

Jan-Erik Romar *
Casper Källberg
Ville Huuhka
Joni Kuokkanen

THE DUAL COMMITMENT OF STUDENT ATHLETES IN LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN FINLAND

DVOJNA KARIERA UČENCEV ŠPORTNIKOV VIŠJIH RAZREDOV OSNOVNIH ŠOL NA FINSKEM

ABSTRACT

Student athletes are expected to succeed simultaneously in school and sports. Research findings mainly come from upper secondary and university students, while research on younger adolescent student athletes has been largely overlooked. Drawing upon rich qualitative data derived from individual interviews with student athletes from grade eight (n = 15), teachers (n = 4), principals (n = 2), and nonparticipant observations (n = 7) at five schools, this study examines how young student athletes succeed in school and sports and in combining these two. The data was analysed using collaborative qualitative data analysis to find themes describing these student athletes. The main findings indicated that most student athletes had high ambitions and showed strong orientations in their school approaches. For some student athletes, the student and athlete roles conflicted, and they prioritized sports over educational success. A similar variation in student athletes' sport commitments was found: from having a goal to become a professional athlete to pursuing sport as a leisure activity. Student athletes in this study were in the beginning of a developmental dual career process, and they needed to be recognized as a heterogeneous group with individual pathways. Finally, the sport school provided more opportunities for practice and a flexibility in school-related issues. The findings indicated the demanding nature of the dual commitment of student athletes in lower secondary sport schools. Consequently, it is difficult to form a consistent picture that fit every context because the student athlete role is individual and to some extent conflicting.

Keywords: student athlete, dual career, sport and education, qualitative methods

Faculty of Education and Welfare Studies, Åbo Akademi University, Finland

Corresponding author:*

Jan-Erik Romar, Faculty of Education and Welfare Studies, Åbo Akademi University, 65101 Vasa, Finland.

E-mail: jromar@abo.fi

IZVLEČEK

Študentje športniki morajo kombinirati šolsko in športno kariero. Dosedanje ugotovitve raziskav v večini temeljijo na starejših mladostnikih in mlajših odraslih, medtem ko so bile raziskave o mlajših mladostniških športnikih v glavnem spregledane. Pričujoča študija temelji na bogatih kvalitativnih podatkih, pridobljenih na podlagi individualnih razgovorov z učenci športniki iz osmega razreda (n = 15), učitelji (n = 4), ravnatelji (n = 2) in ostalimi opazovanci (n = 7) petih osnovnih šol. Podatki so bili analizirani s pomočjo skupne kvalitativne analize podatkov z namenom opisa osnovnošolske populacije učencev športnikov. Glavne ugotovitve so pokazale, da je večina učencev športnikov imela visoke ambicije saj je pokazala močne usmeritve pri svojih šolskih pristopih. Pri nekaterih učencih smo ugotovili. Ugotovili smo, da imajo športniki različne cilje, med najpogostejšimi sta slednja: i) postati poklicni športnik; ii) ukvarjanje s športom kot prostočasno dejavnostjo. Učenci športniki v pričujoči študiji so sicer bili na začetku procesa razvoja dvojne kariere in jih je bilo treba prepoznati kot heterogeno skupino z različnimi interesi in potmi. Ugotovitve študije nakazujejo na dvomljive ugotovitve zato je posledično tudi težko oblikovati skladno sliko, ker je vloga učenca športnika individualna in do neke mere nasprotujoča si.

Ključne besede: učenec športnik, dvojna kariera, šport in izobraževanje, kvalitativne metode

INTRODUCTION

Sport associations and clubs have traditionally had the main responsibility for structuring competitions and sports in Europe. Nevertheless, during the past decade, European countries have strived to combine practice, sport competitions, and education (The EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes, 2012), which has enabled individuals to begin making dual careers. A dual career (DC) is defined as a career with a focus on sports and study or work (Ryba et al., 2015; Stambulova & Wylleman 2015). Sports and educational experiences are connected, which makes the transition natural for the athlete and therefore, they can combine their interests in an ideal manner (Tekavc et al., 2015).

DC research is a relatively new field that has gained momentum in the last 10–15 years (Guidotti et al., 2015; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). The research area emphasises athletes who combine sports and education in normal schools, sports classes, sports schools, or universities (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015). European DC research show an emphasis on athletic career development (Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman et al., 2013), challenges and demands in combining sport with education (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009; Ryba et al., 2016), and risk and resilience factors related to the construction of DC pathways (Ryba et al., 2016). There has been research examining the possibilities of making a DC at the upper secondary school level (Baron-Thiene & Alfermann, 2015; Ryba et al., 2017) and at the university level (Brown et al., 2015; Fernandes et al., 2019; Lupo et al., 2017). However, to the best of our knowledge, there is no research about the opportunities for DC in lower secondary school.

Student athletes who have made DCs are more successful at the transition from sports to working life than athletes who focused solely on sports (Ryba et al., 2017; Stambulova et al., 2009; Torregrosa et al., 2015). Aquilina (2013) described the presence of an alternative focus as a relief from the pressures of sports that provides perspective to the student athlete. However, investing in a sports career and education is demanding, and studies show that it is difficult to achieve good results in sports and academic careers at the same time (O'Neill et al., 2013; Ryba et al., 2016). Some student athletes are struggling to find a proper balance between combining an athletic career with an academic or working career (Aquilina, 2013; Debois et al., 2015). In addition, their commitment and motivation towards athletics and education can vary greatly depending on gender, age, and level of competition (Miller et al., 2005).

Student athletes pursuing DCs indicated that they experience challenges, such as absences from exams or lectures, training and sport pressure, too little leisure time, and the loss of social life.

(Condello et al., 2019; Li & Sum, 2017; O'Neill et al., 2013; Romar, 2012). Moreover, student athletes who make DCs at the upper secondary school face the risks of athletic burnout and school burnout and, thus, increase the risk of work overload and injuries. (Sorkkila et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2015; Tekavc et al., 2015). Student athletes tend generally to perform as well or better academically as their nonathlete counterparts (Emrich et al., 2009), while in the American high school context, female student athletes outperform their peers (Miller et al., 2005). In addition, findings related to participation and success in school in Finland, show that almost 40% of student athletes studying at upper secondary sports schools would consider dropping out of studies if education would interfere with their pursuits for athletic success (Ryba et al., 2017). Furthermore, students reporting low engagement or unwillingness to invest in school run higher risks of dropout and academic ill-being (Li & Lerner, 2013).

Research findings from student athletes in upper secondary school and higher education show that achievement in one domain is often accomplished at the expense of the other domain (Aquilina, 2013; Christensen & Sørensen, 2009). The majority of student athletes perceive education as important to facilitate future study options (Romar, 2012; Ryba et al., 2016). Some student athletes feel that sports are only a hobby, which is why they also concentrate more on education. These student athletes believe they will benefit from the studies for the rest of their lives, while the sports are only temporary (Li & Sum, 2017). Student athletes considering that sports might not be their future professions have higher academic identities (Stambulova et al., 2015). Nevertheless, many student athletes report that they prioritise sports over their education (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009; Cosh & Tully, 2014; Harrison et al., 2020; Tekavc et al., 2015). This choice is even more evident in sports where the student athletes easily get income to practice their sports professionally (Stambulova et al., 2015).

While gender is generally an issue in sports, female elite athletes tend to value and invest more in academic careers than males do (Kerštajn & Topič, 2017; Ryba et al., 2016). Similarly, male athletes often have stronger sports identities than females do (Stephan & Brewer, 2007). Research also indicates that female athletes have higher aspirations for education than males do, and they have less motivation to pursue sports careers (Gaston-Gayles, 2005; Tekavc et al., 2015). Therefore, female athletes have a greater risk of ending the DCs, which means that they will give up education or sports (Baron-Thiene & Alfermann, 2015; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Tekavc et al., 2015). In addition, female athletes more often than male athletes cannot live on sports and have to work for financial stability (Harrison et al., 2020; Stambulova &

Wylleman, 2019). Importantly, these DC research findings are mainly from upper secondary and university students, while research on younger adolescent student athletes is lacking.

Tekavc et al. (2015) also noted a difference in study motivation between team athletes and individual athletes pursuing DCs. Team athletes study less frequently at universities, while those who participate in individual sports often study at universities. However, Lupo et al. (2017) argued that there were no differences in study motivation between team and individual athletes; rather, the differences were individual and not sport specific.

Several researchers have noted the developmental perspective of a DC. Li and Sum (2017) defined the first stage of the DC experience as becoming an athlete with DC. During this stage, the security, alternative focus, or backup plan was evident, particularly how student athletes intended to deal with the challenges whilst preparing for the future life. Later, student athletes deal with sport and education transitions at different stages of their lifetimes, highlighting that the DC is fundamentally developmental in nature (Debois et al., 2015). Apparently, student athletes encounter many challenges, which occur at different layers in sports and education, thus they have to prioritize depending on life situations (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). Student athletes use this fluctuation in focus and prioritization as a temporary coping mechanism for periods of particularly high demand on time or energy (Cartigny et al., 2019; Guidotti et al., 2015; Li & Sum, 2017). However, studies have indicated that the DC demands faced by student athletes increased during more advanced levels of education (Cartigny et al., 2019, Harrison et al., 2020).

Although research describes student athletes as a heterogeneous group, each athlete has their own individual process with different changing motives and related identities impacting on the student athlete's development (Defruyt et al., 2020; Li & Sum, 2017). Drawing on previous studies (e.g., Aunola et al., 2018; Ryba et al., 2017; Stambulova et al., 2015) and their own interview data, Cartigny et al. (2019) presented a lifespan perspective of the student athlete experience by identifying three distinct student athlete pathways. One group of student athletes reflected a balance between sport and education, while another showed a sporting dominance and a third group showed educational and/or vocational dominance. Differences in identity development were linked to each pathway, suggesting that athletes construct their DCs from a young age, and these constructions impact the individual actions they take.

Given an increased focus and concerns about youth sports, it is important to understand how student athletes balance sports and education at different educational levels. As outlined by

Stambulova and Wylleman (2019), the DC literature has grown in Europe during the last decade. The review underlined a need for further exploration of student athletes at a primary school level, which means the time before the transition to upper secondary education. Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine student athletes' commitments to education and sports during lower secondary education.

METHODS

Context

Finnish comprehensive schools have long had an international status as relatively equal and providing uniform education for all students. The educational system consists of 9 years of compulsory basic schooling, starting at age 7 and ending at age 16. In primary school (Grades 1–6), classroom teachers are mostly responsible for giving instruction, whereas subject teachers primarily give instruction in lower secondary school (Grades 7–9). After comprehensive school, students choose between upper secondary (academic track) or vocational education. Currently, Finland has 15 sports upper-secondary schools, which supports the construction of a DC path by collaborating with sports clubs, national sports academies, and sports federations.

The present study is part of an ongoing DC research project that focuses on examining student athlete well-being throughout lower secondary school. At present, 19 lower secondary schools nationwide have been certified in accordance with the criteria established by the Finnish Olympic Committee to participate in a 3-year lower secondary sports schools pilot project (LSSSPP) during the academic years 2017–2020. The aim of the LSSSPP project was to promote young adolescent athletes' opportunities to pursue academic and athletic careers simultaneously through strengthening the collaboration between local lower secondary schools, the national network of sports academies, and local sports clubs. The LSSSPP schools are geographically representative of Finland, and student athletes form their own classes (about 25 student athletes in one group) within each school. The participating schools have committed themselves to making special arrangements for flexible solutions, so that student athletes can combine sports with education. In reality, this means schools provide 10 hours a week during school days for physical education or sports practice, as well as a 2-hr weekly "Develop as an Athlete" unit during the whole school year. In addition, admittance to the lower secondary sport classes is competitive. Thus, student athletes must display physical competence, and the most competent are selected through national physical aptitude tests.

Participants

We purposefully sampled five LSSSP schools that were located close to or had good connections to the university, were willing to be observed during the school day, and represented schools with different sports focuses. The participants in the study were 15 student athletes ($M = 14.5$ years old) and six persons from the school staff (see Table 1). We based the inclusion of school staff on Harrison et al. (2020), who suggested it would enable an understanding of DCs within a broader context. We selected three student athletes purposefully from each school, following the criteria of having gender, team, and individual sport balances. In addition, two subject teachers, two physical education teachers, and two principals participated in the study, with at least one staff member being from each school. Prior to data collection, we obtained ethical approval from the Åbo Akademi University ethics committee. Additionally, parents to all student participants signed written informed consent forms.

Table 1. Student Athletes, School Staff, and Observations as Data Sources at Five Schools.

School	Student Athlete		School Staff		Observation	
	Name	Sport	Name	Position	Subject	
<i>Björkby</i>	Roland	Soccer	Victoria	Physical education	Finnish	
	Jenny	Soccer			Physical education	
	Gustav	Soccer				
<i>Granby</i>	Lisa	Swimming	Oskar	Physical education	Swimming	
	Ulla	Swimming			Principal	Motor skills
	Christopher	Swimming			Emma	Mathematics
<i>Lärkby</i>	Lukas	Ice hockey	Sofia	Finnish	Motor skills	
	Ulrika	Swimming			Finnish	
	Mathilda	Figure skating				
<i>Tallby</i>	Lovisa	Synchronized swimming	Ben	Principal		
	Marika	Motocross				
	Jesper	Ice hockey				
<i>Enby</i>	Pelle	T&F/Basket	Ida	Home economics	Mathematics	
	Måns	Floorball			Physical education	
	Amanda	Team gymnastics				

Data Collection

We obtained qualitative data for this study via interviews and observations with field notes. We conducted the interviews at the end of the academic year, when student athletes had attended 2 years at an LSSSPP school. The first and fourth authors conducted the interviews in a quiet room in each school. We audio recorded and transcribed the interviews verbatim. We used semistructured individual interviews to gain insight into the student athletes' commitment to school and education. We developed a semistructured interview guide based on previous DC literature (e.g., Guidotti et al., 2015; Li & Sum, 2017; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019), similar for student athletes and school staff, to ask in-depth questions tailored to the participants' experiences. For example, broad categories of questions were related to individual factors (e.g., How important is education? What are the good points or downsides of this LSSSPP school?) and institutional factors (e.g., How do schools support students in combining education and sports?). The lengths of interviews ranged from 14–28 min for student athletes and from 16–39 min for school staff.

The purpose of nonparticipant lesson observations was to provide us a chance to “live” the DC in LSSSPP schools and experience what actually takes place. Although unsystematic in nature, the observations were based loosely on Virtanen et al.'s (2019) study using the classroom assessment scoring system. During observations, the researchers took detailed field notes about teachers' instructional behaviour and interactions, peer interactions, and student task orientation. We observed mathematics, Finnish, physical education, motor skill practice, and swimming lessons (see Table 1), and the length of each lesson varied from 60–90 min. These observations provided glimpses into a DC school day, as seen through the lens of the researchers.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

We analysed the qualitative data by using a collaborative qualitative data analysis (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). The development of coding categories involved a repetitious process of exploring the interview and observational data. We defined the codes to reflect the issues and with reference to notions in the DC framework. We achieved consensus upon discussion of differences in coding and categorizing the themes. Thus, we generated the final codes and created a coding frame to define key themes, their definitions, and criteria for recognition in the coding for each data source (see Table 2).

Table 2. Thematic Analysis.

Main Themes	Area of Focus	Example of Raw Data
School commitment	High study ambitions	I would say it [school] is very important. At the moment, it is my highest priority.
	Future professional careers	I think it is quite important. I want to a certain high school because I want to study medicine.
	Success in school	Probably this class is by far better than the other classes, if we think of all students on average.
	Differences among student athletes	It is individual, and I would still say that most of our students make an effort in school beside their sport involvement.
	Gender-specific issues	The girls are definitely investing more in school, while the boys are investing more [in] sports.
Sport commitment	Strong commitment	Super important . . . I have such a dream that I would like to win a World Cup medal.
	Weaker commitment	I want, as I now have, a good basic fitness level and physical activity, to be out and to be with friends. I don't have any major goals to play in any one league.
	Competences for everyday life	It has of course taught me time management. You almost have to have a minute schedule for each day, so that you have time for everything.
A dual career	Combining sport and school	Probably both are equally important; if you don't become a professional athlete, you have to build another career.
	To train during the school day	A good point is that you have a lot of physical education and morning sessions, which you might not get from a normal school.
	Demanding amount of work	In my opinion, the biggest challenge is to cope [with the demands]. Our young athletes are under a great pressure.
	Adjustments in schooling	If you have long game trips, you can get extra time for homework or similar.

We took several steps during the research process to facilitate trustworthiness. First, we made the study procedure transparent to participating student athletes and school staff at the beginning of the study. The triangulation of data sources involved identification of similar data situated in the observations and interviews. We used researcher triangulation multiple times to make sense of and challenge emerging categories. We retained verbatim quotes from student athlete and school staff interviews and field notes to stay close to the data, and for the result text, we chose the best of the selected quotes, which were identified by participant pseudo name and sport or staff position.

RESULTS

After analysing the data, we identified three main themes related to school commitment, sport commitment, and a DC. These themes are apparent across all data.

School Commitment

A large proportion of student athletes have a strong commitment to school with high study ambitions. A strong commitment to school means that the students were interested in and goal-orientated with their schooling. We noticed that they thought further studies were important. Ulrika (Lärkby School, swimming) said, "I would say it [school] is very important. At the moment it is my highest priority, I want to invest in school so that I get into a high school and, after it, to a university." In addition, the student athletes reflected that schooling was important for their future professional careers. According to Jenny (Björkby School, soccer), the school was very important for her future life, "I think it is quite important, I want to a certain high school because I want to study medicine [Faculty of Medicine]." In addition, Emma (Granby School, Principal) pointed out that several student athletes had a strong commitment to school, "They are very determined to attend school because they want to get into Mäkelärinne [a sport upper secondary school]." Subject teachers also noticed that student athletes had a strong commitment to school and high aspirations: "In my opinion, they invest and are academically ambitious. Clearly they are already talking about what high school they are aiming for" (Ida, Enby School, home economics teacher).

The majority of the student athletes were also successful in school, and they had high average grades in academic subjects. Most of them had an average of more than 9.0 on a scale from 4 to 10. Mathilda (Lärkby School, figure skating) said, "I am very satisfied ... 10.0 [average]." According to the school staff, there were differences between student athletes and regular students in school success, while there were no low-performing students in the sports classes. Ida (Enby School, home economics teacher) said, "Probably this class is by far better than the other classes, if we think of all students on average ... and the really low achievers are missing from this class." We also observed high efforts on school tasks: "there was a good working climate in the class and students were interested and asking questions" (field note, Granby School, mathematics).

The school staff recognized differences in the school commitment among student athletes, while some students were high performers in school and some did not invest as much. Ben (Tallby School, Principal) said, "It is individual, and I would still say that most of our students make an effort in school beside their sport involvement." Ulla (Granby School, swimming) also said, "Now, I have invested even more in sports and less focus on school during this spring, given the summer and the upcoming big competitions." Conversely, there were some student

athletes with no clear plans for the future. Måns (Enby School, floorball) mentioned, “I might go to high school, a sports high school. I do not know what high school I am applying for.”

Furthermore, the school staff saw gender-specific differences in the school commitment for the student athletes. Girls often invested more in school than boys did, while the boys focused more on sports. Victoria (Björkby School, physical education teacher) pointed out, “The girls are definitely investing more in school, while the boys are investing more [in] sports. Among the boys there are several who take the school with a heel kick.” Classroom observations (field note, Lärkby School, Finnish) showed that presentations from girl students were structured and well prepared, while two boys showed low efforts in their presentations. Similarly, “during the recess before an examination in mathematics, two girl students were reading the mathematics text book, while a group of five boy students were watching a video clip from their phones, although the text book was on the bench” (field note, Enby School, mathematics).

Sport Commitment

There was also a variation in student athletes’ sports commitment, with students showing a strong commitment to sports and students with weaker commitment to sports. A strong commitment to sports indicated student athletes who were greatly determined and interested in sports. Amanda (Enby School, squad gymnastics) mentioned, “Super important ... I have such a dream that I would like to win a World Cup medal.” The school staff also noticed that some student athletes were devoting a lot to sports. Sofia (Lärkby School, Finnish teacher) expressed, “Then, there are those who invest more in sport.” The investment and high ambitions were evident in Lukas’ (Lärkby School, ice hockey) goals, “Well ice hockey professional, that you would someday play as professional and get money for it and live on it. You should do what you like.” Similar high future goals in an individual sport were recognized by Lisa (Granby School, swimming), “I think it is important, I want to be successful in swimming and reach high ... at least I want to participate in international competitions.” This commitment also was noticed in observations from sport practice where “student athletes showed great interest and engagement in the passing drill” (field note, Björkby School, soccer practice) and “they were concentrated and did their best during all parts of the practice session. No disturbing or deviant behaviours occurred” (field note, Granby School, motor skill practice).

Despite student athletes with strong commitment to sports, there were student athletes with weaker commitment to sports. These students were not as ambitious; rather, they participated in sports because it was fun and to be physically active. Roland (Björkby School, football) said,

“I want, as I now have, a good basic fitness level and physical activity, to be out and to be with friends. I don’t have any major goals to play in anyone league.” Sport could also be a leisure activity and Jenny (Björkby School, football) said, “I have not ever aimed for the national team or so. Rather it has been a hobby ... I have no goals in that way. And I don’t want to be a professional [player] as an adult.” In this sense, for some student athletes, school was more important. Ulrika (Lärkby School, swimming) said,

It is a second priority, right after school. I always go to the practice sessions; I preferably do not miss any. I do the best I can. I’m not necessarily that competition oriented, and I do not want to reach as far as [someone] else. For example, it is enough for me that I can participate in my own age group national championships, and I don’t have to win anything there. For me, I just want to do my own best so I can enjoy the practice, and it is the most important to me.

Although sports may be demanding, student athletes indicated that sports gave them competences for everyday life. Many student athletes felt they learned social competencies and collaboration with others, as Roland (Björkby School, football) noted, “Social skills, you get to know new people more easily.” In addition, they had learned time management and daily planning with the help of sports, and Mathilda (Lärkby School, figure skating) mentioned, “It has of course taught me time management, you almost have to have a minute schedule for each day, so that you have time for everything.” Several student athletes also had learned not to immediately give up facing challenges, as indicated when Pelle (Enby School, athletics / basketball) said, “Then, when it starts to feel heavy, and you start to fight, then you do not give up, but you continue.”

A Dual Career

The student athletes considered it important to have dual careers: to combine sports and school. They noticed that something else, other than sports, was important in life. Therefore, school and studies were important as a backup if the professional sports career was not achieved. Jesper (Tallby School, ice hockey) said, “Probably both are equally important, if you don’t become a professional athlete you have to build another career.” Also, Lukas (Lärkby School, ice hockey) pointed out, “Although I dream of becoming a professional ice hockey player, it’s still good to have a backup plan there, so the school should be well taken care of so you have something after the ice hockey in life too.”

Participation in the DC project schools allowed student athletes to train during school hours, which meant the athletes had better opportunities to develop as athletes. Gustav (Björkby

School, football) said, “At least we have much better opportunities for all kinds of things and activities [sport practice] than what other classes have. We have the opportunity to train more.” Practice sessions during the school days were usually morning sessions, which allowed athletes to increase their training loads.

A good point is that you have a lot of physical education and morning sessions, which you might not get from a normal school. Then, bad things, or not, I do not know, but that you can get too much sport. (Marika, Tallby School, motocross)

Although the amount of work can be large by combining sport and school demands, it might not feel heavy for the athlete. This is because athletes enjoy practice and going to the practice sessions, which makes it less stressful.

It can be difficult to combine sport and school, I don't question that, but it certainly varies a lot from person to person. But for me, it personally has not been demanding. Of course, it is sometimes very difficult and demanding, but usually it hasn't been that demanding. Maybe it's because I haven't had to invest in the school so much anyway, but that may change. Nevertheless, in itself, swimming probably never feels stressful because it is fun. For that, you like it and you like going to practice, and it's not hard to watch Netflix when you like it. (Ulla, Granby School, swimming)

Even though no student athletes considered the load to be a challenge, the school staff felt that the load could be demanding. This could, according to school staff, lead to an increased burnout risk and/or an early drop out of sports when the combination of sports and school is a burden, not just sports or school. Most stressful was that students were constantly expected to perform, in school and in sports, and the overall load was often high.

In my opinion, the biggest challenge is to cope [the demands]. Our young athletes are under a great pressure, and I think this pressure comes from three different directions: demanding homes, demanding coaches in the sports, and demanding school. Ranking these is difficult, at least for me. I believe that everyone puts the school in the first place, or do they. But a young athlete gets tired because of that too much is too much. (Oskar, Granby School, physical education teacher)

The DC can be demanding for these young student athletes; however, they appreciated the way school was adjusted for their needs. The student athletes felt that the teachers were more flexible with schooling and understood that student athletes were not always able to do all assignments

on time. Måns (Enby School, floorball) mentioned, “If you have long game trips, you can get extra time for homework or similar.” Similarly, Ida (Enby School, home economics teacher) felt that the teachers tried to adjust “the amount of homework or the placement of exams, which would make it easier for students’ day-to-day living, when they feel that everything is not piling up.” The field notes (Enby School, mathematics) also indicated that seven students missed the mathematic examination due to a tournament; however, the teacher explained that they would do it the next day. Finally, practice sessions were included during the regular school day to provide time for sports and school. Lisa (Granby School, swimming) said, “The most positive is that the practice sessions are adapted so that there is time for both school and swimming; that’s the most important thing in my opinion.”

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine student athletes’ commitment to education and sports during lower secondary education in Finland. This study’s results add new knowledge to the existing literature, as past researchers have focused primarily on DC experiences from upper secondary or university levels. The student athletes at the lower secondary level in Finland indicated that education was important for further studies and for future working careers. At this stage, student athletes may not know how ambitious their sports careers will be and, therefore, are compelled to invest equally in their education. The student athletes in our study were in the first phase of their DC experiences, described by Li and Sum (2017) as becoming an athlete with a DC. During the first phase, student athletes are concerned about security and show backup plans in dealing with the challenges, whilst preparing for their future lives. When the lower secondary student athlete then transfers to upper secondary and university studies, we might see a higher investment in sports, and education can then be neglected (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009; Cosh & Tully, 2014; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). Ryba et al. (2016) also noted that Finnish university student athletes showed a high sports identity. If the student athletes notice at any phase of the career that they have reached the highest level and probably will not become a professional or international athlete, they usually start to invest in studies or working life (Cartigny et al., 2019). Furthermore, sports and school can complement each other. These student athletes thought it might be good to have something else to think about, not just school or sports (Aquilina 2013; Defruyt et al., 2020). According to previous research (Baron-Thiene & Alfermann, 2015; Stambulova et al., 2015; Tekavc et al., 2015), it is easier to succeed

with a DC if individuals are allowed to express themselves in several different ways, not only through sports.

Student athletes in this study were successful in school. They performed well in school and had higher average grades than other students had in the same school. In addition, there were few student athletes who were significant low performers in academic subjects. These results are consistent with those reported by Emrich et al. (2009) and Gaston-Gayles (2004), where student athletes usually had good grades because they had to perform well in school to get into university sports programs. However, our results are from lower secondary student athletes in Finland, while Gaston-Gayle's (2004) results were based on college student athletes in North America, which means we cannot draw a direct link to previous research. However, education is important in Finland, and Finnish students are doing well in international comparisons. Therefore, the strong commitment to school and success may also be because these student athletes want to ensure their acceptances to a specific upper secondary school and from there on to university and working life.

This study also indicated that there were gender-specific differences in education for lower secondary student athletes. Girls were often more determined with school, while boys were more focused on sports. This finding supports previous evidence, which indicates that girls have higher ambitions with education (Kerštajn & Topič, 2017; Ryba et al., 2016; Stephan & Brewer, 2007; Tekavc, et al., 2015). One explanation may be that girls are usually more determined and have clearer plans for the future than boys have. In addition, girls usually mature earlier than boys do, which means that girls usually know what they want with their lives at an earlier stage than boys know (Harrison et al., 2020; Patton et al., 2004). Additionally, a few student athletes indicated that sports were more important than education, and these were all boys from team sports. A possible explanation might be that sports commitment among team sports boys is higher than among girls. Male team athletes usually succeed better financially than individual or female team athletes (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019; Tekavc et al., 2015). A connection between boys in team sports and a strong commitment to sports might be related to male team athletes having a much higher probability of being able to support themselves through sports than individual or women athletes have. In addition, while men's sports tend to have higher status than women's sports and media visibility is higher for men's sports (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019), these differences can affect student athletes' commitment and opportunities to pursue professional sports careers.

In addition to these DC experiences, lower secondary student athletes considered that the overall load could be demanding, but the load was not a problem for most student athletes. On the other hand, school staff felt that the overall load was demanding and that this could lead to dropout and/or burnout. Other researchers (Sorkkila et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2015; Tekavc et al., 2015) revealed that student athletes making DCs are at risk of suffering athletic burnout or school burnout. However, these studies were based on student athletes from the upper secondary or university level. This means that the situation might be different during the beginning phase of a DC (Li & Sum, 2017), particularly when both Harrison et al. (2020) and Cartigny et al. (2019) reported that a DC became increasingly difficult to manage when the levels of education increased. Thus, a DC might be challenging, but their situation was clearly supported by individuals (teachers and coaches) who were willing to sustain both of their pursuits. In addition, the provided structure with practice sessions during the school day, a flexible schedule, and adjusted time arrangement for school tasks and examinations also helped the student athlete in combining sports and education (Harrison et al., 2020; O'Neill et al., 2013).

Noticeably, the demands student athletes encounter are challenging and require effort, time, and support to meet (Ryba et al., 2016). They have to prioritize and adjust their focus to balance sports and education to find an optimal solution (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). Student athletes in this study were in the beginning of a developmental DC process with not only a single event but also several educational and sport transitions at different stages during their lifetimes, which highlighted the importance of adopting a lifespan perspective when considering DC student athletes (Debois et al., 2015; Tekavc et al., 2015). As the diversity of these student athletes indicated, distinguishing between the different DC decisions that each one makes at different levels is important. Therefore, we need to recognise DC student athletes as a heterogeneous group with individual pathways (Li & Sum, 2017), where an individual student athlete could be placed anywhere from high to low commitment. Student athletes in this study showed similar pathways, as reported by Cartany et al. (2019): a DC pathway, a sporting pathway, and an educational pathway. Thus, this study was able to extend the DC findings from older student athletes to lower secondary students. Finally, these student athletes constructed their careers at a young age, and because fluctuation in focus, prioritization, and coping mechanisms will change during their coming years (Guidotti et al., 2015), estimating their future DC pathways is impossible.

Limitations and strengths

A limitation of this study is the generalisability, because the results are based on a small sample and only on the DC experiences in Finland. Studies in a different context may yield different findings. A second limitation is that this study did not emphasize the type of sports that the schools offered and in which the student athletes participated. To obtain an understanding of the developmental processes of the DC, future studies should include a longitudinal approach, with qualitative and quantitative measures, while focusing on the challenges and the well-being of student athletes. A notable strength of this study is that we included school staff and observations in capturing the processes of DCs for young student athletes, thus providing a basis for future research to assess the progression and success of a DC. Regardless of the limitations, this study substantiates previous findings in the literature that understand student athletes during DCs as a heterogeneous group with individual pathways and processes. Finally, this study presents novel and interesting findings, which provide a detailed insight into Finnish lower secondary student athletes' DCs and the experiences encountered in their schools. Importantly, this knowledge needs to inform the government and the sporting movement to outline, develop, and implement a DC program in close cooperation with local lower secondary schools.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- Aquilina, D. (2013). A study of the relationship between elite athletes' educational development and sporting performance. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 30(4), 374-392.
- Aunola, K., Selänne, A., Selänne, H., & Ryba, T. V. (2018). The role of adolescent athletes' task value patterns in their educational and athletic career aspirations. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 63, 34-43.
- Baron-Thiene, A., & Alfermann, D. (2015). Personal characteristics as predictors for dual career dropout versus continuation—A prospective study of adolescent athletes from German elite sport schools. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 21, 42-49.
- Brown, D. J., Fletcher, D., Henry, I., Borrie, A., Emmett, J., Buzza, A., & Wombwell, S. (2015). A British university case study of the transitional experiences of student-athletes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 21, 78-90.
- Cartigny, E., Fletcher, D., Coupland, C., & Taylor, G. (2019). Mind the gap: A grounded theory of dual career pathways in sport. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 1-22.

- Christensen, M. K., & Sørensen, J. K. (2009). Sport or school? dreams and dilemmas for talented young danish football players. *European Physical Education Review*, 15(1), 115-133.
- Condello, G., Capranica, L., Doupona, M., Varga, K., & Burk, V. (2019). Dual-career through the elite university student-athletes' lenses: The international FISU-EAS survey. *PLoS one*, 14(10), e0223278.
- Cosh, S., & Tully, P. J. (2014). "All I have to do is pass": A discursive analysis of student athletes' talk about prioritising sport to the detriment of education to overcome stressors encountered in combining elite sport and tertiary education. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 15(2), 180-189.
- Debois, N., Ledon, A., & Wylleman, P. (2015). A lifespan perspective on the dual career of elite male athletes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 21, 15-26.
- Defruyt, S., Wylleman, P., Kegelaers, J., & De Brandt, K. (2020). Factors influencing Flemish elite athletes' decision to initiate a dual career path at higher education. *Sport in Society*, 23(4), 660-677.
- Emrich, E., Fröhlich, M., Klein, M., & Pitsch, W. (2009). Evaluation of the elite schools of sport: Empirical findings from an individual and collective point of view. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 44(2-3), 151-171.
- European Union Expert Group: Education and Training in Sport. (2012). *EU guidelines on dual careers of athletes: Recommended policy actions in support of dual careers in high-performance sport*. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/sport/library/documents/dual-career-guidelines-final_en.pdf
- Fernandes, A., Moreira, L., & Gonçalves, C. (2019). Student-athletes identity and motivation towards dual career: The context matters. *Kinesiology Slovenica*, 25(2), 15-29.
- Gaston-Gayles, J. L. (2005). The factor structure and reliability of the Student Athletes' Motivation toward Sports and Academics Questionnaire (SAMSAQ). *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(3), 317-327.
- Guidotti, F., Cortis, C., & Capranica, L. (2015). Dual career of European student athletes: A systematic literature review. *Kinesiology Slovenica*, 21, 5-20.
- Harrison, G. E., Vickers, E., Fletcher, D., & Taylor, G. (2020). Elite female soccer players' dual career plans and the demands they encounter. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 1-22.
- Kerštajn, R., & Topič, M. D. (2017). Motivation of Slovenian and Norwegian Nordic athletes towards sports, education and dual career. *European Journal of Social Science Education and Research*, 4(1), 35-43.
- Li, M., & Sum, R. K. W. (2017). A meta-synthesis of elite athletes' experiences in dual career development. *Asia Pacific Journal of Sport and Social Science*, 6(2), 1-19.
- Li, Y., & Lerner, R. M. (2013). Interrelations of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive school engagement in high school students. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 42(1), 20-32.
- Lupo, C., Mosso, C., Guidotti, F., Cugliari, G., Pizzigalli, L., & Rainoldi, A. (2017). Motivation toward dual career of Italian student athletes enrolled in different university paths. *Sport Sciences for Health*, 13(3), 485-494
- Miller, K. E., Melnick, M. J., Barnes, G. M., Farrell, M. P., & Sabo, D. (2005). Untangling the links among athletic involvement, gender, race, and adolescent academic outcomes. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 22(2), 178-193.
- O'Neill, M., Allen, B., & Calder, A. M. (2013). Pressures to perform: An interview study of Australian high performance school-age athletes' perceptions of balancing their school and sporting lives. *Performance Enhancement & Health*, 2(3), 87-93.
- Patton, W., Bartrum, D. A., & Creed, P. A. (2004). Gender differences for optimism, self-esteem, expectations and goals in predicting career planning and exploration in adolescents. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 4(2-3), 193-209.

- Richards, K. A. R., & Hemphill, M. A. (2018). A practical guide to collaborative qualitative data analysis. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 37(2), 225-231.
- Romar, J.-E. (2012). An analysis of Finnish skiing school students' academic education and athletic success. *Acta Universitatis Palackianae Olomucensis Gymnica*, 42, 35-41.
- Ryba, T. V., Aunola, K., Ronkainen, N. J., Selänne, H., & Kalaja, S. (2016). Urheilijoiden kaksoisuraan liittyvän tutkimuksen tämänhetkinen tilanne suomessa [The current status of dual career research in Finland]. *Liikunta ja Tiede*, 53 (2-3), 88-95
- Ryba, T. V., Stambulova, N. B., Ronkainen, N. J., Bundgaard, J., & Selänne, H. (2015). Dual career pathways of transnational athletes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 21, 125-134.
- Ryba, T. V., Stambulova, N. B., Selänne, H., Aunola, K., & Nurmi, J. (2017). "Sport has always been first for me" but "all my free time is spent doing homework": Dual career styles in late adolescence. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 33, 131-140.
- Sorkkila, M., Ryba, T. V., Aunola, K., Selänne, H., & Salmela-Aro, K. (2020). Sport burnout inventory–Dual career form for student-athletes: Assessing validity and reliability in a Finnish sample of adolescent athletes. *Journal of Sport and Health Science*, 9(4) 358-366.
- Stambulova, N., Alfermann, D., Statler, T., & Côté, J. (2009). ISSP position stand: Career development and transitions of athletes. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 7(4), 395-412.
- Stambulova, N. B., Engström, C., Franck, A., Linnér, L., & Lindahl, K. (2015). Searching for an optimal balance: Dual career experiences of Swedish adolescent athletes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 21, 4-14.
- Stambulova, N. B., & Ryba, T. V. (2014). A critical review of career research and assistance through the cultural lens: Towards cultural praxis of athletes' careers. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 7(1), 1-17.
- Stambulova, N., & Wylleman, P. (2015). Dual career development and transitions. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 21, 1-3.
- Stambulova, N. B., & Wylleman, P. (2019). Psychology of athletes' dual careers: A state-of-the-art critical review of the European discourse. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 42, 74-88.
- Stephan, Y., & Brewer, B. W. (2007). Perceived determinants of identification with the athlete role among elite competitors. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 19(1), 67-79.
- Tekavc, J., Wylleman, P., & Erpič, S. C. (2015). Perceptions of dual career development among elite level swimmers and basketball players. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 21, 27-41.
- Torregrosa, M., Ramis, Y., Pallarés, S., Azócar, F., & Selva, C. (2015). Olympic athletes back to retirement: A qualitative longitudinal study. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 21, 50-56.
- Virtanen, T. E., Pakarinen, E., Lerkkanen, M. K., Poikkeus, A. M., Siekkinen, M., & Nurmi, J. E. (2018). A validation study of Classroom Assessment Scoring System–Secondary in the Finnish school context. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 38(6), 849-880.
- Wylleman, P., Reints, A., & De Knop, P. (2013). *A developmental and holistic perspective on athletic career development*. In P. Sotiariadou & V. De Bosscher (Eds.), *Managing high performance sport* (pp. 159–182). Routledge.