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# The politics-administration dichotomy in support for national sport guidelines in local government

## The views of Finnish municipal top decision-makers on child and youth physical activity guidelines

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### Abstract

While autonomous municipalities in western societies have become responsible for the implementation of national sport policy, the diversity of local decision-makers' policy interests presents significant challenges. Building on an institutional approach based on Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy, this problem is addressed by studying local political and administrative top decision-makers' support of the Sports Act guidelines for child and youth sport in Finland. Utilising large survey data from 736 Finnish local top decision-makers, the analysis revealed attitudinal differences, especially between politicians and administrators, and thus a paradoxical situation in the implementation of these guidelines. This finding supports the view that the current debate on the realisation of sport policy in Finland's autonomous local government system needs to consider differences in the views of different decision-making groups and their influence on local sport provision.

**Keywords:** top decision-makers, attitudes, decision-making groups, child and youth sport, institutional theory, Max Weber

# 1. Introduction

While the current decline in physical activity is increasingly being recognised as a major health policy concern (e.g., Kokko et al. 2021; WHO 2020; Hakanen et al. 2019; Itkonen et al. 2018; Vasankari and Kolu 2018), the responsibility for national sport policies is simultaneously being transferred to autonomous municipalities in many western societies, including Finland. Local decision-makers (i.e., political (elected) leaders and administrative officials who take part in local decision-making regarding sport) have thus become the main actors in the implementation of national sport policy. Various scholars in the sport sciences (e.g., Broch and Skille 2019; Sam and Ronglan 2018; Strittmatter et al. 2018) share the view that issues of legitimacy in municipalities have meant that support of sport policy falls short of the high national expectations. More specifically, several sport policy studies (e.g., Sam and Ronglan 2018; Stenling and Sam 2017; Chaney 2014; Macris and Sam 2014) have shown that a dichotomy exists between political and administrative decision-makers in their attitudes to sport policy. For example, Macris and Sam (2014) argue that the attitudes of administrative officials might be influenced by other criteria, while Sam and Ronglan (2018) suggest that political decision-makers are dependent on the preferences of their constituents in securing legitimacy for making decisions. Similarly, various studies on administration and policy (e.g., Birkland 2019; Baviskar and Winter 2016; May and Winter 2007; Tolbert and Zucker 1983; Lipsky 1980) have reached similar conclusions on the divergence between local politicians and administrators in their behavior. However, the ability of sport policy scholars to evaluate structural influences on local decision-makers' support in sport issues has been limited. In drawing attention specifically to the pluralistic interests and hierarchical structures of local decision-makers in sport policy, these studies also point to the theoretical challenge faced by researchers interested in investigating local decision-makers' support for national sport policy guidelines.

As in many western countries, formal leadership structures in Finland conform to Max Weber's (1978) classic model of bureaucracy, in which political and professional management are separated (Joensuu and Niiranen 2018; Virikko 2016). This ideal model of the separation of political and administrative power is an important contextual characteristic in explaining strategic management, power and legitimacy in the public sector across different European countries. Investigation of the differences between the two hierarchies of local decision-makers in their support for national

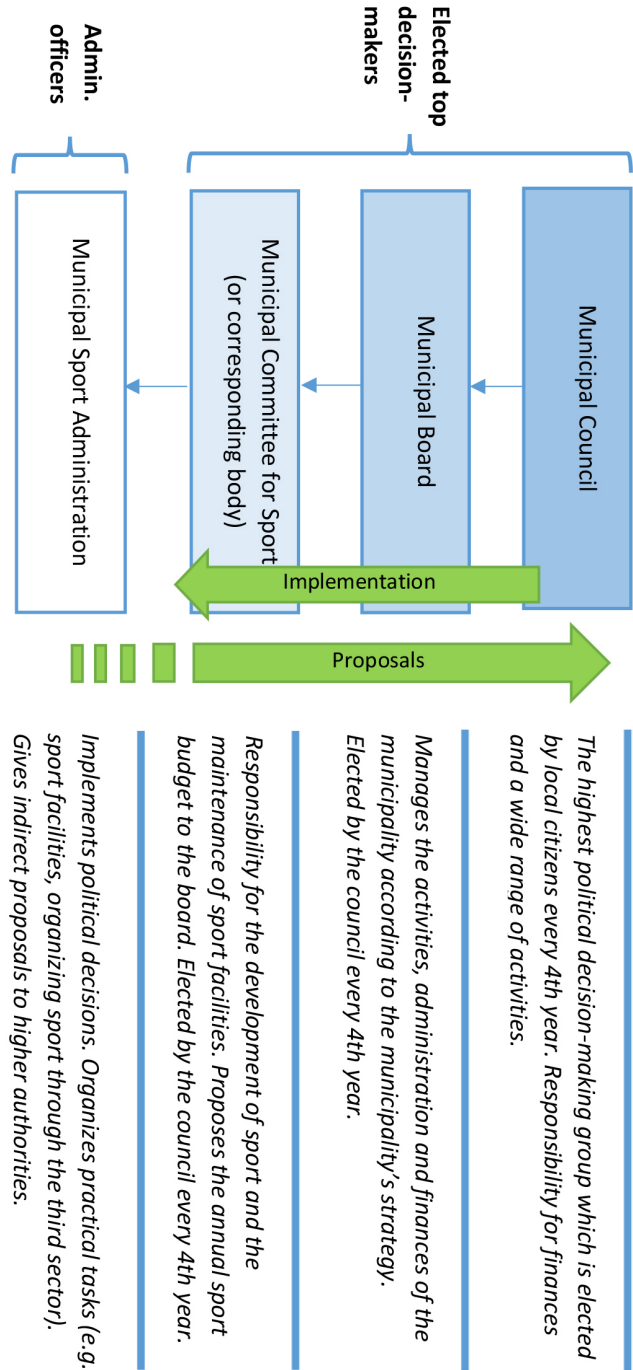
sport policy is highly interesting as it draws attention to the structural patterns of decision-making and implementation in this specific domain. In Weber's model, social structures such as bureaucracy rest on legitimating principles as the norms that shape decision-makers' values and thus create dominant attitudes. Although various institutional approaches (e.g., isomorphism, dominant logics) have been adopted in sport policy and management research to better understand governance and legitimacy issues in sport (e.g., De Bock et al. 2021; Szerovay 2020; Danisman et al. 2006; Kikulis 2000; Slack and Hinings 1994), most studies have focused on sport organisations (e.g., Nite and Edwards 2021; Robertson et al. 2021; Nite et al. 2019). According to March and Olsen (1996), the examination of structural influences on behaviours in political institutions should be approached in a theoretically different way from behaviours in other institutions (e.g., businesses, churches), owing to the differences in the practices and rules that characterise political institutions. On the other hand, the existence of multiple structures, variously described as institutional complexity, institutional pluralism and multiple logics, is recognised in both sport organisations and local government (Nite and Edwards 2021; Dunleavy et al. 1993). Moreover, the marginal interest shown in the commitment of sport-related resources and policy agendas across hierarchies in local government also suggests that, as a tool for investigating local decision-makers' support, the institutional theory needs to be applied in a different way (March and Olsen 1996). For example, approaching the issue of sport policy support by analysing local decision-makers' responses to different institutional "pressures" assumes that the political environment and interests are similar at all bureaucratic levels. It also assumes that these pressures create conformity to institutionalised rules, i.e., isomorphism, which causes attitudes to sport policy to be perceived as legitimate. However, it is not self-evident that the same variables influence decision-makers at different levels in the same (isomorphic) way. Therefore, this study applies an institutional approach based on Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy to the empirical investigation of local decision-makers' support for national sport policy across decision-maker hierarchies.

Specifically, the aim of this study was to examine whether local top decision-makers' support for national sport policy is conditioned and distinct by the local political and administrative contexts. Here, support is studied by examining decision-maker's attitudes to the Finnish Sports Act updated guidelines on the promotion of child and youth sport (Act on the Promotion of Sports and Physical Activity, 2015). The current sedentary

lifestyle of children and youth in Finland is currently a major health policy concern (e.g., Kokko et al. 2021; WHO 2020; Hedenborg 2019; European Commission 2019; Hakanen et al. 2019; Itkonen et al. 2018; Finnish National Sport Council 2018; Vasankari and Kolu 2018; Telama et al. 2014). Only one third of Finnish children and youth meet the recommendations for a level of physical activity that positively affects adulthood activity (Kokko et al. 2021; Ministry of Education and Culture 2016). Although the Finnish Sports Act lays the foundation for implementing the sport policy across municipalities, ambivalence between the Act, as a skeleton law, and the strong local autonomy of the municipalities means that local decision-makers have considerable administrative freedom in allocating money to sports (Koski et al. 2019). Various studies on the local implementation of child and youth sport have reported increased sport participation fees in municipalities and lack of neighbourhood sport facilities as core barriers to sport participation in children and youth (Kokko et al. 2021; Hakanen et al. 2018; Itkonen et al. 2018; Laukkanen et al. 2017; Suomi and Kotthaus 2017). Remedying this situation depends heavily on support from local decision-makers. Here, the influence of the political and administrative context on attitudes are studied among the local decision-making groups (see figure 1) involved in the formal sport policy decision-making process as an explanatory variable. In the analysis, decision-makers refers to the top decision-makers (i.e., chairs) leading their particular decision-making group. The attitudes of local top decision-makers have been recognised as particularly important in understanding local support for the national sport policy due to their leadership role in strategic decision-making in their regions and their power in directing local policy (Ruostetsaari 2017).

Analysis of the distinction between policy making and administration as influential factors in local sport policy is important for two reasons. First, by focusing on local decision-makers' attitudes to the national guidelines on child and youth sport, this study contributes to the growing attention paid by sport management and policy researchers to such issues as the sources of support, legitimacy, and salience (Nite and Edwards 2021; Sam and Ronglan 2018). Furthermore, it is important to understand how local decision-making groups in the policy-making and administrative contexts shape the top decision-makers' attitudes in municipalities. That is, this study highlights the value of institutional research in the study of sport management and policy and builds on recent insights gained from sport management research (Nite and Edwards 2021; Robertson et al. 2021) by investigating the role of embedded structures in the public sector. Further,

Figure 1. Finnish local political and administrative decision-making groups in sport policy and their tasks.



along with the traditionally used institutional concepts (e.g., isomorphism, dominant logics), application of the Weberian approach enables this study to complement other sport research, not only by focusing on structures as antecedents of policy support but also by exploring an environment in which complex interests are prevalent (Micelotta and Washington 2013). On the other hand, the hybridisation of modern policy-making processes and the instability of modern organisations challenge the classical institutional claim of the policy-administration paradigm. The practical value of this study is that it may reveal patterns and solutions for future changes in public sport governance.

The empirical analysis utilises a large data set (n=736) drawn from the Changes in Finnish Public Sport Administration Survey 2020, which focused on Finnish local top decision-makers, i.e., chairs, of political decision-making groups and sport administration officials. The 293 Finnish municipalities are easy to compare, as their decision-making groups resemble each other (see Figure 1), and their tasks are determined by the Local Government Act (Local Government Act, 2015). Thus, *elected top decision-makers* in the municipal council, board and committees for sport decide on sport-related policies, while the *top administrative officials*, i.e., top decision-makers of the sport administration department, who also hold informal decision-making power, implement these policy decisions.

The next section outlines the theoretical framework and the hypothesis to be tested. This is followed by a description of the data and research methods used. Lastly, the analysis and results are presented and discussed.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypothesis

Different institutional approaches have yielded considerable insight into fundamental sport-related issues. Concepts that have been commonly applied in empirical studies of sport management and policy include isomorphism, change and legitimacy. (Nite and Edwards 2021; Robertson et al. 2021.) Isomorphism, which was first proposed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), has been applied in the investigation of different types (coercive, mimetic and normative) of institutional pressures as contexts influencing the tendency for ideas and practices in organizations to converge, i.e. become isomorphic, in sport NGOs or clubs (e.g., Vos et al. 2011; Edwards et al. 2009; Skille 2008; O'Brian and Slack 2004; Slack and Hinings 1994). For example, Skille (2008) pointed to the issue of public funding as a coercive

mechanism for steering Swedish sport organisations in implementing national policy. Other scholars, such as O'Brian and Slack (2004), have proposed contextual factors emanating from mimetic pressures as an explanation for the tendency of sport organisations to emulate other organisations to secure legitimacy and minimise risks. Another mechanism is normative pressure, referring to the adoption of appropriate practices or structures underpinned by normative systems such as groups and their internal logic (e.g., professionalisation). For example, Slack and Hinings (1994) argue that when sport organisations join umbrella organisations, certain normative practices are adopted which then create collective pressure. However, given that municipalities are characterised by many competing political interests within a pluralistic structure and that commitment to sport as a policy area is marginal, subjection to the different kinds of pressures does not seem the best approach to the analysis of local support. Overlaps between the different types of pressures may cause either coercive or normative pressures (Tolbert and Zucker 1999; Meyer and Rowan 1977).

Another common institutional approach in the sport sciences has been the analysis of institutional changes aimed at establishing the legitimacy of institutions (Robertson et al. 2021). For example, Wright and Zammuto (2013) applied the institutional change approach in their study of the transition from amateurism to professionalism in the English game of cricket. Lastly, the concept of legitimacy, which has been widely understood to be related to assessment by the social system of the appropriateness of an action or policy, has functioned as a core institutional pillar in the sport science research (Deephouse et al. 2018). As defined by Kostova et al. (2008), legitimacy refers to acts or ideas which are widely accepted inside or outside the organisation in question. While this concept of legitimacy has been used both as part of other institutional concepts and as a stand-alone concept, the idea that legitimacy is contextual and based on social approval is common to sport science studies. Sport policy scholars such as Broch and Skille (2019), Sam and Ronglan (2018), and Sritmatter et al. (2018) have examined how central actors or organisations in sport build credibility and acceptance for their policies and programmes by examining sources of legitimacy. While a diversity of institutional approaches have been taken in sport studies, a more comprehensive structural approach which would address the problem of pluralistic ideologies and structures in public-sector policy making continues to be lacking (Nite and Edwards 2021; Robertson et al. 2021). Turning now to consideration of the dualist hierarchies found in Finnish municipalities, the next section introduces



the institutional approach, based on Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy, which we used to formulate the study hypothesis on the influences of the policy-making vs. administrative groups on local decision-makers' attitudes.

### *2.1 The role of decision-making groups in explaining the attitudes*

In political science, the institutional theory focuses on domestic politics, especially on the ways in which key structures shape politicians' attitudes. Institutional scholars have tended to study the structural characteristics of organisations that induce homogeneity in attitudes or actions, thereby enabling institutions or organisations to achieve legitimacy (e.g., Scott 2014; Pfeffer and Salancik 2003; Tolbert and Zucker 1999; Oliver 1991; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Thus, once attitudes structures become embedded in organisations, they are likely to be perceived as legitimate (Deephouse and Suchman 2008). The concept of legitimacy is an important in this study, as it invokes the Weberian idea of a power struggle (e.g., manipulation of interest, profitable exchanges) between policy-makers and administrators (Blau 1963). A decision-maker who triumphs in this struggle achieves the position of a legitimate authority. Nevertheless, policy decisions by elected decision-makers and their implementation by administrative officials continue in competition with each other. On this view, the attitudes of decision-making groups are presented as norms to be maintained throughout the decision-making hierarchy. Thus, belonging to a political or administrative decision-making group is highly relevant in explaining the attitudes.

Applying the Weberian bureaucratic model to the Finnish local government system reveals that the important factors distinguishing the policy-making from the administrative groups are democracy and the need for efficiency (Joensuu and Niiranen 2018). Based on the Weberian principles of bureaucracy, Olsen (2006), Tolbert and Zucker (1999) and Blau (1963) suggest that the guiding criterion for achieving specific policy objectives is administrative efficiency, meaning their realisation at minimum cost. This is in line with Weber's (1978) claim that the democratic freedom to disagree and the view of the majority are often set aside in order to achieve administrative efficiency and performance goals. This is based on the assumption that democratic decisions are ineffective without an administrative department to implement them. However, the criteria of administrative ef-

efficiency often conflict with the requirements of democratic decision-making. (Blau 1963.) Thus, the administrative department is governed by the principle of efficiency rather than majority opinion (Olsen 2006; Tolbert and Zucker 1999; Blau 1963.) Similarly, as proposed by Tolbert and Zucker (1999), the formal structure, on both the policy and administrative levels, is assumed to reflect rational attempts by decision-makers to maximise efficiency by including specialist and professionals. For example, May and Winter (2007), in their study on the divergence between stated policies and their implementation by street-level frontliners in Danish municipalities, found that the frontline bureaucrats were more willing to differ from national policy goals when their political leaders supported their disagreement. In turn, Baviskar and Winter (2017), in their study on Danish policy toward vulnerable children and youth, found that bureaucrats' faith in resource optimisation supported the direction of services on customers who they found to be influenced by their actions.

After the 1930s, Finnish sport policy was gradually established at the national level. During the 1960s, municipal-level sport committees were formed and local sports administration officials were hired to implement sport services and to monitor the construction of sports facilities. Owing to their potential to influence political decision-making in sport, these officials have been important since the first Sports Act was passed in 1979. (Suomi and Kotthaus 2017; Kokkonen 2013; Salmikangas 2012.) However, sport policy has been initiated for longer by well-established elected top decision-makers. In line with the assumptions of Weber and of Tolbert and Zucker (1999), it can be argued that the expansion of sport policy at the municipality level led to a need for administrative efficiency and professional expertise, which in turn led to the dichotomy between democratic decision making at the political level and efficiency-seeking implementation at the administrative level. Similarly, policy scholars such as Hajnal and Trounstein (2010) and Serritzlew (2003) who have studied local political and bureaucratic impacts on spending preferences, argued that in a situation in which political considerations have diminished, local administrative officials tend to favour greater developmental spending and less distributive spending.

A few other reports indicating the dichotomous nature of attitudes to child and youth sport policy guidelines can be cited. For example, Norra et al. (2020) and Hakamäki (2020) surveyed local sport administration officials and found that the national guidelines on sport participation often fail to reach them and that their involvement in political top decision-

making on sport is low. While no detailed investigation on the attitudes of the elected top decision-makers (on the council, board and committee levels) has been conducted, there are few reasons to expect that elected top decision-makers' attitudes to the child and youth sport guidelines differ from those of sport administration officials. It is only since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, through policy documents (Rantala 2014) and the presentation of child and youth physical activity data (Itkonen 2018), that child and youth sport can be seen to have gained more attention among politicians. Nevertheless, Ståhl and Hakamäki (2019) found that the local strategic status of sport in Finland has improved, a situation that might generally strengthen the importance of child and youth sport among elected top decision-makers, as they have the main responsibility for formulating local strategies. Local elected decision-makers' increased attention to the guidelines may also have been influenced by the 2015 reform of the Sports Act in when the promotion of child and youth sport became one of the nine core objectives of Finnish sport policy (others include the promotion of elite sport and support for civic activities).

Taken together, because of the strong public emphasis on promoting child and youth physical activity, it can be assumed that, owing to their dependence on voters, the elected top decision-makers have gained legitimacy for supporting the guidelines. However, given the influence of administrative efficiency, which may have led to resource optimisation or the favouring of developmental spending, and the later adoption of the national child and youth sport policy by officials than by elected decision-makers, we assumed that administrative officials would be less supportive of the child and youth sport guidelines than elected top decision-makers. Hence, we set the following hypothesis:

*H: Elected top decision-makers in municipalities are more likely than sport administration officials to hold more positive attitudes towards the national guidelines on child and youth sport.*

### 3. Data and methods

The present findings were based on data collected in Finland by electronic questionnaires in 2020. The original survey comprised 38 items on local sport policy-related issues, such as sport advocacy across different ac-

tors, the municipal economy and sport facilities. The survey was sent to all Finnish local top decision-makers and administrative-level officials ( $n = 2\,584$ ) in all 293 mainland municipalities. All responses were anonymous. The top decision-makers were defined as the chair and vice-chair of the council, the board, and the committee for sport. The officials represented the municipality's sport administration department. Responses were received from 736 top decision-makers (response rate 29%) from 276 mainland municipalities (response rate 94%). Mean respondent age was 53, and women (47%) were slightly younger than men (53%). The non-response analysis showed small differences between the political non-respondents and respondents, whereas the administrative officials accounted for 70% of the target population and hence were over-represented. In addition, women were slightly more representative of the target population than men (33 vs. 24%).

The decision-makers were mainly highly educated, especially the administrative officials, most of whom were younger and female. In contrast, the oldest and least educated members of the council and the board were men, who were also overrepresented in these decision-making groups. Women were represented more than men on the committees for sport and in sport administration. Financial information on the municipalities was collected from the LIPAS database (Finland's national sport facility database) which applies the Geographic Information System (GIS) (LIPAS 2021).

### 3.1 *Response variable*

As described in Table 1, the response variable was the municipal top decision-makers' attitude to the *importance of the Sports Act* guidelines on child and youth sport. The response variable was option d), "supporting the growth and development of children and youth through "sport." The variable was considered an ordered categorical variable and coded accordingly (1 = not selected, 2 = selected as the third most important, 3 = selected as the second most important, and 4 = the most important).

Overall, the top decision-makers showed overwhelming agreement (84 %) on the importance of supporting the growth and development of child and youth through sport. Over 24 percent reported this item as the most important (= 4), over 50 percent selected it as the second most important (= 3) and only 10 percent selected it as the third most important (= 2).

**Table 1.** *The survey question on the importance of the Sports Act guidelines. The nine response options (a to i) are drawn from the core values of the Finnish Sports Act.*

| Response variable   |
|---|
| Survey question and response options  |
| Which issues do you perceive as most important in the Sport Act? Choose the 3 most important options (1=most important, 2= second most important, 3= third most important): |
| a) promotion of competitive and elite sport   |
| b) supporting civic activities in sport   |
| c) promotion of public well-being and health  |
| d) supporting the growth and development of children and youth through sport  |
| e) promotion of equality and tolerance through sport  |
| f) supporting diversification of cultures through sport   |
| g) supporting sustainability of sport   |
| h) functioning distribution of responsibility between public and third sector   |
| i) supporting ethicality (e.g. against doping, sport deception and violence)  |

### 3.2 Independent variables

To complement the theoretical background, a set of six independent variables, displayed in Table 2, were chosen. The decision-making group variable comprised the council, the board, the committee for sport, and the sport administration. Because, in sport, the financial situation of a municipality is closely related to its institutional context, we used variables that have been highlighted in the Finnish sport policy literature (e.g., Norra et al. 2020; Averio et al. 2019): operating revenues, net expenditure, operating cost, grants given by the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) and grants from the Regional State Administrative Agency (RSAA) for sport facility construction.

**Table 2.** *Descriptive statistics, definitions and coding of the variables.*

| Variables   | Description of variables and coding  | N   | %   |
|---|--|-----|-----|
| <i>Outcome variable</i>   |  |     |     |
| Importance of Sports Act guidelines on child and youth sport    | Which issues do you perceive as most important in the Sports Act? Choose the 3 most important options: | 723 | 100 |
|   | 1=no selection   | 115 | 16  |
|   | 2=3rd most important   | 70  | 10  |
|   | 3=2nd most important   | 364 | 50  |
|   | 4=most important   | 174 | 24  |
| <i>Independent variables</i>                                    |  |     |     |
| Decision-making group   | Respondent's decision-making group:  | 736 | 100 |
|   | 1=council  | 178 | 24  |
|   | 2=board  | 165 | 23  |
|   | 3=committee for sport  | 142 | 19  |
|   | 4=sport administration   | 251 | 34  |
| Operating revenues from sport (€) per capita                    | Income generated from sport facilities and services in the respondent's municipality:                  | 736 | 100 |
|   | 1=€0 - €8  | 232 | 32  |
|   | 2=€9 - €25   | 231 | 31  |
|   | 3= €26 - €80   | 273 | 37  |
| Operating costs (€) per capita                                  | Costs of providing sport facilities and services in the municipality:                                  | 736 | 100 |
|   | 1=€12 - €100   | 246 | 33  |
|   | 2=€101 - €140  | 243 | 33  |
|   | 3=€141 - €349  | 247 | 34  |
| Municipal net expenditure (€) per capita                        | Allocation of funding to sport from locally collected income taxes:                                    | 763 | 100 |
|   | 1=under €60  | 102 | 13  |
|   | 2= €60 - €79,90  | 114 | 16  |
|   | 3= €80 - €109,90   | 228 | 31  |
|   | 4=over €110  | 292 | 40  |
| State grant for sport facility construction granted by the MEC  | Received MEC grant in 2019:  | 736 | 100 |
|   | 0=no   | 674 | 92  |
|   | 1=yes  | 62  | 8   |
| State grant for sport facility construction granted by the RSAA | Received RSAA grant in 2019:   | 736 | 100 |
|   | 0=no   | 674 | 92  |
|   | 1=yes  | 62  | 8   |

### 3.3 Statistical analysis

A mixed ordered logistic regression model was first fitted with the assumption that the data are hierarchically structured. However, after fitting a two-level analysis (individual and municipality level), none of the variance components for the municipality effect were significant. Thus, the ordered logistic regression model was then used to evaluate the associations of the independent variables with each of the four response categories of the ordered categorical variable on the perceived importance of the national guidelines on child and youth sport.

The first modelling strategy used was the stepwise backward elimination method, which is appropriate with large data and several variables (e.g., Zhang 2016; Bursac et al. 2008; Peng and So 2002). The selection criteria were confirmed by using the likelihood ratio test. The level of significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ . The significances of the three and pairwise interactions of the variables in the latest model (Table 4) were then further tested. The ordered regression modelling analysis was performed using Stata 17.0 and R software (R Core Team 2020).

### 3.4 Model selection

In our model selection strategy for the model with six main effects, we removed, first, municipal net expenditure ( $p=0.968$ ), second, state grants from the RSAA ( $p=0.717$ ), and third, operating costs ( $p=0.377$ ). Three independent variables remained in the final model: decision-making group, operating revenues, and grants from the MEC. Further tests showed that three-wise interactions were not needed ( $p=0.582$ ), and no combinations of pairwise interactions were included in the final model ( $p$ -values were between 0.236 and 0.720). Thus, we ended up with three equations, shown in Table 3. The estimated values of  $\alpha$  and  $\beta_{1-6}$  are shown in Table 4.

In the ordered logistic regression model, each regression coefficient,  $\beta_{1-6}$ , measures the strength of the association with the log-odds of the outcome when the values of the other covariates are fixed, and the exponentiated coefficient used to evaluate the impact of the independent variables on attitudes is the odds ratio ( $OR=\exp(\beta)$ ) with 95 percent confidence intervals (CIs). Table 4 shows the ordered logistic regression coefficients and odds ratios indicating the impacts of the independent variables on the decision-makers' attitudes. Odds ratios indicate the odds of being in the next highest category related to a one-unit change in the independent variable with non-change in the other variables.

**Table 3.** *The model equations for the ordered logistic regression.*

$$\begin{aligned} \text{logit } (P(Y \leq 1)) &= \alpha_1 - \beta_1 \times \text{council} + \beta_2 \times \text{board} - \beta_3 \times \text{committee} - \beta_4 \times \text{operating income925} - \beta_5 \times \text{operating income2680} - \beta_6 \times \text{state grants} \\ \text{logit } (P(Y \leq 2)) &= \alpha_2 - \beta_1 \times \text{council} + \beta_2 \times \text{board} - \beta_3 \times \text{committee} - \beta_4 \times \text{operating income925} - \beta_5 \times \text{operating income2680} - \beta_6 \times \text{state grants} \\ \text{logit } (P(Y \leq 3)) &= \alpha_3 - \beta_1 \times \text{council} + \beta_2 \times \text{board} - \beta_3 \times \text{committee} - \beta_4 \times \text{operating income925} - \beta_5 \times \text{operating income2680} - \beta_6 \times \text{state grants} \end{aligned}$$

**Table 4.** *The ordered logistic regression model for the top decision-makers' attitudes on the national guidelines on child and youth sport, 2020.*

|   | $\beta$  | SE   | OR (95% CI)       |
|---|----------|------|-------------------|
| <b>Decision-making group</b>              |          |      |                   |
| Sport Administration                      | I        |      |                   |
| Committee for Sport                       | 0.57     | 0.20 | 1.76 (1.19-2.62)* |
| Board                                     | 0.22     | 0.19 | 1.25 (0.86-1.81)  |
| Council                                   | 0.48     | 0.19 | 1.62 (1.12-2.34)* |
| <b>Operating revenues (€) per capita</b>  |          |      |                   |
| €0 - 8                                    | I        |      |                   |
| €9 - 25€                                  | 0.39     | 0.18 | 1.47 (1.04-2.10)* |
| €26 - 80                                  | -0.17    | 0.17 | 0.84 (0.60-1.17)  |
| <b>State grant</b>                        |          |      |                   |
| No  | I        |      |                   |
| Yes                                       | 0.56     | 0.25 | 1.75 (1.07-2.88)* |
|   | $\alpha$ | SE   |                   |
| <b>Juridical importance</b>               |          |      |                   |
| Not important vs. 3rd most important      | -1.33    | 0.18 |                   |
| 3rd most important vs. 2nd most important | -0.73    | 0.17 |                   |
| 2nd most important vs. most important     | 1.56     | 0.18 |                   |
| *p ≤ 0.05                                 |          |      |                   |

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Interpretation of the results

Based on the institutional theory and prior studies, it was assumed that the decision-making groups in municipalities are crucial in decisions on support for the national guidelines on child and youth sport. Specifically, we hypothesised that the elected top decision-makers' attitudes would be more positive towards the guidelines on child and youth sport than those



of the sport administration officials. The results (see Table 4) show, with sport administration as the reference category, a significant association for two groups: the committee for sport and the municipal council. The odds for the sport administration officials selecting response 1 vs. selecting responses 2, 3 or 4 were 1.76 (CI 1.19 - 2.62) times higher than the corresponding odds for the committee decision-makers, 1.62 (CI 1.12 - 2.34) times higher than the odds for the council decision makers, and 1.25 (0.86-1.81) times higher than the odds for the board decision-makers, although the latter value was not statistically significant. Thus, the sport administrators were the least supportive decision-making group, and the hypothesis was supported to the extent that the elected top decision-makers, excepting those on the board, were more supportive of the Sports Act on child and youth sport than the sport administration officials.

The results also supported earlier sport policy findings that decision-making groups are closely linked with financial factors. Specifically, when the decision-making groups were included in the model, certain financial resources reached the level of significance. The results showed that attitudes were closely related both to decision-making group and to financial resources, as these remained in the model and reached statistically significance levels.

The decision-makers (all four categories) from municipalities with high operational revenues showed more positive attitudes towards the importance of the Sports Act guidelines on child and youth sport than those from low revenue municipalities. Since the same equation (see Table 3) can be applied to all levels of the response variable, the odds ratios (see Table 4) can be interpreted in several ways. For example, when fixing the other covariates, the odds of selecting option 1 vs options 2, 3 or 4 was 1.47 (CI 1.04 - 2.10) times higher for the decision-makers in the municipalities whose operating revenues from sport were €0-8 per capita than for counterparts in municipalities with revenues of €9-25 per capita. Notably, in the municipalities with the highest operating revenues of €26-80, the OR was 0.84 (CI 0.60 - 1.17), and thus had a negative, although not statistically significant, effect on the response variable.

On state grants, the results showed (see Table 4) that top decision-makers in municipalities that received grants from the MEC for sport facility construction showed more positive attitudes towards the Sports Act guidelines on child and youth sport. That is, the odds of selecting the not important option vs one of the important options were 1.75 (CI 1.07 - 2.88) times higher than among the decision-makers in the municipalities which

had not received a MEC grant than counterparts in the municipalities which had received such a grant. The other financial variables were not associated with the response variable.

## 5. Conclusions

The primary aim of this study was to examine whether local top decision-makers' support towards national sport policy is conditioned by their political and administrative contexts. This was approached by studying Finnish municipalities' top decision-makers' attitudes towards the Sports Act guidelines for child and youth sport. The theoretical framework used was based on Weber's theory of bureaucracy. Accordingly, we assumed that since the behaviour of elected decision-makers is based on making democratic decisions and that of administrative officials is based on achieving efficiency in their implementation, the group of which a decision-maker is a member, i.e., political or administrative, will determine the decision-maker's attitudes towards national sport policy guidelines. On the assumption that the demands of administrative efficiency may lead administrators to prioritise resource optimisation or favour greater developmental spending, and postpone the possible later adoption of child and youth sport policy, we expected the attitude of the group of administrative officials towards implementing the guidelines of child and youth sport to be less favourable than the attitude of the groups of elected top decision-makers. In other words, we hypothesised that local elected top decision-makers in municipalities will likely hold more positive attitudes towards the national guidelines of child and youth sport than local sport administrative officials.

Consistent with previous studies which have linked specific decision-making groups with sport policy support (Stenling and Sam 2017; Chaney 2014; Macris and Sam 2014), the results showed that decision-makers attitudes were heavily influenced by their decision-making group. The results confirmed the hypothesis by revealing that the elected top decision-makers on councils, i.e., the highest authority elected by local citizens, and on sport committees tended to be more supportive than either board members or sport administrative officials. In fact, the officials responsible for operational sport-related tasks tended to be the least supportive group. Based on Weber's dualist principles, the need for cost efficiency and professionalisation in the policy implementation phase may lead administrative officials to perceive the importance of the guidelines

on child and youth sport as only one of their many tasks. For example, the drive for efficiency and professionalisation in the implementation of sport policy tends to result in the promotion of sport for the population in general rather than for specific groups. If, as Tolbert and Zucker (1999) state, contradictions are most likely to occur when administrators have little policy-making discretion over structural changes, it is possible that the involvement of local sport officials in decision-making on sport will be low. From a more general institutional perspective, given the history of the formation of municipal sport administration groups, it is possible that administrators' adoption of the norms that promote the value of the guidelines on child and youth sport has yet to come. Because legislation typically follows rather than leads social change in democratic societies, local decision-making groups are in a key position to determine current and future guidelines for child and youth sport.

In general, the results showed that Finnish local top decision-makers were moderately supportive of the growth and development of children and youth through sport. Alternatively, the existence of a consensus, i.e., uncritical acceptance of the national sport policy, could be interpreted as validating earlier findings on the low salience of sport policy in political decision making (Harris and Houlihan 2016). In addition to the main research setting, the study incorporated financial variables, which are an important structural determinant of local decision-makers' attitudes (Hajnal and Trounstein 2010; Serritzlew 2003). The financial variables used in the analysis were local operating revenues in sport and whether the respondent's municipality had received grants from the Ministry of Education and Culture. In addition to the hypothesis on decision-making group membership, the results also supported the assumption that financial resources are associated with support. Both local operating revenues from sport and grants from the MEC (for sport facility construction) are important tools in promoting the importance of the guidelines on child and youth sport. Consequently, there is reason to doubt that the dichotomous nature of the two types of decision-making groups strongly influences the use of financial resources. Although the grants had important effects, the overall significance of revenues along with that of the local decision-making groups further underlines the autonomous nature of local regimes and local decision-makers in deciding child and youth sport policy.

An internationally unique strength of this study is the large study population and the use of multiple local decision-making groups, representing both the political and administrative levels, as categorical variables for the

group variable. The importance of decision-making group membership in determining attitudes provided new information on how local support on child and youth sport can be understood. Theoretically, this study offers a novel approach to the investigation of public support on sport-related policy issues. The application of Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy also contributes to understanding and finding ways to resolve the institutional problems created by pluralism and complex governance structures in sport-related management and policy research. However, while this study showed that the dichotomy between the policy-making and administrative levels still holds today, attitudes did not differ between the policy-making and administration groups alone, but also between the political groups. A more sophisticated approach, applying modern management theories might better explain these differences. Moreover, neither the institutional isomorphic nor the Weberian approach solve the dilemma that sport policy is isomorphic, yet lacks legitimacy. Although this study yielded information specifically on attitudes towards the Sports Act with respect to children and youth, it might not be sufficient to allow generalisations about attitudes to the other population groups mentioned in the Sports Act (e.g., disabled persons and migrants). Combining the present data with other information on child and youth policy attitudes or conducting a longitudinal study over different election periods could prove fruitful. Investigation of the interaction between decision-making groups and financial variables could strengthen or refute the assumptions regarding the policy-administration dichotomy. Finally, the present response rate resembles the rates of earlier policy surveys focusing on decision-makers (Laver 2014; Fisher and Herrick 2012).

To conclude, local decision-making in sport policy seems to be entering a new era, although within traditional policy structures. While the previously state-led child and youth sport policy has become municipality-led in many respects, the policy-administration dilemma also applies here. This study indicates that different distinctive features between elected top decision-makers and administrative officials can lead to different attitudes between these groups on sport issues. Thus, decision-making group membership is an important determinant of sport policy decisions and implementation. Although the position of child and youth sport in local decision-making is strong, more homogeneity in this support would yield better policy outcomes. Sport administrators' involvement in the higher level of decision-making or vice versa may be vital in achieving optimal results regarding legislative guidelines in child and youth sport. However,

changes in decision-making sub-systems could not realistically be carried out in this study, as they present a barrier to short-term change. Instead, understanding of the drive for efficiency among administrators might help to understand why policy outcomes can markedly differ from democratically decided policies. Other approaches that might be considered include increasing the knowledge of decision-makers through the provision of training programmes. To avoid compromises (e.g., through diminished service provision or increased participation fees) in the promotion of child and youth sport, the revenue strategies of local sport services should be reconsidered. The state should further encourage municipalities to apply for grants for sport facility construction and maintenance, since this seems to be positively linked to support. Promoting top decision-makers' as well as other policy members' knowledge of the local sport economy could also be valuable. We suggest that the study of local decision-making groups is key in determining the current and future guidelines of child and youth sport in municipalities. The present novel findings on support for the national guidelines on child and youth sport offer important openings for future research. Researchers may also wish to further examine the effects of the variables discussed in this study.

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