

ORIGINAL ARTICLE**Identifying The Consequences of Designing a Football Kindergarten Model With a Physical Literacy Approach**Shabnam Gholam Ghara Gheshlaghi¹, Nasrin Azizian Kohan^{*2}, Mehrdad Moharramzadeh³, Abbas Naghizadeh Baghi⁴

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EXTENDED A B S T R A C T**Introduction**

Early childhood represents a critical period for establishing foundations that optimize health, development, and lifelong physical activity engagement. Children should consistently experience joy, learning, and progressive development through play and structured activities. Contemporary children's sports programs, particularly in football, have increasingly emphasized early specialization and technical skill development, often overlooking the fundamental needs of holistic child development. This approach contrasts sharply with developments in developed nations, which have undertaken substantial revisions to their youth sports structures, designing programs that address the essential developmental needs of childhood. The Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model, implemented across numerous developed countries, underscores the importance of acquiring physical literacy during childhood. Physical literacy, as conceptualized by Margaret Whitehead, represents a unique individual capability encompassing motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding for valuing and taking responsibility for engagement in physical activities throughout life. This multidimensional construct extends beyond physical skill acquisition to incorporate affective and cognitive domains essential for sustained active living. Football, the world's most popular sport with four billion followers, offers a powerful way to promote physical literacy in young children. A "football kindergarten" is an innovative concept that goes beyond traditional training, creating vibrant spaces where football-interested children learn through play. These environments provide safe, stimulating settings where kids progress from individual to group activities, building social skills while preparing for formal education. Child-centered sports structures prioritize children's needs, interests, and participation in athletic activities. This approach is characterized by involving children in decision-making processes, ensuring inclusive participation, and creating safe, enjoyable environments. It emphasizes learning through play and encourages children to assume responsibility for their learning and sports participation. Such programs utilize sports like football to promote child development, focusing on cultivating love for the game, movement education, ball comfort, and foundational skill acquisition. Despite the importance of quality early sports experiences, many children lack proper instruction and remain at beginner levels. Traditional youth football often prioritizes winning, early specialization, and adult-focused methods, leading to poor motor skill development, reduced enjoyment, and dropout. Consequences include weak motor abilities, low fitness, poor habits, unfulfilled potential, and future player shortages. Given these challenges, designing a football kindergarten model with a physical literacy approach represents a potentially transformative intervention. Such a model would prioritize fundamental movement skill development, holistic child growth, and lifelong physical activity engagement rather than premature specialization. The present study aimed to identify the consequences of designing a football kindergarten model with a physical literacy approach, thereby providing empirical evidence to inform policy development, program design, and coaching practices in children's football.

Methodology

This qualitative study employed an applied, exploratory purpose utilizing thematic analysis methodology. The research population comprised academic experts and specialists, prominent football managers and grassroots coaches, and child development specialists from Iran, the United States, and Canada. Non-probability purposive sampling was employed to select participants with relevant expertise. Semi-structured interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved with 18 participants, comprising 16 males (89%) and 2 females (11%). The interview protocol involved initial contact through invitations via virtual platforms, containing cooperation requests and general research questions. Participants received comprehensive information regarding the research process. Data collection occurred from May 19, 2024, to November 5, 2024. Interview durations ranged from 20 to 45 minutes, yielding 51 pages of transcribed material. Following interview completion, all recordings were transcribed verbatim, and initial coding was performed to extract primary concepts. Subsequent analysis involved thorough literature review and expert consultation to identify secondary components. MAXQDA20 software was utilized for data analysis. The thematic analysis process followed three stages: interview analysis and description, text interpretation through theme network mapping and analysis, and text synthesis through report compilation. Validity was enhanced through standardized interview protocols with open-ended questions administered consistently across participants, multiple source triangulation, and rigorous multiple examination. Reliability was established through inter-coder agreement using Fleiss' Kappa coefficient. Five interview transcripts were provided to two expert coders who independently coded the material. Subsequently, coded documents were merged using software integration capabilities, and inter-coder agreement was calculated. Results for each code's presence or absence across three coders were entered into SPSS26 with the STATE FLEISS KAPPA extension. The overall Fleiss Kappa coefficient of 0.80 indicated substantial inter-coder agreement.

Findings

Analysis of the 18 interviews yielded 44 open codes, organized into 13 sub-themes and 7 main themes. The main themes identified were: development of key skills, educational outcomes, long-term sports development outcomes, future-oriented progress, challenges, health-oriented activity, and economic benefits. The development of key skills encompassed three sub-themes: mental skills, psychological skills, and communication and social skills. Mental skills included better decision-making and decision-construction, enhanced mental toughness, problem-solving skill reinforcement, self-control, and learning assistance. Psychological skills comprised self-confidence reinforcement, creativity enhancement, self-esteem strengthening, performance stress reduction, positive self-concept support, emotional growth assistance, and child personality development support. Communication and social skills included reinforcement of communication and social skills, empathy and cooperation enhancement, extraversion skill capability, and team sports' impact on experiencing various necessary skills. Educational outcomes emerged as a main theme with the sub-theme of educational-developmental effects. This included life skills improvement, experience of victory and defeat with appropriate reactions, healthy nutrition, better lifestyle, approaches to handling problems and difficulties, and learning discipline and responsibility.

Long-term sports development outcomes constituted another main theme, with the sub-theme of achieving goals aligned with the LTAD model. This encompassed encouragement for longer activity duration and persistence, fundamental skill reinforcement, motor skill development, training age considerations, and physical literacy. Future-oriented progress appeared as a main theme with the sub-theme of being predisposed for future success, specifically increasing future success levels. Challenges represented a main theme comprising two sub-themes: activity cessation if programs are improperly implemented and limitations for other sports disciplines. The former included childhood injury effects, consequences of incorrect childhood education, and psychological pressure for success. The latter involved reduced participation in other sports due to football's popularity. Health-oriented activity emerged as a main theme encompassing four sub-themes: healthier future, prevention and treatment, mental health, and physical and executive benefits. Healthier future included greater health levels through skill acquisition. Prevention and treatment comprised encouragement for physical activity given current unfavorable conditions. Mental health encompassed life expectancy, prevention of depression and isolation, and support for children's psychological needs. Physical and executive benefits included impact on physical development and physical strength enhancement. Economic benefits constituted the final main theme, with the sub-theme of economic optimization and increased economic turnover. This included job creation, expansion of the football market nationally, local economic strengthening, revenue generation, and reduced societal welfare costs.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings illuminate the multifaceted consequences of implementing football kindergarten models grounded in physical literacy principles. The identification of seven main themes

demonstrates that such an approach extends beyond traditional skill development, encompassing holistic child development with implications for individual well-being, educational outcomes, long-term athletic progression, future success predisposition, health promotion, and economic benefits, while acknowledging potential challenges requiring careful program design. The development of key skills represents a foundational outcome, integrating mental, psychological, and social domains. This finding aligns with research by Aldoghan and colleagues (2023), Thelwell and colleagues (2006), Mao and colleagues (2024), and Visek and colleagues (2013), confirming that physical literacy-oriented football programs cultivate comprehensive skill sets essential for both athletic and life success. Mental skills such as decision-making and self-control complement psychological attributes including confidence and emotional regulation, while social competencies facilitate effective interpersonal interactions. Educational outcomes identified in this study underscore the pedagogical value of football kindergartens. The educational-developmental effects resonate with findings from Lenzen and colleagues (2023), Licardo and colleagues (2023), and Merino and colleagues (2021). These outcomes demonstrate that football kindergartens serve as educational environments where children acquire essential life competencies alongside athletic skills. The alignment of football kindergarten outcomes with LTAD model objectives represents a significant finding, confirming that physical literacy-oriented programs can effectively support long-term athletic development pathways. Consistent with research by Affolter (2016), Balyi and colleagues (2013), and Ford and colleagues (2011), the emphasis on encouraging sustained participation, fundamental skill reinforcement, and appropriate training age positions children for optimal long-term athletic progression. Future-oriented progress reflects the forward-looking nature of physical literacy-oriented football kindergartens. By preparing children for future success, these programs contribute to building better future generations. This finding aligns with Humphrey (2012) and Matthews and colleagues (2024), suggesting that investment in quality early sports experiences yields dividends in children's subsequent achievement. The identification of challenges provides important caveats for program implementation. Potential activity cessation from improper program execution and limitations on other sports participation represent legitimate concerns requiring proactive management. These findings corroborate research by Radojević and colleagues (2011) and Merkel (2013), emphasizing the need for careful program design and qualified personnel. Health-oriented activity outcomes demonstrate significant public health implications. The integration of immediate and long-term health benefits across physical, mental, and preventive domains aligns with research by Ring-Dimitriou and colleagues (2019), Clemente and colleagues (2022), Faude and colleagues (2010), and Morgado and colleagues (2023). These findings suggest that football kindergartens can contribute to addressing pressing public health challenges. Economic benefits identified in this study, including job creation, market expansion, local economic strengthening, and reduced welfare costs, highlight broader societal value. Consistent with research by Bohdan and Olga (2024) and Memari (2021), these findings demonstrate that investment in quality children's sports infrastructure generates economic returns beyond the immediate sports sector. In conclusion, this study provides comprehensive evidence that designing football kindergarten models with physical literacy approaches yields substantial positive consequences for children interested in football. The integration of physical literacy principles within child-centered football programs supports holistic development encompassing key skills, educational outcomes, long-term athletic progression, future success predisposition, health promotion, and economic benefits, while acknowledging challenges requiring careful program design. These findings underscore the importance of moving beyond traditional early specialization approaches toward developmentally appropriate, physically literacy-oriented programs that prioritize children's overall well-being and lifelong physical activity engagement. For sports policymakers, administrators, coaches, and parents, these results emphasize the value of investing in quality early football experiences that nurture children's physical, psychological, and social development, thereby contributing to healthier, more capable future generations and stronger sports systems.

KEY WORDS

Children's Football, Football Kindergarten, Child-centered Structure, Physical Literacy, Long-term Development of Athletes.

