering the age of the informants, the focus-groups consisted of no more than four boys and the interviews lasted between 46 and 60 minutes (Clarke et al., 2018). The interviews comprised one group of selected, one group of non-selected, and four mixed groups of players. This composition was sought to create focus-groups where different dynamics and experiences could emerge (Morgan et al., 2002). Further, the composition was also a result of a pragmatic arrangement of the focus-group interviews to take place before or after practices and competitions, with a seemingly random composition of boys.

Name	Self-reported age of entry in football	Primary team	Extracurricular activities	Part of go-along procedure
Albert	3	B		
Andrew	4	C		
Benjamin	4	B		
Charlie	4	B	TP	
Daniel	4	B		
Duncan	7	C		
Ethan	5	C-B		
George	3	A	TP/TC	X
Harry*	3	A	TP/TC	X
Jack	3	A	TP/TC	X
Jacob*	4	A	TP	
James	6	B		
Leo*	4	A	TP	
Liam	5	C		
Lucas	6	B		
Nathan**	5	A	TP/TC	X
Noah	3	A	TP	
Oliver	2	A	TP/TC	X
Oscar*	4	A	TP	X
William	5	C-B		

Table 2: List of participants in focus-group interviews and go-along.
*TC = TOP-Center. TP = technique-practice (extra-training for which skills were needed). *=participated in two focus-group interviews. **=did not participate in focus-group interview. Modified from Paper 2.*

I followed Smith and Sparkes' (2016) suggestions for construction of the interview guide and conduct of the interview. The participants were asked to talk about the total group of peers, as well as the differences and similarities within the group of boys, and whether they had experienced being categorized as talented or not. The guides were developed over time as new themes and topics emerged through the fieldwork and the focus-group interviews were conducted in two rounds (see interview-guides in appendix B and C). During the interviews, I moderated the discussions by ensuring that we talked about issues pertinent to this project while giving time and space to the participants to discuss and elaborate on each other's

points (Morgan, 2001). In line with a symbolic interactionist approach, and the role of the 'traveler' who creates material with the participants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Smith & Sparkes, 2016), I enclosed both questions and answers when presenting material, to contextualize the production of meaning.

4.2.4. CATEGORIZATION EXERCISE

In the focus group interviews I drew on an exercise developed by Laura Gilliam, who in her PhD thesis on identity, inclusion, and exclusion conducted interviews with ethnic minority children aged 10-12 years of age (Gilliam, 2006). The exercise was adapted here, so the children were given cards with names of themselves and their peers and asked to separate or categorize them based on self-selected criteria (mirroring descriptions of grouping and ranking exercises, Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). This technique both qualified an investigation of which categories the children mentioned and found relevant to use, and further how they grouped their peers and themselves. To avoid a reproduction of categories, the exercise was carefully explained without giving any examples. I asked the children to group the cards in as many groups they found relevant based on differences and similarities among them, and subsequently enlighten me on why they were grouped this way (Gilliam, 2006).

There are some obvious ethical considerations following categorization-exercises like these pertaining to how the exercises might influence the children; will the exercise merely reproduce different categories and groups or reinforce them? Might it change the children's stream of thought to who belongs with who?

Both instances were possible; however, I carefully followed the children's use of words, and thereby used the categories, similarities, and differences they already had spoken about and found relevant. Furthermore, I challenged their perceptions by questioning why they categorized as they did, how they thought their peers grouped them, and how else they could categorize each other.

4.2.5. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As already indicated, ethical considerations are to be dealt with at specific points of time in the field work but also throughout the research process as a whole. Priority should be given to actions such as securing informed consent, and anonymity of the research participants as well as avoiding exploitation (Eder & Fingerson, 2001; Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

The informed consent was derived from the parents on behalf of the children, as they are minors; however, both children and parents were orally informed of the project in ways that were adapted to their respective ages (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Morgan et al., 2002). Despite the parents being the legal caretakers for the children, and signing the informed consent letter, they were not entitled to know what the children had expressed in their responses. During my fieldwork, all information given to or obtained by me were held confidential in relation to the other participants. Further, all participants were informed that they could withdraw from the project at any time, and this piece of information was given before the participants became involved in the project.

In this project, all participants, names, places, etc. have been replaced by pseudonyms, making it practically impossible for outsiders to identify who is who (Wiles et al., 2008). All participants were made aware of this process in the informed consent. Although I aimed at making their identities a secret, other participants and individuals present in the same settings during the fieldwork, might have the ability to decipher who is who. To mitigate the risk that both insiders and outsiders identify participants, I have changed or left out details of minor importance about the places or individuals to camouflage their involvement in this project (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). For example, information about family members and their background is left out. While this may have limited the integrity of the descriptions, the aim of protecting the children was deemed more important. Although I will not assess the subject field as particular precarious for the children to talk about, there could have been issues with children who were unhappy to find themselves categorized as something or identified as someone, they experienced as wrongful. Therefore, and despite ongoing debates about if participants should be given the choice of being held anonymous (Grinyer, 2002), I chose to use pseudonyms. I experienced no form of abuse, social misbehaving, or anything that could have prompted a report to the parents or club representatives during the fieldwork.

During the project, I carefully followed the AAU research data policy and the guidelines from the Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science when handling and managing data. This involves arrangements ensuring safe storage of data on a secure AAU FileShare. All data were immediately uploaded to this

FileShare, and not saved nor stored otherwise, to minimize the risk of losing or being deprived of data. All handwritten material was kept under lock in a secured place.

4.3. PROCESS OF ANALYSIS

The total list of material comprised field notes of observations and audio-recordings from the fieldwork, as well as audio-recordings of the focus-group interviews, and field notes and audio-recordings from the go-along procedure. Field notes and observations from fieldwork acted as an empirical foundation and were used in the second and third paper. Focus-group interviews were used in the second paper and material from the go-along procedure were used in the third paper.

The process of analyzing the material occurred throughout the fieldwork, as well as in the period with writing about and publishing the findings from the project. All audio-recordings from interviews were transcribed. During the analysis, I both read the transcripts and heard the audio-recordings, since this dual process potentially enables new ways of interpreting the material (Revsbæk & Tanggaard, 2015). The process of analyzing the material followed the six principles or phases from thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and colleagues (2016; 2019).

The data were first inductively coded, followed by a phase of deductive coding using Jenkins' framework on social identity. Hereafter, the codes were collated into themes, refined, and named after going back and forth between the material and the evolving analysis. Importantly, the themes presented in the papers are more than collated codes, and rather, reflect tendencies of the material pertinent

to the area of interest. As Braun and colleagues (2016) describe, *"[the themes] also has to tell you something important about the data, relevant to your research question"* (p. 198). Finally, relevant excerpts were chosen to represent the themes.

In the work with the third paper, where the primary material consisted of field notes from the go-along procedure the coding pointed to the need of adding the theoretical construct of athletic identity. Throughout the fieldwork, the material and possible interpretations thereof were discussed with the group of supervisors (i.e. peer debriefing, Burke, 2016). Therefore, codes, themes, and the naming of themes developed during the fieldwork and were refined afterwards (as common to ethnographic fieldwork, Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Moreover, as I rendered meaning and interpretations of interactions important, following a symbolic interactionist approach, the material and themes should be considered as both formed by where I had directed my attention during the fieldwork, and who I interacted with. Consequently, it became important to present a transparent account of the material and the interpretations thereof, why I carefully sought to describe the themes, context, and situations in detail without compromising anonymity.

CHAPTER 5. PAPER SUMMARIES

In this chapter, I summarize the aim, use of theory and methods, findings as well as conclusion for each paper. In so doing, I also emphasize how each paper contributed to the field of research on talent identification and selection. Further, I outline the interconnectedness between the three papers.

5.1. PAPER 1: THE MISSING CHILDREN: A SYSTEMATIC SCOPING REVIEW ON TALENT IDENTIFICATION AND SELECTION IN FOOTBALL (SOCCER)

Aim: A scoping review was designed to review the nature and extent of research specifically pertaining to talent identification and selection in football. Although recently published reviews have investigated talent identification and development in football from various perspectives, no review was found to have focused on talent identification and selection. Further, no reviews appeared to have outlined how existing studies had been conducted, with whom, and from which perspectives. Thus, this paper set out to meet such shortcomings and review the strength and limitations of the current literature on talent identification and selection processes to inform the future research agenda.

Theory and method: The literature search was systematic in nature, and the analysis and synthesis aligned with a scoping review approach (Grant & Booth, 2009; Tricco et al., 2018). Importantly, only studies investigating a talent identification and/or

selection *process* were included in the synthesis. A systematic literature search provided 2.199 articles, and the subsequent title/abstract and full-text screening yielded 73 studies for inclusion in the qualitative and quantitative analysis. First, data were extracted from each study to pre-defined categories: author name, title, year of publication, type of publication, participant, perspective, definition of talent identification, selection/identification criteria, study design, data type, and key findings. The qualitative analysis entailed interpreting, for example, which perspectives the study had applied, how talent identification was defined, and their key findings, whereas the quantitative analyses entailed counting the number of occurrences in each category (e.g., how many used quantitative or qualitative data?). Supplementary material for the first paper consists of search documentation (Appendix D) and a descriptive table of all articles included in the scoping review available online through the webpage of the European Journal for Sport and Society.[6]

Findings: The overall publication frequency has been increasing from no annual publications on the subject between 2002-2008, to +10 annual publications from 2016 and onwards. Results also indicated that 72.6% of the studies failed to provide a definition of talent identification, and that approximately two thirds of the studies focused on selection processes while the rest explored talent identification alone or

[6] The table can also be retrieved from the following link: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/suppl/10.1080/16138171.2021.1916224/suppl_file/ress_a_1916224_sm7946.docx

in combination with selection processes. A relatively small percentage of studies used explorative or descriptive approaches (13.7% and 1.4% respectively), and only 13.1% collected qualitative data. The most common participants involved male players (60.7%) and coaches and recruitment staff (18%). Approximately two thirds of the articles were designed and written from a *system* perspective, entailing an investigation into how the talent systems shaped the player population and how the process of selecting talented players could be optimized. Importantly, only 5.5% of the studies investigated the players' perspective on being part of such talent identification and selection processes.

Conclusion and contributions: This study laid out the landscape of research pertaining to talent identification and selection in football. Specifically, it showed how most studies used quantitative data derived from, for example, physiological, or anthropometric tests to outline the prognostic validity of different variables considered predictive for talent, while the combination of a longitudinal and close-context approach such as ethnography were left out entirely. Importantly, when players were included as participants, they participated as research subjects who underwent different tests to provide answers that could either optimize the selection practices or explain how the systematized practices would shape the player population. The child athletes' perspective on being subjected to identification and selection processes and their role in attributing meaning to and navigating such processes were missing, and it was concluded that future research could benefit from pursuing those perspectives.

5.2. PAPER 2: HOW DO YOUNG ATHLETES EXPERIENCE SELECTION AND NON-SELECTION? AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF TALENT CATEGORIZATION AND IDENTIFICATION PROCESSES

Whereas the first paper identified the missing perspectives of children exposed to talent identification and selection processes, the second followed through by exploring such processes amongst children. Further, as talent identification and selection practices have gained space in children's sport, it became important to investigate how children experienced such processes, and what significance these processes had to their social identity. Thus, this second study explored the experiences of children situated in a local club, wherefrom several players were selected to an extra weekly practice with other selected players in a regional TOP-Center program.

Aim: The specific aim of the second paper was to explore children's perspectives on early talent identification and selection processes in the club setting in particular. Special emphasis was given in this paper to how children (in the total age-group) negotiated their adherence to different football related groups, and the significance they paid to being part of those groups.

Theory and method: Jenkins' (2014) social identity theory served as the background for this study. Specifically, I sought to investigate the importance of institutional

settings and external categorizations for the individuals involved. The primary material from the fieldwork for this study was participant observation at weekly practices for the specific age group, including informal interviews with boys, their parents, and coaches, as well as focus-group interviews (n=6) with 19 different boys. Transcripts from focus-group interviews and field notes went through inductive and deductive phases of coding, in which Jenkins' three societal orders (institutional, interactional, and individual), the internal-external dialectic, and notions on the power of categorizations were identified as core constructs to analyze the material.

Findings: Three themes were presented in the findings section: 1) *The institutionalized organization of football teams*, 2) *The interactions that shape football-identity*, and 3) *Identification of individuals.* First, the institution of football and its associated categories appeared as salient factors in the boys' identification processes. Thus, the A-, B-, C-team, and TOP-Center constituted some of the main groups and categories that both were physically present during practices, but also present in extracurricular activities for which a certain level of skill was decisive for participation. Second, the boys used those significant groups and categories to actively negotiate their own belonging and skill-level through ongoing interactions amongst the group of boys at the local club. Being seen as skilled and associated with the A-team became an important role for the boys to negotiate and adhere to. Third, the boys signaled their preferred group membership to the coaches during practices, by turning and moving their body towards their preferred group as the coaches divided them. They also verbally defended and argued for their own group

memberships, while defining what it entailed to be part of the distinct groups. The boys used the institutionalized categories to signal how they identified themselves and wanted others to identify them.

Conclusion and contributions: This paper utilized a theoretical approach that is novel to research on talent identification and selection and helped us understand how such processes intersect with children's identification processes. To be more specific, Jenkins' attention to the range of institutional, interactional, and individual orders points to the ways in which individuals and their interactions are linked with larger institutional settings such as the football system. Further, Jenkins' internal-external dialectic contributed to analysis of the ways in which categories of the football system such as A-, B-, and C-levels interweave with how the children identify themselves and others. Further, the paper contributed insight into how the boys actively used the affiliation with institutionalized A-, B-, and C-team categories, alongside the categories of those selected to participate in 'technique-practice' and the 'TOP-Center', as important and significant for demonstrating a certain skill-level and aspiration to become a footballer. These institutionalized categories acted as the reference point from which the boys negotiated their social identity. Thus, even if the coaches downplayed the importance of such categories and the division according to skill-level, they became salient to the boys' identification processes.

5.3. PAPER 3: FOOTBALL IS LIFE! AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF TALENTED CHILDREN'S IDENTITY FORMATION

Aim: To further our knowledge about how talent identification and selection processes intersect with the children's daily negotiation of their social identity, this paper turned our attention to the daily lives of individual boys, who aspired to be or already were selected to the TOP-Center. In comparison with the second paper, the third paper extended the investigation from primarily football-related sites to include personal sites such as the boys' home through go-along ethnography in particular. In this paper, I aimed to explore how early talent identification and selection practices intersected with children's identification processes during their everyday lives.

Theory and method: This paper was based in the ethnographic fieldwork in general and particularly go-alongs with 6 boys from the local club, of whom several were selected to the TOP-Center. Furthermore, informal interviews with the boys and their parents served to complement the participant observation. The concept of athletic identity, and more specifically the in-built dimensions of social identity, negative affectivity, and exclusivity, informed the analysis of the material, alongside the related concept of identity foreclosure.

Findings: The boys were found to display several features indicating the promises and pitfalls of developing an athletic identity. The boys' primary social groups were associated with football, as they all had developed close friendships in football and compared themselves with their teammates more so than with classmates. They

exhibited their identification with being a footballer through their appearance and clothing (by wearing football related apparel), and through their bedroom decorations (e.g., displaying medals, trophies, football-posters and bedsheets). Further, the family's gardens were designed so that the boys' opportunities to play football were accommodated. The boys' experienced selections to the TOP-Center as significant to their identity as footballers. They explained that continuous skill improvement was necessary to still be considered part of the TOP-Center and were nervous about the annual selection process. Lastly, the increased time, status, and attached interest invested in football for the selected boys were paralleled with an exclusive focus on football. Although the boys all had other leisure activities, they were fond of (e.g., they all played online videogames with each other), their main interest and focus was devoted to football. Their daily lives were arranged in accordance with the playing schedule and practices. Further, the football homework given from the TOP-Center received status as equally important as regular school homework (for both the children and their parents), situating the institution of football as equally important as school.

Conclusion and contributions: The boys' lives were filled with football in various ways, and the findings showed signs of the boys slowly moving towards forming an identity centered on the athlete role. Selections played a salient role in that development, as it served as a verification of them as footballers. Further, they showed an exclusive focus on football, risking prematurely foreclosing their identity (Brewer & Petitpas, 2017). This study contributed with novel insights into children's

first experiences of talent identification and selection systems through the not yet used approach of go-along ethnography.

CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION

In this section I discuss my methodological approach, the theoretical framework, and the empirical findings described in the papers with focus on three main points. First, the attention drawn in this thesis to children's perspectives is discussed in relation to the strengths and limitations of the chosen methodology that is inspired by ethnography. Second, I discuss how the thesis has made use of Jenkins' framework on social identity in shedding light on how the power of institutions and external categorizations interplay with identification processes among youth athletes. Finally, the third point discussed is how the findings in this thesis relate with knowledge about early identification and selection practices in sports systems.

6.1. CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES

The significant methodological contribution of the current work lies in adding the children's perspectives on identification and selection processes, and in using an ethnographic approach to the research. An existing study has used an ethnographic approach to examine girls' identity formation in relation to football, however, without considering the intersection with talent identification and selection processes (Pielichaty, 2019). Another study focused on boys' perspectives on talent identification and selection processes in English academy football, but chose not to use an ethnographic approach (Clarke et al., 2018). As such, the current PhD thesis complements these gaps in using an ethnographic approach directed towards approaching the children's perspectives.

Despite the strengths of this design, there are limitations to this methodological approach. It would be naïve to believe that I could possibly capture the children's perspectives entirely for several reasons (and importantly, is why I also stress that I *approach* their perspectives). First, as the research process itself is considered a co-creation of material, subsequently interpreted by me and the research team, the children's perspectives only partially constitute the results (Hill, 2006). Second, the setting and context in which the research takes place is suggested to significantly influence children's responses (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Hill, 2006). Therefore, I specifically chose to conduct 'go-along' with selected boys outside the local club setting and into their homes and daily lives. However, during the fieldwork in the club and focus-group interviews in particular, the children's comments and responses may still have been influenced by institutional norms and expectations, and by power relationships within the group of children (Hill, 2006; Munk & Agergaard, 2018).

A tool that was utilized in an attempt to bring the children's perspectives forward was the categorization-exercise in the focus group interviews. This provided the opportunity to explicate the boys' use of categories to identify themselves and others. As such, the categorization-exercise may be of interest to researchers, when examining how children understand themselves and others, as it points to how they define the groups and categories surrounding them. However, there are limitations to its use in the current project. The fact that the focus-group interviews were conducted in the club's cafeteria building before or after practice might have influenced the children's responses in several ways (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). This

may have directed their attention towards the football system and contributed to position the A-, B-, and C-groups as salient ways of grouping each other. Even if I stressed that the focus group participants could group each other in whatever way they wanted, their relationship with me was centered around football, which may have emphasized this association further. However, the choice of conducting the focus group interviews in the football context reflect considerations about situating the children in an environment in which they felt safe so they could express themselves, while also interfering minimally with their everyday schedules.

These limitations give rise to considering other related methodological tools such as sociograms, which enables researchers to facilitate research participants' identification of their social relations not only in, but also beyond sports settings (Grimminger, 2014). The use of sociograms in this PhD project could have complemented the material by 'mapping' the degree of the interconnectedness and relationships between the children (Smith, 2003), and thus extended and systemized my knowledge about the social positioning of the group of children.

Looking at the children's lives in a wider range of settings may also aid in understanding the significance each context and group holds for the individual's identification processes. If we consider an individual as one embodied person, we may have overlapping social identities that switches on/off depending on contexts (Jenkins, 2014). Thus, by using the go-along procedure, I have shown how the football identity permeates different contexts of their lives, positioning that particular identity as salient and defining for who they are. However, there are other social settings in which I was not able to follow the children, such as through a

regular day at school, in after-school programs, family gatherings, or other prominent contexts in their lives. Although I was provided with anecdotal descriptions of their days in school, I was not able to observe it myself due to Covid19-restrictions. The relatively limited number (*n*=6) of participants in go-alongs in the current project also restricts the saturation of data that we can utilize when exploring the transferability of the findings to other cases (Smith, 2018). Further, the choice of exploring a group of boys in one club environment facilitated an in-depth knowledge about that group of children, however, it also means that the findings were contingent on the experiences, characteristics, and conditions of that particular group. This should be considered when making inferences from the current study to other cases.

6.2. THE POWER OF INSTITUTIONALIZED CATEGORIES

Jenkins' theoretical framework on social identity enabled me to analyze how the institutionalized categories such as A-, B-, and C-levels were delt with among the boys. Using Jenkins (2014) framework, this thesis has also shed light on children's ongoing negotiations of their position. Talent identification and selection processes are thus understood as more than adult governed processes; it is not only practiced by coaches and other personnel in clubs and academies, but also followed by athletes' actions and emotional reactions (Brown & Potrac, 2009).

In line with the theoretical perspective developed in this thesis, Thomas and colleagues (2022) proposed a *relational* approach to better understand the practices of talent identification and development in football academies. They described how

a focus on interactions, relations, and networks could shed light on how relations between stakeholders shape the academy setting and practices within (Thomas et al., 2022). The relational approach strives to overcome the often dualized understanding of individuals and larger society, by directing focus to how relations between the two create a 'relational order' (Thomas et al., 2022), which resembles many of Jenkins' descriptions of the 'interaction order' of our identity (Jenkins, 2014). As such, the current PhD thesis complements and expands our knowledge by considering the relational interplay between the individual, the group of boys, and the wider institutional categories they operate within.

Jenkins, however, only to a limited extent consider the significance of the cultural environment in his theoretical framework on social identity. Other researchers have stressed how understandings of cultural psychology can shed light on the development of athletic identities (Champ, Nesti, et al., 2020; Champ, Ronkainen, et al., 2020). Champ and colleagues (2020) outlined that a cultural sport psychology approach focuses on how culturally shared meanings, practices and institutions influence the lives of individuals, with special emphasis on how the use of language, discourse and power-relations construct identities. In line with Jenkins' approach, identities are understood as dependent on both social and cultural elements (Champ, Ronkainen, et al., 2020).

Several distinct yet comparable theoretical approaches to studying the social world are capable of complementing Jenkins framework. It is clear that relational and social identity approaches along with cultural sport psychology can further inform how athletes' lives are socially dependent, how identities are

negotiated, and how larger social structures, institutions, and norms affect who we can become. All of which are elements prominent in both psychology and sociology (Smith & McGannon, 2015). Bridging approaches from the two disciplines may enhance our understanding of interrelated social issues such as the interplay between larger social structures and individual agency. In this specific case, supplementing Jenkins' social identity approach with cultural sports psychology approaches could have shed light on what role the culture of football played for children's experiences of football, or how relational networks mediated their football experience. Champ and colleagues (2021; 2020) e.g., show how a 'masculine' and 'tough' culture in youth football shapes the practices, behaviors, and identities of those present in such cultures.

Consistent with the aim of this PhD, I chose a social identity approach to focus on the children's identification processes, knowing that a relational or cultural approach could have given additional insights into the interplay amongst the children and the cultural environment. Whereas there are core benefits associated with using Jenkins' approach (e.g., as a framework for understanding the interplay between institutions and individuals), there are shortcomings pertaining to its use.

Different disciplinary fields have developed and used frameworks on social identity differently, creating different conceptual terms and ways of explaining the mechanisms pertaining to forming an identity (Korte, 2007). In his book, Jenkins' (2014) focus is on how the dialectic between individuals and institutions mediate our formation of identity through an ongoing process. Thus, with a conceptualization of identity as always social, fluid, processual, and contextual it naturally becomes

difficult to measure elements of an individuals' identity or to understand such identities without providing extensive descriptions of dynamic social situations. As such, Jenkins' approach is capable of analyzing the processual features of identity, whereas he to some extent denotes the power of group identities in determining individual's behavior. Others have developed frameworks explaining how individuals shift between personal and social identities depending on group memberships and norms, emphasizing social identity as residing within the individual and largely stemming from social psychology with other methodological traditions (e.g., Social Identity Theory, Korte, 2007; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

6.3. EARLY IDENTIFICATION WITH ATHLETIC IDENTITY

The findings from the second and third papers complement the otherwise limited amount of empirical research on children's experience with talent identification and selection processes. Specifically, this thesis shows how young boys' identification processes are shaped around a hierarchy of categories and groups (TOP-Center, A-, B-, C-group), while the boys also actively negotiated the categories provided by the institutionalized football system and developed their athletic identity. Below I will discuss my findings with related literature.

The skewed power balance between adult stakeholders and children may serve as one explanation for why the institutionalized categories appear so important for the boys to identify with—the system's sporting logic with skill-level divisions and selections to TOP-Centers were to a large extent adopted and attributed meaning by the boys. In line with such findings, and based in ethnographic fieldwork in a

local Swedish football club, Eliasson (2015) found that the sporting logic adopted by the coaches and parents prevailed over the social logic adopted by the children, even in a grassroots setting not concerned with talent identification and selection processes.

Some of the consequences of a prevalent sporting logic have been reported with older athletes. For instance, Elliott and colleagues (2018) outlined how 15-year-old Australian football players, who were identified as talented, experienced difficulties with upholding social relationships (also outside sport), and actively negotiated their future identities, due to the intensified focus on sport. The findings in this thesis rather point towards the significance of early identification and selection processes and indicates how a strong football identity may develop already during childhood.

The boys' strong identification with football, as shown in the third paper, appears to be build up over time. Throughout the fieldwork, the engagement in football was progressing for the boys in focus. Notably, there are reasons to believe that the label as talented, or as showing 'special prerequisites,' the recognition as a good football player, and the added 'talented' peer-group membership following selection, all contributed to the boys' athletic identity. In alignment with such findings, Pielichaty (2019) created a 'football self-continuum' to explain how some girls showed a 'salient' (committed and motivated) and others a 'contingent' (play for fun, recreational) football self. Individuals may shift between the two states following significant life-changes (such as being identified and selected to an academy setting). Using this model to further explore what the children themselves

emphasized as important for shifting between a contingent and salient football identity may further our knowledge in this field and could help further contextualize the experiences of the athletes from this thesis.

Developing athletic identities has been shown to accompany both potentials and challenges for the athletes' sport-specific and general life experiences. For example, it is commonly conceptualized that individuals who have created strong social identities related to sports may experience high self-esteem, a sense of belonging and meaning, and a sense of continuity in their social identity across contexts (Bruner et al., 2020). A strong sense of social identity has also been found to endorse prosocial behavior towards teammates, while teammates who failed to conform to group norms were acted negatively against (Bruner, Boardley, et al., 2018). Further, strong social identities centered on being an athlete were found to foster both personal and social development as athletes felt higher self-worth and are more committed to the team/sport (Bruner et al., 2017). On the other hand, a strong athletic identity can be challenging. For example in collegiate sports, where it has been found to cause severe distress upon transitioning out of a high profile setting from college due to identity foreclosure (Beamon, 2012). Similar outcomes have been reported upon de-selection in youth football (Brown & Potrac, 2009), or when left in difficult positions between teams or out of the team rooster (Champ, Nesti, et al., 2020). Involvement in sport itself does not necessarily bring these mentioned side-effects, rather, it is socially conditioned (Bruner et al., 2020). Therefore, it serves the children's best interests for clubs, federations, and sport communities to

be aware of how institutionalized settings shape children's sport experiences and identities.

The traditional Danish youth sport model, where clubs are managed as voluntary non-profit associations (Bennike et al., 2020), is currently challenged by the increasing societal attention drawn towards talent identification and selection processes (Larkin & Reeves, 2018). This does not necessarily imply an either/or situation for the clubs, given that research has noted that athletes may manage shifting between several different pathways from youth to senior in Danish elite sports. The scenario does however lie between two historically opposing logics of inclusion/equality and competition in youth sport (Storm et al., 2012).

Advocating for a youth sport setting where clubs and coaches underplay talent and competition, poses a risk of losing those children that are eager to compete and nurture their talent. However, creating an environment with focus on being able to both compete and experience sport as primarily a social engagement can be managed without practicing early talent identification and selection. For example, Erikstad and colleagues (2021) found a successful age group in Norwegian youth football to foster athletes that continued their recreational engagement in sport with several eventually attaining professional level. The coaches delayed selection practices and gave the athletes the opportunity at age 13 to 'self-select' to a recreational or elite team, dependent on the individuals' ambitions and interest (Erikstad et al., 2021). As such, there are ways of organizing youth football to accommodate the development of athletes to elite level while mitigating identity

issues related to early talent identification and selection practices as those present in this PhD thesis.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES

In this PhD thesis, the aim was to shed light on how early talent identification and selection processes intersected with children's understandings of themselves and their peers. This aim was satisfied by first reviewing literature on talent identification and selection in football, and then, empirically investigating such processes using an ethnographic approach. Young boys' experiences of early talent identification and selection appeared to be defining for who they can and wish to become, as the introduced groups and categories based on skill-level and talent set the scene and boundaries for their identity formation. Furthermore, go-along ethnography with those aspiring to or already being selected as talented exhibited an emerging athletic identity, as football occupied a salient spot in their everyday lives.

In the first paper, I meticulously reviewed the literature on talent identification and selection in football and found that the perspective of the children on these processes were absent. Previous studies had encouraged researchers to pursue longitudinal and multidisciplinary work (e.g., Williams et al., 2020); however, I extended these suggestions and also emphasized the lack of qualitative research and children's perspectives on identification and selection systems. I showed how the majority of research had been presented from a 'systems' perspective, which was aimed at understanding how the talent identification and selection systems could be improved and optimized. The first paper acted as a

foundation and reassurance for the importance of designing fieldwork with the aim of approaching the children's perspectives.

Using Jenkins' social identity framework to analyze material produced through ethnographic fieldwork, my research highlighted the importance of institutional categories and external categorizations (i.e., being identified and selected) for the boy's identification processes. The boys used institutional categories derived from the official team rankings (A-, B-, and C-group, A being the highest level) as strong reference points when identifying one another. Those categories were used on a regular basis to divide the groups of children during practice sessions and became salient categories for the boys to negotiate and identify with. Various other (in)formal groups were formed during the fieldwork, and being a member of such groups formed as extra practice stemming from the A-team (e.g., a running-group and Friday-practice) served to manifest the boys' position as A-team players. It became favorable to be part of the A-team compared to the B- and C-team. On top of the division into categories based on skill-level, some of the boys became selected to participate at the TOP-Center. The boys were excited to be part of the initiative and they mirrored themselves in what it entailed to be part of that category. The children did not question these groupings, but rather operated within the boundaries and limits of the categories at hand to determine how central football was for their identity.

Go-along procedures with boys, who were selected or aspiring to be part of the TOP-Center, showed how football became a salient and permeating part of their everyday lives extending the findings from the club context in the second paper. The

identification and selection processes held significance for their understanding and negotiation of their social identity in various ways. They managed their impressions on a daily basis by signaling the importance of football through their physical appearance (e.g., clothes) and their bedroom decorations. Their lives revolved around football, as their primary peer-groups were situated in the sport, and they used spare-time to play self-organized football. Further, their interest extended to how the families as a whole organized their weekly schedules and garden arrangements (with football equipment and goals being necessary features).

By approaching the children's perspectives and using a methodological and theoretical approach seldomly found in studies on talent identification and selection, I hope to have contributed with novel approaches and knowledge to this realm. Future studies could expand the ethnographic approach, with follow-up periods across seasons to further our understanding through longitudinal insights into the development of both individuals and groups of athletes in relation to identity issues. For example, by using elements from short-term ethnography in implicating oneself intensely in shorter recurring periods of time in one club/with one team and thereby being able to shift between multiple clubs (Pink & Morgan, 2013). Such an opportunity would provide a broad, even if less deep insight into the phenomenon under study.

Moreover, broadening our knowledge with similar research designs in other contexts and with girl/female participants would provide a solid foundation for understanding the mechanisms of identification and selection processes. Additionally, it was interesting to note that families were also socialized into the

norms of youth sport, as children's engagement in organized sport shaped the family-life (Dorsch et al., 2015). Questions remain as to how athletes (with the support of their family) maneuver between different identities during a prolonged period (e.g., from 10-20 years of age). Such studies would extend the current knowledge significantly by broadening our understanding of the role different life-stages and institutions (primary school, high-school, college; local clubs, academies, national federations) play for the development of an athletic identity.

Overall, based on the findings from this PhD thesis, I suggest that stakeholders should be aware of the significance of early talent identification and selection processes for the children involved in association football. These institutionalized practices serve as delineating features for the children's ongoing identification processes and plays a significant role in the development of a salient athletic identity. The findings may serve to highlight the importance for parents and coaches to support the children in exploring and developing broad and multistranded identities.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Letter of information to club

Information about PhD project

Ny name is Christian Wrang, I am 27 years old, and a PhD student at Sport Sciences, Aalborg University. In my PhD project, I wish to investigate how 9-11-years-old boys understand and negotiate their identities in groups – in other words: how they figure out who is who. It is at precisely these ages that our identity in particular is shaped and negotiated, and sports and especially football may play an important role for boys during this period. How football thus contributes to the children's identity formation is the question I am particularly interested in.

To give a well-founded description of this, I will use anthropological methods, which implies following football teams with boys around 10 years of age – observing their practices and talking with the children, their parents, and their coaches. I want to follow the club's U9 boys once a week (as far as possible). This will of course not happen till I have received an agreement about my presence in dialogue with the coaches, the players, and their parents. During the practices, I will offer my help as a 'ball boy', an extra player at practices, or similar. I expect that the fieldwork will take place during of period of 12-15 months, starting ultimo April 2019 and ending June 2020.

I will inform the group of U9 boys and their parents prior to starting the fieldwork – the information will, among other things, consist of a presentation of the project alongside details about data management. The

storage and management of data will follow the guidelines of Aalborg University. All personal information and names will be held confidential and replaced with pseudonyms prior to publication. It will thus not be stated anywhere who I have followed or in which club. To secure anonymity for the research participants and the club, I will also encourage you to not publicly communicate information about my project.

If you have any questions or need any of the above information elaborated, you are very welcome to contact me.

Kind regards,

AALBORG UNIVERSITY

Christian Wrang
PhD student | Sport Sciences
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Aalborg University | Niels Jernes Vej 12, A5-206 | 9220 Aalborg East

Appendix B. Interviewguide 1

Interview-guide, focus-group Interview, round 1

The interview-guide consists of generic themes and carefully chosen questions adjusted to the form (focus-group interviews) and participants with respect to both age and vocabulary used when formulating the questions.

Before conducting the focus-group interviews, I have conducted participatory observation in the field of inquiry, and hence in an iterative process developed both themes and questions in the present interview-guide. Also, this interview-guide was originally written in Danish and subsequently translated to English by the author.

Follow-up questions (Pocket questions)

- What happened? – How did it happen??
- How did you feel about that?
- What did you experience?
- What did you think about that?
- What does that mean?
- What do you mean when you say that?
- Can you tell me some more about that?

Interview-guide for focus-group interview:

Research interest/question	**Interview question**
Introduction	Hi! Thanking you so much for wanting to talk with me. I really want to learn more about what football means to young boys such as yourself, and therefore you are the right ones to talk to! We are several boys here today, and that's actually because you also are allowed to talk with each other and talk about what you think of the different things I ask about. Even though you are several here all of you are very welcome to answer my questions, yet we'll have to see if we can talk one at a time. I'll help with that. - If you are going to the toilet or want something to

	drink, just let me know, and we'll have a small break. - I'm recording our conversation on the Dictaphone, and that's why it's laying here on the table – is that okay? - I won't put the recording online on Facebook or anywhere else. - Do you have any questions before we start?
How do the children **categorize** themselves, og what significance does football hold in their everyday lives?	Let's pretend I don't know you. Please start by telling me a bit about yourself. (if they don't know what to say: you could for example tell me how old you are, what your name is, and what you like to do)? - For how long have you been playing football? - How often do you play? - Tell me a bit about how it is to play in this club?
	Why do you play football? - What do you like about playing football here? - What do you like less? - Where and when else do you play football? - How would you feel if you could not play football? Exercise: Football types: Pictures of cheering children who have just scored, friends, the bench, high-five, trophies, a tackle, a goalkeeper. What reminds the most and least of you – why do you think that?
In which ways are **differences** and **similarities** constituted among **groups** of boys? (internal-external dialectic)	I saw that you should team up two-and-two in this drill, do you remember it? How do you choose whom to team up with? - Is it always the same person you team up with? - Are there someone who reminds of/are similar to you? - Are there any differences compared to you? - Who do you team up with at football?
How significant is it to play football for the **identification process** of 10-11-years old boys?	Can you describe the group for me? - How many boys are you at U10? - Are there any of those, that reminds of you? Or who are like you? How? - Are there some that are very different from you? Why? Exercise: Categorization-exercise – Are there any other ways you can group each other?

In what ways does selection play a role for the children?	How does a normal practice play out? - Is the way you are divided or grouped random? How are you being divided? - How do you get the chance to attend games? - How is it to play games with each team? (A, B, C). - Are you given equal minutes on the field, or do some get a lot of playing time? Why? - What is it like to play together on each team?
How does the boys experience external **categorization**?	There have been some technique-practices in August and September on Tuesdays, who have been attending that? What is it about? - Why did you want to attend? - How is it to practice at the technique-practices? Have you heard about the TOP-Center? What is that? - How do you come to be a part of the TOP-Center? - Are any of you part of the TOP-Center? How did you find out? - What's it like practicing at the TOP-Center? - How has it been to start at the TOP-Center? - Is it any different that practicing at the club? How?
What influence do others have on the boys' understanding of themselves?	- What does you mum and dad think of you playing football? - What does a good coach do? What is good to do, and what is not good to do?
Closing	- Is there anything we haven't talked about, that you want to share? - Do you think I have forgotten anything interesting?

Appendix C. Interviewguide 2

Interview-guide, focus-group interview, round 2

Follow-up questions (Pocket questions)

- What happened? – How did it happen??
- How did you feel about that?
- What did you experience?
- What did you think about that?
- What does that mean?
- What do you mean when you say that?
- Can you tell me some more about that?

Interview-guide for focus-group interview:

Research interest/question	**Interview question**
Introduction	Hi! Thanking you so much for wanting to talk with me. I really want to learn more about what football means to young boys such as yourself, and therefore you are the right ones to talk to! We are several boys here today, and that's actually because you also are allowed to talk with each other and talk about what you think of the different things I ask about. Even though you are several here you are all very welcome to answer my questions, yet we'll have to see if we can talk one at a time. I'll help with that. - If you are going to the toilet or want something to drink, just let me know, and we'll have a small break. - I'm recording our conversation on the Dictaphone, and that's why it's laying here on the table – is that okay? - I'm not going to share what we are talking about today, and I won't put the recording online on Facebook or anywhere else. - Do you have any questions before we start?

How do the children **categorize** themselves, og what significance does football hold in their everyday lives?	Let's pretend I don't know you. Please start by telling me a bit about yourself. (if they don't know what to say: you could for example tell me how old you are, what your name is, and what you like to do? - For how long have you been playing football? - How often do you play? - Tell me a bit about how it is to play in this club? - When are you a "football-boy"? What does a football player do? - Are you football-boys? If not, what are you then?
What ways of playing football do the children engage in, and how important are these for them?	I write the 'ways to play football' down on a piece of paper, and then we talk about the different ways afterwards. - Where do you play football and with whom? - Who do you play football with? - Where would you rather play – why? - Who would you rather play with – why? - Now you have told me about all these ways to play football – how many of the ways do you play?
How does selection and external categorization affect the children's self-understanding?	Use the paper from before – what can you be selected to, and how do you become that? - How do you experience being selected for matches, for extra technique-practice and/or for the TOP-Center? - What is it like to be in a match with the one team and the other team? (A, B, C). - Have any of you participated in technique-practice? How is that? - Have any of you participated at the TOP-Center? How is that? - Do you want to play football somewhere that you do not play today? For example, at technique-practice or at the B-team? - How do you get to become a part of this? (Use the different categories from the paper).
In what ways do differences and similarities among groups of players constitute itself during practice?	When you are practicing, you are sometimes divided in groups that do different exercises. Can you explain to me how these functions? - Does it matter which group you are put in? - Why are you divided into groups? - Is there anyone you hope to end up in a group with?

How perishable or persistent is the importance of football for the boys? (How strong is the social identity as a football boy?)	There has just been a long break (Covid19) where you couldn't play football here in the club. How has it been and what have you done? - Have you played elsewhere while there was a break? - Who have you been playing with? - What is it like to be playing in the club again?
What significance does the transition from U10 to U11, and from 5-a-side to 8-a-side hold for the boys' understanding of themselves as a football player?	After the summer holidays, you must play 8-a-side football. How do you think it's going to be? - Are you looking forward to it? - Will it be different from the way you play now – how? - Do you know who you are going to be teamed up with – who you are going to play matches with?
How is the influence of others on the boys' understanding of themselves?	Who do you spend a lot of time with during your every day? And how do they feel about football? - Why do you play football in this club? - What do your mum and dad think of you playing football? - What do your friends think about it?
Closing	- Is there anything we haven't talked about, that you want to share? - Do you think I have forgotten anything interesting?

Appendix D. Search documentation

Search strategy for included Databases and Websites

Article Title: *The Missing Children: A Systematic Scoping Review on Talent Identification and Selection in Football (Soccer)*

Search terms

BLOCK #1	BLOCK #2	BLOCK #3
Talent	**Identification and selection**	**Football**
Talent Talents Talented Gifted Giftedness Gifts	Identification Identifying Identify Select Selecting Selection Recruit Recruiting Recruitment Detect Detecting Detection	Sport Sports Athlete Athletes Athletic Player Football Footballer Soccer

Scopus search conducted 26.08.2019

Search #	Search word(s)	Number of items
#1	TITLE-ABS-KEY (talent)	25.599
#2	TITLE-ABS-KEY (talents)	25.599
#3	TITLE-ABS-KEY (talented)	6.911
#4	TITLE-ABS-KEY (gifted)	10.092
#5	TITLE-ABS-KEY (giftedness)	1.894
#6	TITLE-ABS-KEY (gifts)	21.140
#7	#1 OR #2 OR #3 OR #4 OR #5 OR #6 (TITLE-ABS-KEY (talent)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (talents)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (talented)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (gifted)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (giftedness)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (	60.574

	gifts))	
#8	TITLE-ABS-KEY (identification)	1.534.132
#9	TITLE-ABS-KEY (identifying)	515.282
#10	TITLE-ABS-KEY (identify)	1.723.123
#11	TITLE-ABS-KEY (select)	332.663
#12	TITLE-ABS-KEY (selecting)	225.183
#13	TITLE-ABS-KEY (selection)	1.358.884
#14	TITLE-ABS-KEY (recruit)	49.447
#15	TITLE-ABS-KEY (recruiting)	27.611
#16	TITLE-ABS-KEY (recruitment)	182.593
#17	TITLE-ABS-KEY (detect)	771.545
#18	TITLE-ABS-KEY (detecting)	389.450
#19	TITLE-ABS-KEY (detection)	2.274.726
#20	#8 OR #9 OR #10 OR #11 OR #12 OR #13 OR #14 OR #15 OR #16 OR #17 OR #18 OR #19 (TITLE-ABS-KEY (identification)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (identifying)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (identify)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (select)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (selecting)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (selection)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (recruit)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (recruiting)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (recruitment)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (detect)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (detecting)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (detection))	7.658.272
#21	TITLE-ABS-KEY (sport)	237.518
#22	TITLE-ABS-KEY (sports)	237.518
#23	TITLE-ABS-KEY (athlete)	91.499
#24	TITLE-ABS-KEY (athletes)	91.499
#25	TITLE-ABS-KEY (athletic)	56.386
#26	TITLE-ABS-KEY (player)	150.805
#27	TITLE-ABS-KEY (football)	27.186
#28	TITLE-ABS-KEY (footballer)	1.557
#29	TITLE-ABS-KEY (soccer)	22.664
#30	#21 OR #22 OR #23 OR #24 OR #25 OR #26 OR #27 OR #28 OR #29 (TITLE-ABS-KEY (sport)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (sports)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (athlete)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (athletic)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (athletes)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (player)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (football)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (footballer)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (soccer))	419.178
#31	#7 AND #20 AND #30 ((TITLE-ABS-KEY (talent)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (talents)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (talented)	**1.233**

	) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (gifted)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (giftedness)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (gifts))) AND ((TITLE-ABS-KEY (identification)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (identifying)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (identify)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (select)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (selecting)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (selection)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (recruit)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (recruiting)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (recruitment)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (detect)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (detecting)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (detection))) AND ((TITLE-ABS-KEY (sport)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (sports)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (athlete)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (athletic)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (athletes)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (player)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (football)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (footballer)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (soccer)))	

Scopus automatically truncated some search terms such as “Talent” which included “Talents” in the search results. Thus, individual searches on “Talent” and “Talents” both provided 25.559 search items.

PubMed (MEDLINE) search conducted 26.08.2019

Search #	**Search word(s)**	**Number of items**
#1	(((((talent) OR talents) OR talented) OR gifted) OR giftedness) OR gifts	19.706
#2	((((((((((Identification) OR identifying) OR identify) OR select) OR selecting) OR selection) OR recruit) OR recruiting) OR recruitment) OR detect) OR detecting) OR detection	3.275.089
#3	(((((((sport) OR sports) OR athlete) OR athletes) OR athletic) OR player) OR football) OR footballer) OR soccer	340.115
#4	#1 AND #2 AND #3 (((((((talent) OR talents) OR talented) OR gifted) OR giftedness) OR gifts)) AND ((((((((((Identification) OR identifying) OR identify) OR select) OR selecting) OR selection) OR recruit) OR recruiting) OR recruitment) OR	**631**

	detect) OR detecting) OR detection))) AND (((((((((sport) OR sports) OR athlete) OR athletes) OR athletic) OR player) OR football) OR footballer) OR soccer)	

PsycINFO search conducted 04.09.2019

Search #	**Search word(s)**	**Number of items**
#1	(Any Field: (Talent)) OR (Any Field: (Talents)) OR (Any Field: (Talented)) OR (Any Field: (Gifted)) OR (Any Field: (Giftedness)) OR (Any Field: (Gifts))	286.862
#2	(Any Field: (Identification)) OR (Any Field: (Identifying)) OR (Any Field: (Identify)) OR (Any Field: (Select)) OR (Any Field: (Selecting)) OR (Any Field: (Selection)) OR (Any Field: (Recruit)) OR (Any Field: (Recruiting)) OR (Any Field: (Recruitment)) OR (Any Field: (Detect)) OR (Any Field: (Detecting)) OR (Any Field: (Detection))	563.832
#3	(Any Field: (Sport)) OR (Any Field: (Sports)) OR (Any Field: (Athlete)) OR (Any Field: (Athletes)) OR (Any Field: (Athletic)) OR (Any Field: (Player)) OR (Any Field: (Football)) OR (Any Field: (Footballer)) OR (Any Field: (Soccer))	123.515
#4	#1 AND #2 AND #3 ((Any Field: (Talent)) OR (Any Field: (Talents)) OR (Any Field: (Talented)) OR (Any Field: (Gifted)) OR (Any Field: (Giftedness)) OR (Any Field: (Gifts))) AND ((Any Field: (Identification)) OR (Any Field: (Identifying)) OR (Any Field: (Identify)) OR (Any Field: (Select)) OR (Any Field: (Selecting)) OR (Any Field: (Selection)) OR (Any Field: (Recruit)) OR (Any Field: (Recruiting)) OR (Any Field: (Recruitment)) OR (Any Field: (Detect)) OR (Any Field: (Detecting)) OR (Any Field: (Detection))) AND ((Any Field: (Sport)) OR (Any Field: (Sports)) OR (Any Field: (Athlete)) OR (Any Field: (Athletes)) OR (Any Field: (Athletic)) OR (Any Field: (Player)) OR (Any Field: (Football)) OR (Any Field: (Footballer)) OR (Any Field: (Soccer)))	**335**

Updated Searches

Scopus search 26.08.2019 – 31.05.2020 conducted 01.06.2020

Repetition of search #31

#31	#7 AND #20 AND #30 ((TITLE-ABS-KEY (talent)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (talents)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (talented)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (gifted)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (giftedness)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (gifts))) AND ((TITLE-ABS-KEY (identification)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (identifying)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (identify)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (select)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (selecting)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (selection)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (recruit)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (recruiting)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (recruitment)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (detect)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (detecting)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (detection))) AND ((TITLE-ABS-KEY (sport)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (sports)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (athlete)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (athletic)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (athletes)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (player)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (football)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (footballer)) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY (soccer)))	130

PubMed (MEDLINE) search 26.08.2019 – 31.05.2020 conducted 01.06.2020

Repetition of search #4

#4	#1 AND #2 AND #3 (((((((talent) OR talents) OR talented) OR gifted) OR giftedness) OR gifts)) AND ((((((((((Identification) OR identifying) OR identify) OR select) OR selecting) OR selection) OR recruit) OR recruiting) OR recruitment) OR detect) OR detecting) OR detection))) AND (((((((((sport) OR sports) OR athlete) OR athletes) OR athletic) OR player) OR football) OR footballer) OR soccer)	94

PsycINFO search 04.09.2019 – 31.05.2020 conducted 01.06.2020

Repetition of search #4

#4	#1 AND #2 AND #3 ((Any Field: (Talent)) OR (Any Field: (Talents)) OR (Any Field: (Talented)) OR (Any Field: (Gifted)) OR (Any Field: (Giftedness)) OR (Any Field: (Gifts))) AND ((Any Field: (Identification)) OR (Any Field: (Identifying)) OR (Any Field: (Identify)) OR (Any Field: (Select)) OR (Any Field: (Selecting)) OR (Any Field: (Selection)) OR (Any Field: (Recruit)) OR (Any Field: (Recruiting)) OR (Any Field: (Recruitment)) OR (Any Field: (Detect)) OR (Any Field: (Detecting)) OR (Any Field: (Detection))) AND ((Any Field: (Sport)) OR (Any Field: (Sports)) OR (Any Field: (Athlete)) OR (Any Field: (Athletes)) OR (Any Field: (Athletic)) OR (Any Field: (Player)) OR (Any Field: (Football)) OR (Any Field: (Footballer)) OR (Any Field: (Soccer)))	20

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