19. The cultural practices of sport: examining dual career assemblages

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INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have witnessed the burgeoning of research on *dual careers* in sport talent development environments within different sociocultural contexts (e.g. Aquilina, 2014; Storm et al., 2021). The term "dual career" (DC) is commonly understood in the sport literature as the simultaneous pursuit and balance of work/academic studies with competitive sports (EC, 2012). Within wider sports scholarship, DCs have been theorised primarily in sport psychology, and related studies have adopted two complementary axes of inquiry, namely *career development* and *career transitions* (Stambulova et al., 2021). The former centres on athletes' career pathways and predicts potential normative transitions, whereas the latter assumes a view of transitions as change that generates particular outcomes within a specific career context.

Recent systematic reviews (e.g. Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019) have elicited two prevalent approaches in *career development* research: (1) the holistical developmental (Wylleman et al., 2020) and the holistic ecological (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). Both emphasise the whole-person, whole-environment, and life-career perspectives, focussing on various *outcomes* (e.g. life skills, injury prevention, healthy living, sports/academic performance) and DC *antecedents* (e.g. competency of DC support providers, optimal DC environments, effective programmes/interventions, and policies). In the area of *career transition*, more recent frameworks such as the meta-model of adaptation in sport (Samuel et al., 2023) or the cultural transition model (Ryba et al., 2016a) adopt a temporal process perspective, which conceptualises adaptation along *fast* and *prolonged* tracks (Samuel et al., 2023), and similarly as *acute* (shorter timescale) vs. *sociocultural* (longer timescale) adaptation (Ryba et al., 2016a). Last but not least, contemporary DC scholarship, particularly European, has sought to embrace an orientation toward the contextualisation of DC inquiry as embedded in different cultural settings, and the concurrent integration of cultural praxis of athletes' careers (Ryba, 2017; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013, 2014). The cultural praxis heuristic (Ryba & Wright, 2005) serves to navigate career researchers and practitioners to (a) reflexive positioning of research in particular sociocultural contexts, (b) adopting a holistic outlook on careers and talent environments, (c) investigating the inter- and intra-border construction of diverse career pathways, and (d) engaging with culturally sensitive methodologies (Stambulova et al., 2021).

The aforementioned models share a number of common theoretical commitments. First, they are situated in the humanist ontological camp characterised by a dualist ontology that distinguishes between the subject and the object of inquiry. The human subjects of study (e.g. athletes) are viewed as conscious and rational or endowed with agency, albeit constrained (see Ryba et al., 2015), and thus ultimately responsible for their careers. Where human subjectivities are involved, the presumption is of one socially, culturally, and historically contingent

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reality that can differ across cultural contexts but ultimately unfolds as "guaranteed" according to an inevitable trajectory (Gilroy, 1993). Culture is reduced to pre-existing, known entities/categories, such as values, norms, and artefacts that impact or shape cultural contexts. This position also assumes an essential mode of operation of cultural practices in the procurement of anticipated effects within a particular sociocultural setting. Similarly, the transformative potential of cultural praxis (Ryba et al., 2024) is limited to the pre-existent, anthropocentric (human) realm, thus curbing its capacities to act as a (de)reterritorializing force across open-ended, human/non-human entanglements. The result is a flattening of reality, one that equalises every system of relationality and universalises effects across contexts, be it at the societal (e.g. country culture) or group (e.g. school, club, team) level, by defining ahead of time the relevant dimensions within which to describe specific practices. The alternative, non-essentialist proposition is that cultural practices are the site of the intersection of many possible effects or a *multiplicity* – an active organised and organising assemblage of relationalities (vs. essences) actively implicated in the ongoing production of reality and the context itself (Grossberg, 2013).

Second, development is analysed in bidirectional relations between individuals (young athletes), who learn and change, and their adaptive or maladaptive ecologies. The conception of development as the product of interactions between distinct parts (e.g. athlete ↔ ecology) is characteristic of essentialist and humanist understandings of knowledge (Geldhof et al., 2013). Third, although career development models have shifted their focus away from the athlete and more toward the athletic (talent development) environment comprised of nested entities, be it levels (e.g. macro, meso, micro), structures, or systems, they only bear a superficial resemblance to dynamic systems models. Neither the holistic developmental (Wylleman et al., 2020) or the holistic ecological (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017) models are essentially dynamic, in other words, designed to incorporate multiple recursive relationships across levels or to conceptualise specific environments as complex adaptive systems with *emergent* qualities. Finally, the above career development frameworks are grounded in implicit understandings of ontological *totality*. More specifically, ecological levels of career (talent) development are viewed as comprised of aggregates of rational decision-makers (e.g. athletes, coaches, stakeholders) and phenomenological experiences. Similarly, the transition models (i.e. Samuel et al., 2023; Ryba et al., 2016a) cognise of transitions as totalities that presume additivity (i.e. distinction of stages) as well as predictability of closed-ended and categorically differentiated outcomes (e.g. smooth/successful/poor transitions, normative vs. non-normative) (Darpatova-Hruzewicz et al., 2024a).

In this chapter, we argue that extant approaches to investigating DCs are inherently reductionist on three accounts. First, their essentialist construction downplays the role of spatio-temporal and material elements of athletes' (talent) environments and how these are implicated in the production of DC practices, as well as the reverse – how cultural practices contribute to the transformation and construction of context and reality. Second, current models are implicitly totalising; in other words, they disregard the emergent qualities of systems. Third, they are fundamentally static in that dynamism is assumed at the level of interactions between agents rather than in recursive and isomorphic (across levels/systems and cultural contexts) relationships at different temporal and spatial scales. The models' probabilistic assumptions are not explicated in light of complexity, causality, and non-linearity. We posit that DeLanda's social assemblage theory (DeLanda, 2006, 2016) offers fitting conceptual and methodological tools to tackle the complexities of contemporary sports systems, being ontologically and

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epistemically capacious to potentiate a paradigm shift from reductionism to complexity. This theoretical proposition heeds calls for employing assemblage thinking in youth sport research (e.g. Camiré, 2021, 2023). Given that DeLanda's SAT does not cater to culture (DeLanda, 2006), we draw on Grossberg's (2010, 2013) understandings of culture and cultural practices to analyse and compare the material and discursive elements of junior talent development environments in Poland and Finland. Our argumentation is structured in the following manner. We begin with an introduction of the concept of radical contextuality, linking it to the consequent overview of DeLanda's assemblage theory, followed by an analysis of what it may offer DC research, using the two environments as examples. Next, we discuss the formation of dual career practices in two European national contexts, starting with Poland as the less developed DC environment, then proceeding with the analysis of DC entanglements in the more mature Finnish context. In the conclusion, we summarise how assemblage thinking can enrich and advance DC scholarship.

CONTEXTUALISING CULTURAL PRACTICES

In DC research, the concept of *context* is recognised for its functionalist properties: an instrumental point of departure, background, frame of reference, or level/scale of analysis, in relation to talent environments, ecologies, settings, places, processes (e.g. development), and (inter)relations (e.g. coach/athlete). It is the scene in which athletic performance, talent development, and career pursuits unfold. In other words, context serves an auxiliary function in human-centred inquiry. Drawing on Grossberg (2010), we propose an alternative, radical contextualisation approach underpinned by the assumption of *relationality*, which implies that the significance and effects of any cultural practice are defined by the complex set of relations that surround, interpenetrate, and shape it, making it what it is. *Articulation* is the embodiment of radical contextualism, dictating that "one can only deal with, and from within, specific contexts, for it is only there that practices have specific effects, that identities and relations exist" (Grossberg, 2013, p. 55). The practice of articulation[1] highlights a myriad of connections with differing forces producing a multitude of effects within a specific context. In that sense, cultural practices are not "guaranteed" to work in a particular way in any given context because the context itself is a multiplicity, an assemblage of relationalities. For instance, athlete-centred pedagogies are cultural practices produced by forces and entanglements of human and non-human things, and as such unlikely to trigger uniform, equivalent effects, changes, and outcomes in sports schools within a particular cultural context (e.g. a country) or across multiple contexts within the EU. Articulation acknowledges that contexts are not stable entities, bounded/territorialised reservoirs of essences that are captured in cultural values, norms, artefacts, or ideologies as postulated by Schein (1990). Our theoretical proposition is non-essentialist, one that conceptualises sports schools as *assemblages* (see below) and multiplicities, poietic articulations of cultural dynamics (Sha, 2012).

SOCIAL ASSEMBLAGE THEORY (SAT)

The concept of *assemblages,* as originally formulated by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) provides the theoretical backdrop for DeLanda's assemblage theory and the model of social

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complexity this theory evinces. An assemblage is an open-ended ad hoc collective of *actants*, a "non-totalizable sum" (Hayden, 1997). The term *actant*, originally coined by Bruno Latour (2005) refers to both human and non-human elements and encompasses bodies, things, intensities, and affects. The youth talent development space can accommodate a multiplicity of assemblages. Pertinent to our analytical approach is the deployment of assemblage thinking, aided by radical contextualism, to palpate the mechanisms underpinning the production of specific cultural practices within talent environments by examining the intersection of bodies and non-human "vibrant matter" (Bennett, 2010) with the social, discursive, institutional, political, and other processes and "things" in the formation of complex social systems.

KEY TENETS OF SAT

DeLanda (2006; 2016) takes an explicitly realist stance, in which social entities are treated as conception-independent, created in the objective process of assembly and operating at different levels of scale. Thus, SAT conceives of assemblages as "wholes whose properties emerge from the interactions between parts" (DeLanda, 2006, p. 5). Importantly, these wholes are not characterised by seamless, organic unity of their aggregated component parts. The organismic "whole where agency and structure mutually constitute one another dialectically" (DeLanda, 2006, p. 10) in *relations of interiority* is referred to by DeLanda as a *totality*. Contrastingly, assemblages are *irreducible* to their component parts with the implication that components can be detached from the assemblage and plugged into a different assemblage in which their interactions are different. For instance, if a sports school is conceived as a social assemblage, its identity as a whole would not be affected by changes in the student population or teaching staff. This property of assemblages defines *relations of exteriority* between components in that they can sustain their autonomy while effectuating difference. The notion of irreducibility of assemblages is tightly linked to the exercise of their capacities. On that, the relations between individual components (e.g. student athletes and coaches) cannot explain the relations, which constitute a whole (e.g. the sports school or club). It is the actual exercise of the components' capacities and the articulation of cultural practices that make up the whole rather than the aggregation of its components. A school's reputation is an emergent property, which is produced through the exercise of the capacities of its students, teachers, and coaches within a particular space-time of socio-material relations, involving material components such as the school's sports infrastructure or local government funding.

According to SAT, assemblages have two dimensions/axes that identify the role that components can play: material (e.g. spaces, objects, bodies, technologies) and expressive (e.g. identities, signs, affects, desires) involved in practices of cultural articulation. DeLanda (2006) maintains that material and expressive effects are variable, appearing in different configurations through the exercise of different sets of capacities. This mandates that assemblage thinking should prioritise the study of capacities and functions with cultural–historical conjuncture in mind rather than pre-existent aggregations embedded in autonomous cultural contexts defined by a priori essences.

Furthermore, assemblages are characterised through the generative processes in which components are involved, either stabilising or destabilising their emergent identities. The identity of an assemblage is stabilised by increasing its degree of internal homogeneity (of its components) or the degree of sharpness of its boundaries and is destabilised by opening

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it to change (DeLanda, 2006). DeLanda borrows from Deleuze and Guattari (1987) to define the former processes as *territorialization* and the latter as *deterritorialization*, or following a similar logic applied to cultural contexts – processes of *articulation* and *dis(re)articulation*. Destabilised assemblages are *multiplicities* whereby each assembled element is transformed in its relations with other elements such that it no longer makes sense to speak of constituent parts (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987). Thus, the relationality of assemblages involves the production of something new. In other words, bodies, signs, and objects are not folded into a pre-existent entity as would be the case in functional totalising systems, but rather imbricated in the ongoing modification of the assemblage by imparting on it their affective and relational force.

Another tenet of SAT, traceable to complexity theories, is the existence of a wide range of *scales* where assemblages can emerge. Totalising conceptions of social processes (e.g. development, learning) taking place on macro, meso, and micro levels, especially with reference to generalities like "individual" (e.g. athlete) or "society as a whole" (e.g. talent development environments), traditionally employ methodological individualism that rests on the assumption of rational decision-making. When thinking with SAT, however, individual entities (e.g. persons, schools, institutions) not only exist as part of other entities within which they constantly *inter-act*,[2] but they also emerge from the interaction between sub-entity components and at different scales. As larger assemblages emerge from the interactions of their component parts, the identity of the parts may acquire new layers as the emergent whole reacts back and affects them in a (recursive) feedback loop. In this way, student athletes can become component parts of very different assemblages (school, club), interpersonal networks (sports team, family), and public/private organisations (university, sports agency, medical institution). Analogously, different practices of articulation engage in the making, unmaking, remaking, changing, narrating, and fabricating of context as culture, be it a sports school, a sports team, or a larger sports community. Interactions between components often occur within physical locales such as school grounds, sporting infrastructure, and/or within neighbourhoods and city boundaries. Cities can also be viewed as assemblages that concurrently enable (e.g. by providing funding) and constrain (e.g. by introducing zoning regulations) their component parts such as schools, communities, and organisations that inhabit it. Depending on the availability of local funding, sports schools may curtail investments in infrastructure, potentially resulting in the reorganisation or termination of sport classes/specialisations. Budgetary cuts can lead to the closing down of an indoor swimming facility causing students to change schools, or for their families to relocate or to give up on sport entirely. Thus, comprehensive explanations of social processes taking place at a given scale necessitate consideration not only of micro-macro (bottom-up) mechanisms which drive the emergence of the whole, but also of the macro-micro (top-down) mechanisms that constrain it.

Similar to dynamical systems, assemblages are complex entities that operate through a myriad of causal relations between the entities that comprise them. Whereas an entity itself cannot act as a cause because it is not an event, a change in its defining properties can be a cause (e.g. change of recruitment criteria for student athletes), given that changes, even simple ones, are events. For the same reason, actions performed by a complex entity can also be causes (e.g. school recruitment policy can affect a school's reputation, its academic and sporting achievements). DeLanda asserts that social assemblages accommodate nonlinear mechanisms of causality that typically accompany generative processes as opposed to linear causality, which best describes atomistic events when the same causes tend to produce the same effects (e.g. linear causality between frequency of medical testing and rate of injuries).

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However, linear causality is insufficient in explaining the dynamics of a complex system, which is sensitive to external as well as internal causes/events. For instance, external causes of large intensity can produce low intensity or nil effects and vice versa; small causes can generate very large effects (DeLanda, 2006). These are instances of non-linear causality defined by thresholds below or above which external causes fail to produce an effect, or act as triggers which incite new configurations of components and potentiate adaptive changes.

COMPARATIVE CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF POLISH AND FINNISH JUNIOR ATHLETIC ENVIRONMENTS

Sports schools for talented children and young people have a long history. In Europe, they emerged as a result of increased competition in the international sports arena, especially during the Cold War era, and the consequent need to support athletes by ensuring elite sporting success, developing talent, and facilitating the transition from sport to the labour market (Metsä-Tokila, 2002; Riordan, 1977; Svensson, 2021). The first sports schools were established in the 1950s in the Soviet Union and in East Germany. They were initially modelled after the Soviet military academies (Suvorov and Nakhimov), set up to provide for the children of soldiers fallen in World War II (Bobrovnikov, 2015; Filonenko, 2024), but also incorporated practices from specialised arts and foreign language schools (Mathews, 1983). Their aim was to select and train the most promising athletes for international competition, especially the Olympic Games (Metsä-Tokila, 2002; Riordan, 1977). By the mid-1960s, in the Soviet Union there were almost 3,000 children's and young people's sports schools and about 800,000 children were involved in their activities (Dunstan, 1978; Riordan, 1991). The US approach of integrating competitive sport into secondary and higher education also contributed to this trend (Metsä-Tokila, 2002). However, it was not until the 1990s that specialised sports secondary schools, which have a systemic and flexible approach to assisting young athletes combine their secondary education with competitive sport, gained momentum across Europe (Andersson, 2024; Radtke & Coalter, 2007). Spurred on by European policy initiatives such as the European Commission's (EC) White Paper on Sport (2007) and the Guidelines on Dual Careers for Athletes (2012), grassroots networks such as the European Athletes as Students (EAS) established in 2004, and dedicated EC research funding under Erasmus + Sport, dual career policies have made inroads into national sports systems. Many European countries, including Belgium, Finland, France, Italy, Spain, Sweden, and the UK, have advanced their talent development frameworks to include dual careers. Although the configuration of sports schools for student-athletes varies considerably within different education and sport systems, they share some common characteristics, such as being largely public educational institutions, offering flexible curricula, and working closely with sports federations and clubs (Andersson, 2024; Aquilina & Henry, 2010; Morris et al., 2020).

POLAND

The sports DC discourse made its feeble entrance into the Polish institutional and scholarly space roughly a decade ago with the adoption of the EU dual career guidelines, followed by the implementation of the GEES (Gold in Education and Elite Sport) and DCJA (Dual Career

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for Junior Athletes) programmes. Two EU-funded diagnostic reports and a small number of published articles saw the light of day in the period 2013–2021. The first report, authored by Zyśko et al. (2013) put forth recommendations regarding specific career reorientation options for two vocational groups: retired athletes and dancers. In the second report, Włoch et al. (2015) summarised the results of a mixed methods study based on 30 qualitative interviews and two focus groups, as well as survey data collected from a sample of student athletes (*N*=410), primarily at the university level. This research provided useful preliminary insights on the experiences of student athletes, the challenges they faced in balancing studies with competitive sport, as well as their perceptions of dual career pathways. In fact, to the best of our knowledge, it is the only[3] published study which directly investigates Polish DC athletes rather than DC stakeholders (e.g. Küttel et al., 2018) or DC-related support services and systems drawing on data from university websites (e.g. Hong et al., 2022). Whereas the diagnostic reports were very much called for as a reliable source of knowledge for developing future DC projects and a sound foundation for advancing prospective DC scholarship, very little has happened since then in Polish research or applied contexts. Further, the DC discourse as formulated by the EU is practically non-existent at primary and secondary sports schools; greater (albeit relatively modest) strides have been made by Polish higher education sports academies. In 2022, approximately 560 student athletes were enrolled in 38 public and private universities across Poland, with the largest majority (*N*=308) attending one of six sports academies (Tomik et al., 2023). The Academy of Physical Education in Katowice boasts having the best support system in place for elite student athletes who follow a DC track (*N*=161 in 2022).

Polish Sports Schools as DC Assemblages

The first seven Polish "mastery"[4] sports schools were opened in the period 1975–1977 in Raciborz, Olsztyn, Warsaw, Zakopane, and Wałcz. Similar to the Soviet models, these special sports institutions were set up to train highly qualified athletes who could compete successfully at the international level. To achieve these ambitious goals, training in elite sports schools relied on early specialisation, significant time/financial investment, top coaching talent, and first-class facilities. All decision-making was centralised, and control over school curricula, syllabuses, and even lesson plans was exerted prescriptively, following detailed instructional scripts and plans. Remnants of the old communist order have survived in the interventionist model of sport governance carried out by the Ministry of Sport and Tourism (Krześniak, 2023; Zyśko, 2008). Moreover, rigid instructional, hierarchical, and disciplining practices have left permanent prints on the habitual ways of organising lessons and training, recruiting and selecting athletes (e.g. for schools/national teams), managing sports institutions, or procuring coach education (Darpatova-Hruzewicz et al., 2024b; Marek et al., 2025). Thus, these practices have been responsible for shaping a culture of mastery. Although the first elite schools (mastery schools) in many ways resembled the Soviet models, their individual histories, geographies, and cultures contributed to the emergence of unique entities.

The mastery school in the town of Zakopane, Poland's winter capital, provides a telling example. It was launched in 1975 to specialise in two winter sports: alpine skiing and speed skating. Over its 50-year history, the school's graduates have won hundreds of medals in national and international junior as well as senior championships and Winter Olympic Games in skiing (cross-country and alpine), ski jumping, speed skating, and snowboarding. Justyna Kowalczyk, one of its most prominent graduates, a double Olympic and a double

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World Champion, was also a DC athlete. While pursuing her extraordinary sporting career, she completed her master's degree at the Physical Education Academy in Krakow, where she also defended her doctoral thesis in sports science a few months after announcing her withdrawal from competitive sport. On various occasions during interviews, Justyna Kowalczyk has praised the Zakopane mastery school, its teachers, and its coaching staff, in the context of having a unique culture. This culture is an amalgamation of histories and narratives of resistance against cultural encroachments under Austrian rule,[5] material culture[6] (craftsmanship, vernacular, architectural style) of the Górals (highlanders), their unique identity, and strong communal ties. These emergent configurations of material and discursive entanglements unfolded in the collective effort of rebuilding the school after the devastating fire in 1983 and played a critical role in the school's revival after it was formally shut down in 1992.

The Zakopane mastery school, when viewed as a social assemblage, resists notions of static totality with closed-ended binary outcomes: successful vs unsuccessful, efficient vs inefficient, effective vs ineffective talent development environment. The Tatra mountains, the harsh winters, the school's sporting facilities (e.g. ice rink) and sports equipment, the tight Góral community with their histories of solidarity and resistance, the school's reputation for nurturing champions and enmeshed affective intensities (pride, legacy) are not simply "prerequisites" for success in talent development. These ontological entities do not fit within conceptual hierarchies and neat categories of cultural artifacts, espoused values, or basic assumptions (see DC Environment Success Factors working model; Henriksen & Stambulova, 2023), because they are contingent on the whole and within it subordinated to the central human agent (i.e. the performing athlete). From an assemblage vantage point, the school's emergent properties are produced in a meshwork of continuous interactions of actants, neither objects nor subjects, as vibrant (material) matter, both human (e.g. athletes, coaches, teachers) and non-human (e.g. geographical topology, sports facilities). As articulated by Bennett (2010), "assemblages are living throbbing confederations" that "have uneven topographies" (p. 23) resulting in power being unequally distributed across their surface. On the other hand, the larger assemblages of the town (Zakopane) and the region constrain the school's emergent properties (e.g. reputation) in a recursive fashion, affecting it whilst being simultaneously affected by it.

With its commitment to openness and the contingency of social reality, where change is the norm, assemblage thinking allows us to glean new insights into the functioning of sports schools as sites of culture production, with implications for problematising potential improvements. Examples include the selection of athletes to participate in team sports based on their biological rather than normative chronological age. Such practices can destabilise conventional categorical thinking (natural vs. learned/acquired talent) and challenge culturally scaffolded belief systems of coaches and educators. Norms, values, and beliefs as constraints (i.e. bottom-up processes) serve to reify practices of discrimination and privileging of certain groups of students on the basis of gender or "perceived" talent. Overall, the post-communist heritage of prescriptive action, the emphasis on following instruction as opposed to experimentation, and the ingrained expectation of obedience and docility on the part of students have forged cultural practices along rigid lines of territorialisation. Another example is the prioritisation of sport within talent environments, which contributes to the articulation of anti-intellectualism, a reality contingent on understandings of incompatible biological predispositions geared toward either sport or academia. Human-centred approaches tend to problematise performance (in sport or education) individually rather than as part of a collective – a cultural problem engendered by an ecology of practices. In an authoritative culture, where power is

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concentrated in the hands of teachers, deterritorialisation and disarticulation of cultural practices are some of the main challenges. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that despite numerous accounts of teachers in sports schools displaying a lack of understanding and support for DC athletes, the authors of the diagnostic report (Włoch et al., 2015) underline the students' passive stance and unwillingness to challenge those in positions of power. As follows, cultural practices aid in the production of (cultural) context as an organisation of power, inevitably invoking the political. A legacy of communist times, all decision-making related to sports stipends and additional funding (e.g. for the purchase of sports equipment), and modification of exam schedules to accommodate athletes' absences due to travel for competitions or training camps, is centralised and concentrated in the hands of school directors and university rectors. An overwhelming majority of the study's participants identified poor communication within the students–coaches–teachers triad as the root cause of their frustration and ensuing difficulties in balancing sport with studies (Włoch et al., 2015).

Another characteristic feature of sports schools is the cultural practice of shifting onto students the burden of justifying excuses and evidencing absences, rescheduling work and exams, and proposing solutions for dealing with project lags (Włoch et al., 2015). The reports' authors suggest that placing so much administrative responsibility in the hands of youth DC athletes, who are not developmentally ready to take on a heavy load, results in psychological distress, chronic lack of sleep, and fundamentally corrodes the idea of DCs. The question of responsibility is tied to the concept of agency and its cultural articulation. The cited talent development and transition models subscribe to a humanist understanding of rational agentic subjects who are ultimately responsible for balancing their DC endeavours. Radical contextualisation raises ethical questions pertaining to the cultural practices that place the burden of responsibility on student-athletes, especially children and early adolescents. Concurrently, SAT serves to alleviate this heavy load, at least partially, from the shoulders of youth DC athletes by affirming the distribution of agency along a continuum of ontological types and identifying the human-nonhuman assemblage as a locus of agency (Bennett, 2010). This is not to suggest that student-athletes ought to be absolved of any responsibility, but there is considerable merit in weighing their contribution on a balancing scale that accounts for the inherent complexities of social assemblages. Adopting assemblage thinking to deterritorialise and disarticulate the cultural strongholds of power in sports schools is a promising avenue for improving the lives and achievements of student-athletes.

Treading further down the path of Polish history, the original model of sports mastery schools evolved and morphed into multiple organisational structures, primarily public but also private, including elite schools with or without boarding, lower-level (primary education) and higher-level (post-primary education) sports schools, and regular schools with sports departments. Some sports schools are associated with particular sports clubs (e.g. youth football academies) or higher education sports academies. According to the Polish Central Statistical Office, in 2022, there were 1,177 operational sports schools with over 41,000 students and 307 sports mastery schools, including schools with sports mastery departments (62.5 per cent public), with over 28,800 students (GUS, 2023). Interestingly, while at the lower levels of education boys comprised roughly 56 per cent of the student-athlete population across sports schools, in higher-level (upper secondary) mastery schools, the proportion of boys was much higher, almost 70 per cent. In the absence of relevant scholarship, one can only speculate about the causes of this conspicuous gender disparity. Social assemblage theory suggests that the underlying mechanisms should be examined with non-linear causality and socio-material

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context in mind. For instance, research conducted by Bardelas (2018) showed that while most students (76.8 per cent) decided to attend a sports school because it allowed them to combine sports with studies, a surprisingly high number (44.3 per cent) were guided in their choice by the physical proximity of the school to their home. Thus, topological features such as the school's geographical location can produce significant effects in several outcomes, including the reification of gendered discourses and practices in sport, illuminating context as an organisation of power. For instance, the travel time involved in reaching the school and accessing its sports facilities may dictate the choice of discipline. Disciplines with a higher earning potential traditionally associated with men's/boy's sport participation, like football may be perceived as more worthwhile than "poorer" sports such as gymnastics or figure skating, which are perceived as feminine. Physical proximity can also have an adverse effect on perseverance in sport if the logistics involved are perceived to be precarious (e.g. extended commutes by public transport/railroad) and hence less "appropriate" for girls. Therefore, assemblage thinking alongside practices of cultural articulation are instrumental in bringing into focus the expressive-discursive as well as material aspects of schools as social entities.

FINLAND

Compared to Poland, DC discourses feature much more prominently in the Finnish sports space, and there is a significantly higher degree of DC awareness among key stakeholders. This difference emerges from historically bound perceptions of the role of sport in society and manifests itself in the articulation of cultural practices in these two contexts. Whereas Polish sport has traditionally focused on elite performance as part of its ex-communist legacy, in Finland, the commitment to sport and physical activity is not only about elite competition but also about promoting the health, well-being, and social inclusion of all citizens. Therefore, the current mandate of the Finnish Olympic Committee (NOC) extends beyond elite athletes to include grassroots sport and mass participation, in line with the country's ethos of accessible and inclusive sporting opportunities for all (Mikkonen et al., 2022). In addition, Finland's educational culture is known for its emphasis on quality and equity, and there is a strong cultural narrative of expected graduation from high school, which has greatly influenced the development of elite sports schools (Metsämuuronen & Lehikko, 2022; Ryba et al., 2016c).

However, Finnish sport governance is extremely fragmented, reflecting historical traces of political polarisation and tensions between the ideologies of sport for all and elite sport. The governance structures, policies, and power relations between different governing bodies, including the NOC and the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (OKM), which provides the main financial support for sport (Lämsä, 2024; Mikkonen et al., 2022). The legitimacy of the Finnish sports system is constantly challenged by the lack of success of the national teams in the Olympic Games. Additionally, the national sports federations have been tarnished by doping scandals, racism, sexual harassment, and inappropriate behaviour in general. Tensions and conflicts between the NOC and the OKM over funding have also increased during the NOC's transition away from relying on gambling revenues, which used to be a significant source of funding through the state-owned gambling monopoly, Veikkaus (Lämsä, 2024). The NOC was reorganised in 2023 to operate the High Performance Unit, which assembles, develops, and distributes top-level expertise and resources for elite athletes and teams; the Sports Academy Programme, which manages the network of academies covering the entire athlete's

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path (the Finnish dual career model); and the Research and Development Programme, which oversees evidence-based implementation in development and coaching expertise in elite sport.

Historically, the first proposal for establishing a sports-oriented upper secondary school was made in the 1930s, but it was rejected (Juurtola, 1977; Wuolio & Jääskeläinen, 1993, as cited in Metsä-Tokila, 2002). A similar proposal was again dismissed in the 1960s due to the National Board of Education's concerns about cost and the programme's focus on sports (Metsä-Tokila, 2002). However, in the early 1970s, Finland began to experiment with secondary schools. These were organised without a rigid school year or semester structure and offered more flexibility for talented students, which particularly benefited athletes by allowing them additional time to complete their studies while competing at a high level (Metsä-Tokila, 2002). The first sports-oriented school, Mäkelänrinne, was approved as part of a national experiment and opened in Helsinki in 1972 (Metsä-Tokila, 2002; Pelkonen, 1998).

Currently, there are 15 official sports upper secondary schools,[7] 16 official sports vocational schools, a sports-oriented programme within the military, and numerous sports-friendly schools that offer school-based coaching or the opportunity for independent training (Finnish Olympic Committee, 2024a; Nikander et al., 2021). These institutions receive government funding to provide education and/or vocational training for athletes. At their core, sports schools offer a specialised curriculum in which student-athletes have slightly modified course requirements for degree completion (i.e. they may take fewer courses as well as designated sport-specific courses). They can also avail of additional resources like distance learning and the extension of the duration of study for the fulfilment of degree requirements, up to five years on special request in upper secondary schools compared to three to four years for non-athlete students (Ryba et al., 2016b). The system has recently been broadened to include lower secondary schools (ages 13–15), with 50 schools now participating in the initiative (Finnish Olympic Committee, 2024b). Compared to Poland, the Finnish environment provides greater systemic and regulatory elasticity for DCs at the level of sports schools.

Finnish Sports Schools as DC Assemblages

Unlike Poland, where research on DC in youth sports environments such as sports schools is entirely missing, there has been a rapid increase in studies investigating the implementation of European DC guidelines and their implications for young athletes' psychosocial development, especially after the launch in 2016 of the Finnish Longitudinal Dual Career project, which comprises several interrelated projects funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and the European Research Council (Ryba et al., 2016b; University of Jyväskylä, 2024a, 2024b). In the longitudinal study "Winning in the Long Run" (Ryba & Aunola, 2022), adolescent student athletes from seven sports schools in the northern, central, and southern parts of Finland were followed from their transition to elite sports upper secondary school until graduation, with a further follow-up on their transition to early adulthood. All schools were embedded in a national high-performance environment, although they differed in sports specialisation, degree of centralisation (e.g. two were boarding schools), academic support services, urban vs rural location, and gender distribution.

To protect the confidentiality of research participants, we focus on a published case study of an elite Finnish sports academy (Korhonen et al., 2020; Nikander et al., 2020) and suggest ways for performing a SAT-driven inquiry. The study was conducted in one of the most established athletic talent development environments (ATDE) for snow sports, within an Erasmus+

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sport collaborative partnership Eco-DC (Exploring Dual Career Development Environments across Europe; Morris et al., 2020), in light of efforts to rebrand itself as a dual career development environment (DCDE). The academy has a long history of producing many successful athletes, including Olympic medallists, and enjoys international recognition and prestige. Data for the case study were collected using an ethnographic approach and included website content, documents, interviews with athletes, coaches, teachers, and parents, as well as observations in school, training, competition, and dormitories (for details, see Korhonen et al., 2020; Nikander et al., 2020).

Drawing on holistic ecological understandings of talent development environments (Henriksen et al., 2010, 2020), Nikander et al. (2020) noted that in its transition to a DCDE, the academy fell short of incorporating some of the critical features of successful DCDEs (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). Specifically, it lacked a DC support team and adequate communication/coordination between the academic and sports domains. Communication, or rather its absence, between coaches and teachers was identified as one of the key stressors in the lives of Finnish student athletes (Korhonen et al., 2020). Additionally, analysis based on Schein's (1990) framework of cultural values, assumptions, and artefacts revealed that the organisational culture in the Finnish academy was incoherent between domains, although emphasis was consistently placed on the primacy of sport. The prioritisation of sport manifested itself in material affordances such as investment in sports infrastructure to the detriment of educational facilities and teaching equipment/materials (Korhonen et al., 2020) or funding of annual trainings for coaches but not teachers. On the bright side and contrary to reported practices in Polish sports schools, teachers, who were mostly former athletes, were flexible in scheduling examinations and assignments around their students' sporting commitments (Korhonen et al., 2020). Nikander et al. (2020) concluded that the academy's environment was successful and effective, but not efficient as a DCDE.

The aforementioned research problematises talent development through the interactions between student-athletes and their holistic environments. The human subject is awarded centrality, with material affordances playing a supportive role in the analysis. Rethinking sports schools as assemblages and sites of cultural production may shift the focus away from interactions between distinct and pre-existing entities (humans and their ecologies) toward the relational characteristics of DCDEs. For instance, in addition to the analysis of narratives (based on interviews with students, teachers, and coaches or web page content), investigations guided by SAT can focus on historical developments, economic and sociopolitical forces/events/policies at different scales (region, community, neighbourhood). Mapping cultural-historical conjunctures may have elicited connections, forces, and their intensities as implicated in the production of specific (cultural) discursive practices such as prioritising sport over academic achievement. Engaging with the climatic, topological, and other geographical features (e.g. amount of daylight, precipitation) of the locations where schools are situated may have illuminated new relations and constellations thereof shaping preferences for various sports (e.g. cross-country vs swimming), daily training and travel routes (i.e. training/study hours, how they are spread throughout the day), modes/frequency of communication with coaches, peers, and teachers, or physical accessibility and actual use of other types of support (e.g. physiotherapy, mental). Although the proximity of dormitories to the main school building, and the lack of convenient transportation resulting in students being often late to class and having to adjust their study/training routines and needs around public transportation schedules was mentioned by the researchers, the material elements of the environment were not included in the analysis

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per se. In other words, the heterogeneity of human and non-human factors was not examined with cultural articulation or ontological equivalence in mind, and causal links were not contemplated, let alone tested. Consideration of non-linear effects of DCDEs on the lives of athletes, in terms of well-being or academic/sporting performance, may have provided useful insights. For instance, making available school transportation (buses or alternative forms) to dormitories or training sites can result in time savings and consequent performance improvements that significantly outweigh the benefits of hiring/designating a DC support team (as recommended) among teachers, who in addition to being overworked (Korhonen et al., 2020) can be difficult to recruit in such isolated rural regions of Finland.

By assuming an emergent/immanent and relational perspective, SAT can challenge conventional, prescriptive, and homogenising cultural practices, unsettle habitual usages of language and praxis, and actualise the creative capacities of assemblages. One example is rethinking the traditional role of the dormitory parent (whose main task at the academy was to look after the athletes in dormitories and carry out room inspections) to take on greater responsibility for DC support, with consequences for recruitment, compensation, and development. In this sense, SAT opens up new ways of seeing and doing things through rearticulation rather than rebranding the known. It also serves to destabilise and disrupt conventional practices such as over-reliance on testing by forging different, more creative paths and new ecologies of practices. Korhonen et al. (2020) reported that due to sport-related absences, student-athletes were frequently tested in addition to finding themselves swamped with overdue homework. The authors' recommendations centred around teachers' flexibility and adopting rules and regulations, yet these "solutions" are grounded in essentialist understandings of highly territorialised forms and spaces. But what if learning was conceptualised dynamically instead of being the product of fixed/homogenised and testable outcomes? Contrary to closed-ended systems (tests), project-based work as a new cultural practice, if skilfully guided by teachers, can potentiate relevant, emancipative, gratifying, and agentic learning, thus reshaping culture through the redistribution of power between teachers and student-athletes on more equitable terms. The creative capacities of the assemblage can be further effectuated by leveraging the experience of teachers as former athletes, whether in building trusting relationships with students or fostering sporting know-how constitutive of the whole.

Assemblage thinking embraces the notion of *becoming*, characteristic of open-ended dynamic systems, vs *being*, defined by its fixed temporal coordinates. Assessing outcomes such as the success, efficiency, and effectiveness of DCDEs as undertaken by Nikander et al. (2020) follows the logic of being. The list of critical success factors (see Henriksen & Stambulova, 2023) frames the essence of a successful DCDE and its culture, thus territorialising developmental pathways. Inherent to essentialism, the criteriology (e.g. having/lacking DC support) and categorisation (e.g. efficient/inefficient DCDE) act to universalise context, disable dynamic sensitivities, and forge dogmatic or arborescent thinking. Analogously, the notion of transition from one type of talent environment to another loses grounding in an immanent and relational world void of pre-existing fixed essences (e.g. ATDEs and DCDEs), where culture is not reduced to mere meaning and textuality (Grossberg, 2013).

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CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we argue for the case of assemblage theory extended through radical contextualism and seek to demonstrate its fruitful utility for research in talent development environments. Conceptualising sports schools as social assemblages and sites of cultural production entails the adoption of a flat ontology, which places the human and non-human, the material and discursive, on an equal ontological footing. These elements are entangled in relational configurations that produce reality in a particular socio-material and cultural-historical conjuncture. Rather than acknowledging the context (e.g. interpreting the cultural narrative of "graduating athletes") as merely background which exists independently, our approach follows Grossberg's (2010) proposition of cultural articulation. It assumes that Polish and Finnish contexts are not stable entities, bounded/territorialised reservoirs of distinct cultural values, practices, ideologies, and events. Instead, the sports schools as social assemblages are articulations of the effects of cultural practices and events, producing specific conjunctures.

This perspective mandates understanding culture as emergent within assemblages, produced in dynamic constellations of causal relations, and entangled with local histories, power relations, ideologies, geographies, and materialities. Therefore, research and interventions in DC/talent development, if based on cookie-cutter solutions and recommendations such as those formulated in the two diagnostic reports, EU guidelines, or appropriated from other cultural contexts, be it national or sport-specific, will likely generate non-linear causal effects, which are difficult to predict given contextual heterogeneity. For instance, big changes (e.g. large investments in sports infrastructure) may not necessarily yield the desired magnitude of effects (e.g. sports performance, students' well-being) and vice versa, the introduction of small-scale modifications (e.g. online tutoring within individual study paths) can unleash deterritorialising (destabilising) forces that push the system (school) to adopt new patterns of behaviour (e.g. greater reliance on project work vs tests). Hopefully, such changes will endorse sustainable cultural practices that benefit student-athletes in their pursuit of DC pathways.

Deployment of assemblage thinking can also give rise to new ways of designing research. If primacy is given to multiplicities (of relations) between the "local", "national", and "global", whether within or between assemblages (e.g. across geographies), and this is conceptualised along a continuum, instead of examining different scales/levels of ecologies, analysis would focus on talent development environments as topological spaces, aiming to trace patterns, needs, reactions, services, or risk factors (i.e. athlete/coach burnout, injury, performance slump). This vantage point recognises that differences within certain geographies can be greater than those between national contexts. Therefore, rather than designing comparative studies on sports schools in Poland and Finland, a more fruitful line of inquiry may be the investigation of schools/ATDEs/DCDEs dedicated to winter sports or particular sports disciplines within/across schools. This is not to say that societal-level values, practices, or ideologies have no impact on the functioning of sports schools in these contexts; rather, SAT supported by radical contextualism advocates a more process-oriented view.

Another important aspect to consider in DC research is expanding understandings and working definitions of *context*. This involves rethinking the identity of places and reformulating the connection to notions of place, locale and locality, and acknowledging both the spatial and relational nature of context. To that end, we propose reconceptualising contexts as *milieus*, namely assemblages of human and non-human, discursive and nondiscursive, physical, biological, and social practices. Siding with proponents of radical contextualism who

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distinguish between three constitutions of context – milieu, territory, and ontological epoch (diagram) – we call on researchers to embrace more dynamic articulations of culture.

To conclude, in this book chapter the authors' humble intention has been to encourage and possibly embolden sports scholars interested in the study of culture to abandon the safety of holistic and holistic talent development theorising and venture into the riskier, messier, yet infinitely more enticing space of social assemblages through which the cultural practices of sport materialise for analysis.

NOTES

1. A convenient heuristic is to think of articulation as construction, with reality as a complex configuration that is constantly being constructed and reconstructed (Grossberg, 2010). Radical contextualist approaches tend to operate in the space in between realism and constructionism (Grossberg, 2013).
2. Inter-action in this case is more akin to intra-action, a concept coined by Barad (2007). Intra-action places emphasis on the non-human agency of matter, such that matter is a force through which humans and non-humans co-exchange (Barad, 2007). Throughout the chapter, we have used the terms *interaction*, *inter-action*, and *intra-action* to the same effect, to denote agency and mutual entanglement of human and non-human matter.
3. Although the study conducted by Graczyk et al. (2017) involved athlete participants completing a questionnaire, the results, including the main finding that the type of sport (group/individual) did not affect the course of athletes' dual careers, have limited relevance to the current discussion.
4. The Polish term "szkoły mistrzostwa sportowego" has been referred to in English-language publications as "mastery" or "championship" schools. The literal translation is "schools for sports mastery", but the word "mistrz" can also be translated as "champion". These schools differ from other specialised sports schools in that they are meant for elite youth athletes. They are also entitled to different (typically higher) state and local funding. Therefore, throughout this chapter, we use the term "mastery" schools to denote this particular type of sports school.
5. In the late eighteenth century, Poland (the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) was partitioned into three parts: the Austrian partition, the Prussian partition, and the Russian partition.
6. The Zakopane style is a unique architectural style (Crowley, 2001).
7. The official status of elite sports schools is granted by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, which has tasked the schools with providing dual career support for student athletes. These schools are an integral part of the Finnish Olympic Committee's strategy for elite sports performance.

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