Youth Experience in Sport: A Case of Football Development Programs in Lithuania

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Abstract

Participation in organized sport is widely recognized as an important context that can support children and adolescent's health, positive development, and well-being. Football development programs, which involve the largest number of youths worldwide, also contribute to these educational and developmental outcomes through sport. However, survey-based measures that capture key aspects of youth experiences in organized sport have not yet been applied in Lithuanian sports education context. The aim of this study is to assess youth experience in football using Lithuanian versions of the adapted and validated Youth Experiences Survey for Sport (MYES-S) and four subscales from the Life Skills Scale for Sport – Transfer Scale (LSSS-TS). A total of 121 male athletes aged 14-15 participated in the study. Data were collected using the MYES-S and teamwork, emotional skills, time management and leadership skills subscales from LSSS-TS and the Coach-created Empowering and Disempowering Motivational Climate Questionnaire (EDMCQ-C). The current study provides support for the validity and reliability of the Lithuanian version of the MYES-S, as well as the validity and reliability of the Lithuanian version of four subscales from LSSS-TS. In addition, the study found that initiative (M = 3.49; SD = 0.46), personal and social skills (M = 3.27; SD = 0.51), and teamwork (M = 4.03; SD = 0.59) are the most prominent youth experiences acquired through sports. Meanwhile, cognitive skills are indicated as the least developed (M = 2.41; SD = 0.82). In addition, it was found that youth experiences in football are related to the motivational climate created by the coach.

Keywords: *Sport education, youth, personal experience*

1. Introduction

Children and adolescents' participation in sports activities is widely recognized as an important context that can support their health, positive development and well-being [1]. When this activity is implemented through sports education programs within the framework of non-formal education, the educational function of sports is particularly highlighted [2]. This means that organized sports education becomes an important part of the overall physical, emotional, social and psychological health of children and adolescents [3] , where the positive effect is achieved mainly through physical activity, an essential part of most sports [4]. Becoming a means to achieve the recommended level of physical activity, directly associated with a lower risk of cardiovascular diseases and metabolic disorders, better development of motor skills, normal or even stronger skeletal development [5], sports education also leads to better mental health [6], influences the system of values [7] and contributes to positive developmental outcomes. It ensures higher academic achievement, social adaptation, less antisocial behavior, the formation of stronger relationships and a positive peer network, a lower level of social and emotional problems [8,9], and contributes to cognitive, emotional, moral, social and identity development [10]. In other words, sports education of children and adolescents forms socially integrated and functional personalities, which is closely related to the theoretical paradigm of Positive Youth Development (PYD) in sports education. It is most often used to analyze how sports contribute to the holistic development of young people, their life skills development and emotional maturity by emphasizing strengths, not just sports results [11,12].
Despite the advantages and positive outcomes, organized youth sports also have negative educational consequences, such as injuries, aggression, selfishness, disrespect for others, burnout, depression, etc. [13,14]. And this is clearly associated with high-performance sports education programs, whose main goal remains the systematic development of sports results [15].

Football development programs are also highlighted in this negative context. It has been found that programs aimed at adolescents and dominating the number of sports participants in the world, when compared to programs aimed at children, focus much more attention on the development of sports performance excellence, physical and psychological preparation, thus aiming to prepare a highly skilled football player. [16]. This situation is further exacerbated and made worse by the peculiar treatment of football as a “male sport”, which leads to the application of training models aimed at men and ignoring the needs of girls, which limits their involvement and positive experience [17]. However, scientific insights state that these sports education programs, despite the main goal of achieving sports results, can significantly contribute to the development of personality [18]. However, positive developmental outcomes are not guaranteed by participating in sports. Therefore, the need for continuous research is increasingly emphasized, which would allow us to understand how sports in a changing environment affect the health and development of youth [19].

Thus, although sports education can be a significant factor in positive youth development, its impact remains ambiguous as it depends on both the educational environment and the nature of the programs. Despite the growing international interest in youth experiences in sport, in the Lithuanian context there remains a lack of empirically grounded understanding of the real situation in sports education programs, especially in football. In view of this, the aim of this study is to assess youth experience in football using Lithuanian versions of the adapted and validated Youth Experiences Survey for Sport (MYES-S) and four subscales from the Life Skills Scale for Sport – Transfer Scale (LSSS-TS).

2. Methodology

A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed to examine youth sport experiences associated with positive developmental outcomes. The study involved participants from football development programs designed to nurture elite youth athletes. As only male players participate in the Lithuanian Cadets’ Football Championship (U13–U14 age group; https://jaunimofutbolas.lt/english), the research sample consisted of 121 male athletes (mean age = 14.49 years, SD = 0.50). Participants were selected using convenience sampling. Data were collected via paper-and-pencil questionnaires administered across several football academies.

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Lithuanian Sports University (Protocol No. SMTEK-43, 2025.04.18). Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from parents and/or legal guardians. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the instruments used, the research procedures, and their right to voluntarily participate and withdraw at any time.

A questionnaire survey employed several instruments described below. To assess the social environment of football development programs, the Coach-Created Empowering and Disempowering Motivational Climate Questionnaire (EDMCQ-C), adapted for use in Lithuania [20], was used. The questionnaire consists of 34 self-report items, divided into two subscales that assess empowering and disempowering motivational climates within the team. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Mean scores were calculated for each subscale.

Youth sport experiences were assessed using the Modified Youth Experiences Survey for Sport (MYES-S) [21] and four subscales from the Life Skills Scale for Sport – Transfer Scale (LSSS-TS) [22].

The MYES-S consists of 26 items assessing six dimensions: personal and social skills, cognitive skills, goal setting, initiative, physical and psychological health, and negative experiences. Items are rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all*, 4 = *yes*).

The LSSS-TS subscales assess life skills transferred through sport participation, including teamwork, emotional skills, time management, and leadership skills, and consist of 23 items. Responses are provided on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*).

Prior to data collection, all instruments assessing youth experience in sport underwent translation and cross-cultural adaptation in accordance with the *Guidelines for the Process of Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Self-Report Measures* [23]. This process involved five stages: (1) initial translation, (2) synthesis of translations, (3) back-translation, (4) expert committee review, and (5) pretesting of the final version.

To evaluate the psychometric properties confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha and McDonald’s omega, while construct validity was examined through composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). To examine external validity, the EDMCQ-

C was used to assess its relationships with youth sport experience and life skills transfer constructs measured by the MYES-S and LSSS-TS.
All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics and AMOS software.

3. Results and Discussion

In this study, football was chosen as the context due to its popularity, early specialization tendencies, and large number of participants. Considering this, this sport can be considered representative for analyzing youth sports development processes.
The sample for this study consisted of 121 male football players, aged 14 to 15 years. All study variables were normally distributed, and the values of asymmetry and kurtosis were within acceptable limits, indicating suitability for parametric analysis. Descriptive statistics and internal consistency indices of the instruments (MYES-S and LSSS-TS) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and reliability

Scale	Subscale	M	SD	α	ω
MYE-S	Personal and social skills	3.27	0.51	0.75	0.76
MYE-S	Cognitive skills	2.41	0.83	0.85	0.85
MYE-S	Goal setting	3.17	0.57	0.73	0.74
MYE-S	Initiative	3.49	0.46	0.74	0.76
MYE-S	Physical and psychological health	3.40	0.55	0.61	0.62
MYE-S	Negative experiences	1.53	0.56	0.89	0.87
LSSS-TS	Teamwork skills	4.03	0.59	0.81	0.80
LSSS-TS	Emotional skills	3.77	0.81	0.86	0.87
LSSS-TS	Time management skills	3.60	1.00	0.89	0.89
LSSS-TS	Leadership skills	3.72	0.80	0.90	0.90

M – Mean, SD – Standard Deviation, α – Cronbach's alpha, ω – McDonald's omega

The mean scores (min - 1, max - 4) on the MYE-S subscales ranged from 1.53 (SD = 0.56) for negative experiences to 3.49 (SD = 0.46) for initiative. Others, Personal and social skills (M = 3.27, SD = 0.51), goal setting (M = 3.17, SD = 0.57), and physical and psychological health (M = 3.40, SD = 0.55) also showed relatively high levels of positive developmental experiences, while cognitive skills showed lower scores (M = 2.41, SD = 0.83).
The mean scores (min - 1, max - 5) for the LSSS-TS subscales were: teamwork (M = 4.03, SD = 0.59), emotional skills (M = 3.77, SD = 0.81), time management (M = 3.60, SD = 1.00), and leadership (M = 3.72, SD = 0.80).
Internal consistency across all subscales was acceptable to good. Cronbach's alpha values for the MYE-S scale ranged from 0.61 to 0.89 (overall α = 0.87) and for the LSSS-TS subscales ranged from 0.81 to 0.90. McDonald's omega coefficients ranged from 0.74 to 0.90. The internal consistency of the subscale “Physical and psychological health“ was marginal but acceptable for research purposes.
An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to examine the structure of the adapted instruments. The data were validated for factor analysis using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2 = 2320$, $p < 0.001$). The KMO was 0.86.EFA was conducted using principal axis factoring with oblimin rotation.
The MYE-S data largely confirmed the original six-factor structure, although some overlap was observed among the dimensions of positive development. The items from the LSSS-TS clearly aligned with the four

factors of the theoretical subscales. The extracted factors explained an adequate proportion of total variance.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted separately for MYE-S and LSSS-TS. The results show that the six-factor MYE-S model fit the data well: $\chi^2(260) = 366.55$, $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/df = 1.41$; CFI = 0.916; TLI = 0.903; RMSEA = 0.058. Meanwhile the four-factor LSSS-TS model fit the data acceptably: $\chi^2(244) = 370.80$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 1.66$, CFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.89, RMSEA = 0.074. The standardized factor loadings were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), ranging from 0.39 to 0.92 for the MYE-S model and from 0.59 to 0.88 for the LSSS-TS model.

Convergent validity revealed that the composite reliability (CR) values of the MYE-S ranged from 0.61 (Physical and psychological health) to 0.90 (Negative experiences), and the average variance extracted (AVE) ranged from 0.35 (Physical and psychological health) to 0.60 (Negative experiences and cognitive skills). The CR values for the LSSS-TS ranged from 0.81 (teamwork) to 0.90 (leadership), and the AVE values ranged from 0.38 (Teamwork) to 0.68 (Time management). These results indicate acceptable convergent validity for most of the constructs.

The EDMCQ-C was not included in the validation procedures because the study used its previously validated Lithuanian version [20]. Instead, it was used to examine external relationships with the adapted measures.

Descriptive statistics showed that the empowering motivational climate created by the coach was rated higher by the subjects (M = 4.05, SD = 0.64) than the disempowering climate (M = 2.43, SD = 0.68). Internal consistency was high for both subscales (enabling: $\alpha = 0.91$; disabling: $\alpha = 0.87$). Pearson correlation coefficients between motivational climate and the validated constructs are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Pearson correlations between motivational climate and study variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Empowering climate	-											
2.Disempowering climate	-0.49**	-										
3. Personal and social skills	0.42**	-0.05	-									
4. Cognitive skills	0.21*	0.13	0.51**	-								
5. Goal setting	0.37**	-0.03	0.62**	0.53**	-							
6. Initiative	0.45**	-0.27**	0.40**	0.20*	0.55**	-						
7. Physical and psychological health	0.37**	-0.05	0.35**	0.29**	0.38**	0.49**	-					
8. Negative experiences	-0.25**	0.29**	-0.06	0.21*	-0.03	-0.24**	-0.12	-				
9. Teamwork	0.58**	-0.23*	0.62**	0.41**	0.52**	0.37**	0.34**	-0.12	-			
10. Emotional skills	0.36**	0.05	0.59**	0.37**	0.57**	0.48**	0.39**	-0.07	0.56**	-		
11. Time management	0.29**	0.04	0.61**	0.53**	0.64**	0.36**	0.29**	0.01	0.50**	0.58**	-	
12. Leadership	0.43**	0.01	0.69**	0.52**	0.66**	0.40**	0.34**	-0.03	0.63**	0.67**	0.70**	-

* p < .05, ** p < .01

The results of the study, after calculating the correlations between the variables, revealed that the empowering climate was positively correlated with the skills being developed, and the correlations ranged from low to strong (r = 0.21–0.58). Specifically, according to the MYE-S scale, the empowering climate showed a significant positive relationship with personal and social skills ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$), cognitive skills ($r = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$), goal setting ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.01$), initiative ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$) and physical and psychological health ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, the empowering climate was moderately to strongly correlated with the skills measured on the LSSS-TS scale, i.e. was moderately or strongly associated with teamwork ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$), emotional skills ($r = 0.36$, $p < 0.01$), time management ($r = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$), and leadership ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.01$). In contrast, the disempowering climate revealed weaker and less

consistent associations with the developmental outcomes assessed. Negative associations were found with selected MYE-S and LSSS-TS scale variables, such as initiative ($r = -0.27$, $p < 0.01$) and teamwork ($r = -0.23$, $p < 0.05$). Meanwhile, correlations for other skills were insignificant. The disempowering climate was found to be positively associated with negative experiences ($r = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$).

First, the acceptable reliability and factorial validity of the MYES-S scale and the selected LSSS-T scale subscales adapted in this study support previous evidence that youth development outcomes associated with positive development can be measured across cultural and social contexts [24]. Second, the results of the study revealed that adolescents participating in football education programs perceive that they gain positive experiences and develop a range of skills that are considered to be outcomes of positive youth development. This undoubtedly supports the positive impact of sport on adolescents found in other studies [11, 25]. And the high scores in the dimensions of initiative, personal and social skills and goal setting indicate that football education programs can be meaningful as a youth education context in which goals related to sports performance do not become essential. However, one should not ignore the fact that lower scores in the cognitive skills dimension may be associated with an orientation towards sports results, typical of elite youth football programs, where an orientation towards positive youth development is not a priority [26].

The study also revealed that an empowering motivational climate created by the coach has a positive relationship with both positive outcomes in sports education, which is consistent with research based on self-determination theory and positive youth development [27]. On the contrary, the established relationship between a coach's disempowering climate and negative experiences can be linked to the findings of other studies showing that a controlling, goal-oriented coach harms the well-being and development outcomes of the athlete [28].

Taken together, the results of this study confirm that positive developmental outcomes in youth sport are not guaranteed by participation in sports activities alone, but are largely determined by the social environment [11]. In summary, the results of the study highlight the role of coaches as key social agents in sports education, related to the formation of youth's football experience, and emphasize the importance of their behavior in practical activities.

Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that reveals the suitability of football education programs implemented in Lithuania as a context for positive youth development. However, appropriate motivational conditions should be created for this. The adapted Lithuanian versions of the MYES-S and selected LSSS-TS subscales were characterized by acceptable psychometric properties, confirming their use in assessing youth sports experience in the national context. The results revealed that the majority of young football players stated a high level of assessed skills, and indicated that they had relatively few negative experiences. Importantly, the results emphasized the key role of the motivational climate created by the coach, showing that an empowering climate was consistently associated with more positive experiences and was more conducive to the development of skills associated with positive youth development. In contrast, a disempowering climate was primarily associated with negative experiences in sports activities, i.e. playing football. These results confirmed theoretical insights that suggest that participation in sports does not guarantee positive developmental outcomes. Such results are highly dependent on the quality of the social and motivational environment. From a practical perspective, these research results highlight the need for coach education related to their behavior and the activities they implement. Further research should include athletes from different sports and genders in order to better understand the current situation and promote sustainable youth development through sport.

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