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THE PHENOMENON OF SPORT DROPOUT: INTERNAL STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS

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Authors' contribution:

A. Study design/planning
B. Data collection/entry
C. Data analysis/statistics
D. Data interpretation
E. Preparation of manuscript
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Abstract:

Background: At a young age, the phenomenon of abandoning sports practice is frequent. This can be attributed to various causes that, however, are not investigated in the literature. The aim of this study is to understand the perceptions of the main internal stakeholders (coaches and technical managers) with regard to the possible causes for early drop-out from football.

Methods: The sample that took part in this study consisted of 15 coaches and 12 technical managers of football schools in the province of Naples. The study made use of the following methods: analysis of scientific literature, formulation and administration of a questionnaire, and data analysis using mathematical and statistical methods. To analyze the data, the chi-square test (X2) was applied.

Results: The results showed that 86.7% of the coaches and 66.6% of the technical managers have social education as their primary goal, with a significant relationship in the perception of the two categories at p=2.80692E-25. Furthermore, it was found that, according to 66.7% of the coaches and 50% of the technical managers, early leaving causes insecurity in children, with a significant relationship in the perception of the two categories at p=0.002.

Conclusion: The study showed that, among the many possible causes of dropout, the attitude of the main internal stakeholders of football schools also has a considerable effect. This study investigated the perceptions of the main internal stakeholders of football schools, an element that other studies have neglected, focusing on other causes to address the phenomenon.

Introduction

Participation in organized youth sports is already started from an early age in Western countries. The practice of sporting activities in childhood is valued for the positive contribution it can make to the training and personal experience of children and young people. In Italy, the motor and sports sciences have been present in the academy since 2000, following the reform of the Higher Institutes of Physical Education, and are, at present, placed in the pedagogical and medical fields, as both academic disciplines are included in social and humanistic sciences and life sciences [1]. The importance of effectively supporting the development of the capacity for sensorimotor integration seems to be one of the most important objectives that every school system, and not only, should pursue. In addition to sport, the relationship between body, movement, and learning enables the acquisition of spatial, temporal, sequential, linguistic, expressive, and musical skills [2]. The motivations that drive children to participate in sports are heterogeneous, such as having fun, improving skills, making friends, or getting fit [3]. In addition, it must be admitted that sporting activities

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can promote inclusion, based on the integration of people regardless of their health status. In fact, the use of physical and sporting activity is also widely used to obtain benefits in the mental aspect [4]. In other studies, it has been shown that motivation to participate can also depend on other factors such as age, gender, perceived ability, type, and level of sports skills, or influence from family, peers, and coaches [5]. It is no coincidence that a footballer's technical and tactical improvement cannot be separated from the position and attitude of his teammates and the position and behavior of opponents [6]. One of the main components that determine the quality of performance is certainly the motivation to play sports because young people love sports, mainly as an opportunity to socialize and have fun [7]. Despite these positive aspects, it is possible to note, recently, a gradual decrease in the practice of sports at an early age [8]. This phenomenon is called sports dropout, which is as intense as the premature abandonment of a sporting career, even before an athlete has been able to fully demonstrate his or her potential or before having reached peak performance. The onset of this phenomenon, which is the problem discussed in this study, is caused by both personal and situational factors, such as the difficulty of reconciling school and sport, disagreement with the coach, lack of enjoyment, the presence of injuries, poor perception of competence, the influence of other people (parents or teammates), and poor opportunities for success. A further aspect that can be considered as a causative factor of sports dropout at a young age is burnout, i.e., a psychological condition associated with feelings of physical and emotional exhaustion, reduced sense of personal fulfillment, and devaluation of sport and the sporting environment. It is, therefore, a psychological condition that makes the sporting experience difficult to sustain. In this study, particular attention is paid to analyzing the dropout phenomenon in the context of football schools. According to data reported by the FIGC (Italian Football Federation), this phenomenon is reported in 33% of football schools. The drop-out rate from sporting activity, within football schools, is much higher in the Campania region of Italy than in other regions. In fact, according to ISTAT data, in 2021, 50% of children aged 3 years and over in Campania did not practice sports or physical activity, and, in 2022, the percentage was 53.4% [9]. Considering the guidelines issued by the WHO 'Global Recommendations on Physical Activity for Health', in which it is recommended that children and adolescents engage in at least an average of 60 minutes per day of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity, mostly aerobic, throughout the week, the percentages of children who do not engage in sport or physical activity are critical, to say the least [10]. Many football clubs face the phenomenon of young athletes dropping out early because it not only represents a loss of potential talent but can also have negative repercussions on the psychological well-being of the youngsters involved and on the economy of the football clubs themselves [11]. However, the causes of this early drop-out are often multifactorial and poorly understood. Despite the extensive literature on football, there is a lack of in-depth analysis on the phenomenon of dropout and, in particular, on the perceptions of the main stakeholders within the football sector. In particular, there are no studies that explore how coaches, managers, players, and other internal actors interpret and evaluate the dynamics and challenges within the sector in reference to sports abandonment [12]. Understanding these perceptions is fundamental to developing targeted strategies that can improve management practices, athlete well-being, and the overall effectiveness of football organizations, thus reducing the phenomenon of dropout [13]. This gap in the scientific literature highlights the need for research focused on these aspects to fill the knowledge gap and offer new perspectives on the development of professional and amateur football. The objective of this study is to understand and analyze the perceptions of key stakeholders within the football sector regarding the causes contributing to early football dropout. This study aims to identify and assess the key factors, both individual and organizational, that influence the decision to drop out of football, providing a solid basis for the development of effective preventive strategies.

Material and Methods

Study design

In order to understand the perceptions of the coaches and technical managers of the football schools in the province of Naples, Italy, with respect to all the causes that lead to the early abandonment of football, an ad hoc questionnaire was created via Google Forms and subsequently administered via e-mail and social media. The questionnaire administered to the stakeholders mentioned above consisted of 18 items, all of which were closed-ended. It was divided into three different thematic sections. The first section, containing five items, concerned gender, education, and the role played in the football school. Specifically, the questions in this section were aimed at understanding whether the role each of them played within the football school was consistent with their qualifications. The second section, consisting of 9 items, focused on the stakeholders' perception of the role each of them played. This section aimed to investigate the coaches' and technical managers' knowledge of their profession and the influence it exerts on their pu-

pils. The third and final section of the questionnaire, consisting of four items, was specifically dedicated to the central topic of the study, dropout in football. More specifically, it examined what kind of perceptions these stakeholders have regarding this issue, what consequences this phenomenon may have on children's growth, and how its occurrence could be prevented. This section also aimed to find out whether coaches and technical managers might feel in any way responsible for young children dropping out of the sport in question. A detailed description of the questionnaire administered is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Questionnaire for coaches and technical managers of football schools in the province of Naples

Internal Stakeholders Questionnaire					
Items	**Answer 1**	**Answer 2**	**Answer 3**	**Answer 4**	**Answer 5**
1. Age	23-27 years old	28-32 years old	>32 years old		
2. Gender	Male	Female			
3. Title of study	Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree	Other qualifications		
4. Where were you trained as a coach?	UEFA C licence	UEFA D licence	UEFA B licence	UEFA A licence	
5. What role do you play within the football school?	Coach	Manager			
6. What are the characteristics a coach should have?	Teaching discipline	Be patient and understanding	Motivating commitment	Alliance with the family system	Helping to tolerate frustration
7. What value do you attribute to coach education?	Training obligation	A tool for approaching to current social needs	Knowledge of technical and tactical skills		
8. What is the main function of your evaluative action?	Selecting trainees	Knowing the capabilities of the learners	Creating individualised paths	Preventing those without quality from continuing in business	
9. Which of the following is your training principle?'	Insist on intensive loading in training	Gradual approach from simple to complex	Neither of the two		
10. During your training, is the goal set?	Entertainment	Technical-individual performance	Bodily self-knowledge and development of skills		
11. What is the primary goal of a coach of a children's team?	Educating for sociality	Teach how to read the game situation	Promoting the development of technology		
12. Are the proposed trainings fun and challenging?	Always	Most of the time	Sometimes	Almost never	Never
13. In front of a child with excellent football qualities, how do you position yourself?	The subject assumes a role central in training	The subject is always assessed from a team perspective			
14. How much aspect is given to the emotional management of success and failure?	A lot	Little	Remarkable		
15. In your opinion, early abandonment what repercussions on the child's growth?	Insecurity	Refusal of sporting activity	Anxiety		

16. At the conclusion of the football year, what is most valuable?	Talent output	Technical and tactical performance of the team	Achieving a homogeneous level of preparation	Constancy in the number of members
17. Do you feel guilty about the abandonment by children?	Yes	No	Quite	
18. How to prevent the phenomenon of drop-outs?	Maintaining a constant focus on individual athletes	Constant motivation	Creating a coach-parent relationship of trust	

All subjects gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. According to Regulation (EU) 536/2014 and Directive 2001/20/EC, research involving minimal risks to participants may be exempt from formal ethical review, as it does not involve invasive or experimental interventions. Additionally, under Legislative Decree No. 211 of 24 June 2003, research that does not pose significant risks and is solely aimed at improving educational practices might be exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) or Ethics Committee review and approval.

Study participants

The sample in this study consisted of 15 coaches and 12 technical managers of football schools in the province of Naples. The entire sample consisted only of male participants, with an average age between 23 and 32 years. A convenience sampling method was used and every participant was informed in detail about the research protocol and gave their written consent.

Statistical Analysis

The data collected using the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS software. The chi-square (X^2) test was applied to assess the differences in perceptions between the two stakeholder groups. The statistical significance threshold was set at $p<0.05$.

Results

As described above, the questionnaire is divided into three sections. The first section is depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. Results first section of the questionnaire

	Results, first, 5 Items				
Items	**Answer 1**	**Answer 2**	**Answer 3**	**Answer 4**	**Chi-squared**
1. Age	23-27 years old	28-32 years old	>32 years old		p= 0.0002
Coach Frequency	13	1	1		
Percentage Coach	86.6%	6.7%	6.7%		
Frequency Technical manager	2	0	10		
Percentage Technical manager	16.6%	0	83.4%		
2. Gender	Male	Female			p=6.89518E-12
Coach Frequency	11	4			
Percentage Coach	73.3%	26.7%			
Frequency Technical manager	12	0			
Percentage Technical manager	100%	0			
3. Title of study	Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree	Other qualifications		p=0.005
Frequency (coach)	10	4	1		
Percentage (coach)	66.6%	26.7%	6.7%		

Frequency (technical manager)	1	4	7		
Percentage (technical manager)	8.4%	33.3%	58.3%		
4. Where were you trained as a coach?	UEFA C licence	UEFA D licence	UEFA B licence	UEFA A licence	p=7.85012E-05
Frequency (coach)	11	2	1	1	
Percentage (coach)	73.3%	13.3%	6.7%	6.7%	
Frequency (technical manager)	2	5	4	1	
Percentage (technical manager)	16.6%	41.7%	33.3%	8.4%	
5. What role do you play within the football school?	Coach	Manager			p=0.0002
Frequency (coach)	15	0			
Percentage (coach)	100%	0			
Frequency (technical manager)	0	12			
Percentage (technical manager)	0	100%			

The results contained in Table 2 show, in question 1, that 86.6% of the coaches were in the age range of 23-27 years, 6.7% were in the age range of 28-32 years and the remaining 6.7% were older than 32 years. With regard to technical managers, 83.4% were older than 32 years and the remaining 16.6% were in the age range of 23-27 years. The chi-square analysis showed a significance between the group of coaches and the group of technical managers at p=0.0002. On question 2 concerning gender, in the category of coaches, 73.3% were male, and the remaining 26.7% were female. Of the group of technical managers, 100% were male. The chi-square analysis showed a significance between the groups of coaches and technical managers at p=6.89518E-12. Following question 3 on educational qualifications, 66.6% of coaches had a bachelor's degree, 26.7% a master's degree and the remaining 6.7% had other qualifications. In question 3, technical managers were 8.4% with a bachelor's degree, 33.3% with a master's degree, and 58.3% with other qualifications. The chi-square analysis revealed a significance between the groups of coaches and technical managers at p=0.005. For question 4 'Where does your coaching education fit in?', it appears that for the category of coaches, 73.3% held a UEFA C licence, 13.3% held a UEFA D licence, 6.7% held a UEFA B licence and the remaining 6.7% held a UEFA A licence. For the technical manager category, 16.6% held a UEFA C licence, 41.7% a UEFA D licence, 33.3% a UEFA B licence and the remaining 8.4% a UEFA A licence. The chi-square analysis revealed a significance between the group of coaches and the group of technical managers at p=7.85012E-05. With question 5 'What role do you play within the football school?' there is identification of the sample, with 15 units making up the category of coaches and 12 units for the category of technical managers. Chi-square analysis revealed a significance between the group of coaches and the group of technical managers at p=0.0002. The second section of the questionnaire is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of the second section of the questionnaire

Results, second, 9 Items						
Items	**Answer 1**	**Answer 2**	**Answer 3**	**Answer 4**	**Answer 5**	**Chi-squared**
6. What are the characteristics a coach should have?	Teaching discipline	Being patient and understanding	Motivating commitment	Alliance with the family system	Helping to tolerate frustration	p=7.55261E-10
Frequency (coach)	4	2	8	1	0	
Percentage (coach)	26.7%	13.3%	53.3%	6.7%	0	
Frequency (technical manager)	5	5	2	0	0	
Percentage (technical manager)	41.7%	41.7%	16.6%	0	0	
7. What value do you attribute to coach education?	Training obligation	A tool for approaching to current social needs	Knowledge of technical and tactical skills			p=0.1

Frequency (coach)	6	3	6			
Percentage (coach)	40%	20%	40%			
Frequency (technical manager)	4	4	4			
Percentage (technical manager)	33.3%	33.3%	33.4%			
8. What is the main function of your evaluative action?	Selecting trainees	Knowing the capabilities of the learners	Creating individualised paths	Preventing those without quality from continuing in business		p=3.74218E-32
Frequency (coach)	0	11	1	3		
Percentage (coach)	0	73.3%	6.7%	20%		
Frequency (technical manager)	0	9	0	3		
Percentage (technical manager)	0	75%	0	25%		
9. Which of the following is your training principle?'	Insist on intensive loading in training	Gradual approach from simple to complex	Neither			p=2.0752E-130
Frequency (coach)	0	14	1			
Percentage (coach)	0	93.3%	6.7%			
Frequency (technical manager)	1	11	0			
Percentage (technical manager)	8.4%	91.6%	0			
10. During your training, is the goal set?	Entertainment	Technical-individual performance	Bodily self-knowledge and development of skills			p=0.3
Frequency (coach)	10	0	5			
Percentage (coach)	66.6%	0	44.4%			
Frequency (technical manager)	6	0	6			
Percentage (technical manager)	50%	0	50%			
11. What is the primary goal of a coach of a children's team?	Educating for sociality	Teach how to read the game situation	Promoting the development of technology			p=2.80692E-25
Frequency (coach)	13	0	2			
Percentage (coach)	86.7%	0	13.3%			
Frequency (technical manager)	8	1	3			
Percentage (technical manager)	66.6%	8.4%	25%			
12. Are the proposed trainings fun and challenging?	Always	Most of the time	Sometimes	Hardly ever	Never	p=0.08
Frequency (coach)	5	10	0	0	0	
Percentage (coach)	44.4%	66.6%	0	0	0	

Frequency (technical manager)	4	8	0	0	0	
Percentage (technical manager)	44.4%	66.6%	0	0	0	
13. In front of a child with excellent football qualities, how do you position yourself?	The subject assumes a role central in training	The subject is always assessed in a team perspective				p=1
Frequency (coach)	0	15				
Percentage (coach)	0	100%				
Frequency (technical manager)	0	12				
Percentage (technical manager)	0	100%				
14. How much aspect is given to the emotional management of success and failure?	A lot	Little	Remarkable			p=0.08
Frequency (coach)	8	5	2			
Percentage (coach)	53.3%	33.4%	13.3%			
Frequency (technical manager)	6	3	3			
Percentage (technical manager)	50%	25%	25%			

The results show that in question 6 'What are the characteristics a coach should have?' 53.3% of the coaches answered 'motivate commitment', 26.7% answered 'teach discipline', 13.3% answered 'be patient and understanding', and 5% answered 'alliance with the family system'. To the same question, 41.7% of the managers answered 'be patient and understanding', another 41.7% answered 'teach discipline', and 16.7% answered 'motivate commitment'. The chi-square analysis revealed a significance between the group of coaches and the group of technical managers at p=7.55261E-10. To question 7 'What value do you attribute to coach education?', 40% of the coaches answered 'training obligation', another 40% answered 'knowledge of technical and tactical skills', and 20% answered 'tool for approaching current social needs'. When asked the same question, the managers were equally divided, with 33.3% each answering 'training obligation', 'knowledge of technical and tactical skills', and 'tool for approaching current social needs'. Based on the chi-square analysis, no significance was found between the group of coaches and the group of technical managers at p=0.1. Subsequently, to question 8 'What is the main function of your evaluative action?', for the category of coaches, 73.3% answered 'Knowing the abilities of the learners', 6.7% 'Creating individualised pathways', the remaining 20% answered 'Preventing those who lack quality from continuing in the activity', and none answered 'Selecting learners'. For the category of technical managers, 75% answered 'Know the abilities of the trainees', and the remaining 25% answered 'Avoid that those who do not have qualities continue the activity'. The chi-square analysis revealed a significance between the group of coaches and the group of technical managers at p=3.74218E-32. In question 9, 'Which of the following is your training principle?', for the category of coaches, 93.3% responded with 'Gradual approach from simple to complex', the remaining 6.7% answered 'Neither', and none responded with 'Insist on intensive loading in training'. For the category of technical managers, 8.4% answered 'Insist on intensive loading in training', and 91.6% answered 'Gradual approach from simple to complex'. The chi-square analysis showed a significance between the group of coaches and the group of technical managers, at p=2.0752E-130. For question 10 'During your training, is the goal set?', 66.6% of coaches answered 'Fun', 44.4% answered 'Body self-knowledge and skill development' and none answered 'Technical-individual performance'. In the category of technical managers, 50% answered 'Fun', the remaining 50% answered 'Body self-knowledge and skill development', and none answered 'Technical-individual performance'. The chi-square analysis showed no significance between the group of coaches and the group of technical managers at p=0.3. In question 11 'What is the primary goal of a coach of a children's team?' for the category of coaches, 86.7% answered 'Educating social

skills', and the remaining 13.3% answered 'Promoting the development of technique'. For the category of technical managers, 66.6% answered 'Educate on sociability', 8.4% answered 'Teach how to read the game situation', and the remaining 25% answered 'Promote the development of technique'. The chi-square analysis revealed a significance between the group of coaches and the group of technical managers at p=2.80692E-25. Continuing with question 12 'Are the proposed trainings fun and challenging?', 44.4% of coaches answered 'Always' and the remaining 66.6% answered 'Most of the time'. This was also the case for the category of technical managers. Based on the chi-square analysis, no significance was found between the group of coaches and the group of technical managers at p=0.08. To question 13 'In front of a child with excellent football qualities, how do you position yourself?', for both the category of coaches and technical managers, 100% of the sample answered 'The subject is always assessed from a team perspective'. The chi-square analysis showed no significance between the groups of coaches and technical managers at p=1. On question 14 'How much aspect is given to the emotional management of success and failure?' for the category of coaches, 53.3% answered 'A lot', 33.4% answered 'A little', and the remaining 13.3% answered 'Considerable'. For the category of technical managers, 50% answered 'A lot', 25% 'A little' and the remaining 25% 'Considerable'. The chi-square analysis showed no significance between the group of coaches and the group of technical managers at p=0.08. The third section of the questionnaire is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Results of the third section of the questionnaire

Result, third, 4 Items					
Items	**Answer 1**	**Answer 2**	**Answer 3**	**Answer 4**	**Chi-squared**
15. In your opinion, early abandonment what repercussions on the child's growth?	Insecurity	Refusal of sporting activity	Anxiety		p=0.002
Frequency (coach)	10	5	0		
Percentage (coach)	66.6%	44.4%	0		
Frequency (technical manager)	6	3	3		
Percentage (technical manager)	50%	25%	25%		
16. At the conclusion of the football year, what is most valuable?	Talent output	Technical and tactical training of the team	Achieving a level homogeneous level of preparation	Constancy in the number of members	p=7.64485E-18
Frequency (coach)	0	2	12	1	
Percentage (coach)	0	13.3%	80%	6.7%	
Frequency (technical manager)	0	4	6	2	
Percentage (technical manager)	0	33.4%	50%	16.6%	
17. Do you feel guilty about the abandonment by children?	Yes	No	Quite		p=2.07096E-06
Frequency (coach)	1	11	3		
Percentage (coach)	6.7%	73.3%	20%		
Frequency (technical manager)	1	4	7		
Percentage (technical manager)	8.4%	33.3%	58.3%		
18. How to prevent the phenomenon of drop-outs?	Maintaining a constant focus on individual athletes	Constant motivation	Creating a coach-parent relationship of trust		p=7.13126E-05

Frequency (coach)	2	4	9
Percentage (coach)	13.3%	26.7%	60%
Frequency (technical manager)	1	4	7
Percentage (technical manager)	8.4%	33.3%	58.3%

To question 15 'In your opinion, what repercussions does early leaving have on the child's growth?' 66.7% of the coaches answered 'insecurity', and 33.3% answered 'refusal of sporting activity'. To the same question, 50% of the technical managers answered 'insecurity', and the remainder was divided equally between 'refusal of sporting activity' 25% and 'anxiety' 25%. The chi-square analysis revealed a significance between the group of coaches and the group of technical managers at $p=0.002$. To question 16 'At the conclusion of the football year, what is most valuable?' for the category of coaches, no one answered 'Exit of talents', 13.3% answered 'Technical and tactical formation of the team', 80% answered 'Reaching a homogenous level of preparation' and the remaining 6.7% answered 'Constancy of the number of members'. For the category of technical managers and the same question, no one answered 'Exit of talents', 33.4% answered 'Technical and tactical training of the team', 50% answered 'Reaching a homogenous level of preparation' and the remaining 16.6% answered 'Constancy of the number of members'. The chi-square analysis revealed a significance between the group of coaches and the group of technical managers at $p=7.64485E-18$. A different perception between coaches and managers can be seen in question 17 'Do you feel guilty about children dropping out?', with 73.3% of the coaches answering 'No', 6.7% answering 'Yes' and the remaining 20% answering 'quite a lot'. While 58.3% of the technical managers answered 'Quite', 33.3% answered 'No', and the remaining 8.4% answered 'Yes'. The chi-square analysis revealed a significance between the group of coaches and the group of technical managers at $p=2.07096E-06$. Finally, to question 18 'How do you prevent the drop-out phenomenon?', 60% of the coaches responded with 'Create a coach-parent relationship of trust', 26.7% with 'Constant motivation' and the remaining 13.3% with 'Keep the focus on individual athletes constant'. For the category of technical managers, 58.3% responded with 'Create a coach-parent relationship of trust', 33.3% with 'Constant motivation' and the remaining 8.4% with 'Maintain constant focus on individual athletes'. The chi-square analysis revealed a significance between the group of coaches and the group of technical managers, at $p=7.13126E-05$.

Discussion

The results of the present study provide a detailed analysis of the perceptions of coaches and technical managers regarding the causes of early drop-out in youth football, identifying significant differences in their opinions and characteristics. These results are consistent with previous research, which highlighted how various individual and organizational factors can influence the drop-out phenomenon in youth sports [14]. The analysis revealed significant demographic differences between coaches and technical managers. Most coaches were in the age group of 23 to 27 years, whereas technical managers tended to be older than 32 years. This age difference might influence their perspectives and approaches to coaching, as suggested by some studies indicating that experience and age can play a crucial role in coaching strategies and understanding athletes' needs [15]. The gender distribution was also significantly different between the two groups, with a greater female presence among coaches than among technical managers. The existing literature highlights how gender differences can influence coaching dynamics and athletes' expectations, leading to different approaches in team management [16]. Coach education plays a key role in the quality of sports experience of young athletes [17]. Data show that coaches tend to have a lower level of education than technical managers, with a prevalence of three-year degrees and lower-level UEFA licences (C and D). Literature suggests that more advanced training is often correlated with a greater awareness of the psychological and social dynamics that influence youth sports participation and could contribute to more effective strategies to prevent drop-out [18]. A critical aspect that emerged from the study is the perception of the causes of early drop-out. Both coaches and technical managers recognized the importance of creating a trusting relationship between coach and parent as the main strategy to prevent drop-out, in line with the literature that highlights the essential role of communication and cooperation between the adult figures involved in the young athlete's education [19]. However, there is a significant divergence in the perception of guilt regarding dropout, with technical managers showing a greater tendency to feel responsible. This could reflect a greater awareness of technical managers of the impact of their decisions and organi-

zational dynamics on the experience of young athletes [20]. The differences in training preferences between coaches and technical managers suggest distinct approaches to athlete training [21]. Coaches emphasize the motivational aspect and fun, while technical managers may have a more performance-oriented and discipline-oriented vision. These differences could be explored further to understand how to better balance the competitive and educational aspects to reduce the risk of dropout [22]. Among the main studies, it is possible to mention Esposito et al,, who in 2024 demonstrated the reduction of dropouts in football practice, through the strengthening of motivation, acting on the variation of the formation, and on the inclusive and collaborative skills of the team [23]. Another study, by Molinero et al., verified the reasons for abandonment, in a large sample of young Spanish athletes, in relation to their gender, participation in individual or team sports, and the level of competition achieved at the time of abandonment [24].

Limitations of the study

The main limitation of this study is the small sample size. With larger numbers, it would have been possible to obtain more variability in the answers and, consequently, a more complete view of the perceptions regarding the causes of early dropout in youth football. Another limitation is the lack of randomness of the sample. A more random sampling would have reduced possible bias, e.g. other internal stakeholders such as boys and families, who were not considered. In any case, the usefulness of this work lies in attempting to investigate the perceptions of individuals considered to be the main internal stakeholders of football schools and to understand how much their perceptions may influence participation and/or dropout in the sport, an element that other studies have neglected, focusing on other causes.

Conclusions

The contribution that sporting activity makes to people, especially in the developmental age group, is of considerable importance. Considering the numerous benefits it brings at a psychophysical level, it is therefore necessary to take action to remove the obstacles to practicing sports. In this study, it was found that the attitudes of the main internal stakeholders of football schools exert a considerable influence on whether or not children take part in the activity. It is relevant that coaches focus a lot on the emotional and motivational aspects of each individual and less on the technical and tactical aspects, for two reasons: firstly, because the training process is different for athletes and among team sports, and secondly because, in the current context, the coach has become a qualified professional figure, who must possess all-round skills. This consideration is also supported by the Sports Reform of 28 February 2021, through Legislative Decree No. 36, which legally recognized the profession of the sports kinesiologist (commonly coach). This professional is given responsibility for the proper conduct of physical and sporting activities, the protection of well-being, and the promotion of healthy lifestyles. The coach must be able to observe and understand the needs of young players, evaluate their shortcomings and qualities, and subsequently help define the goals necessary to set the training course. At this juncture, managers will also have to play their part, i.e., recruit competent and qualified professionals. To help produce more experienced coaches in terms of participation and performance, many governing bodies have set up coach mentoring systems.

Practical Implication

In practice, to effectively tackle the drop-out phenomenon, it would be crucial to provide continuous and specialized training for coaches, including studies on psychological and motivational aspects in the management of athletes. Another winning strategy could be greater involvement of families, through the organization of regular meetings, since the relationship of trust between coach and parent is recognized as a key factor in preventing sports drop-out. In addition, a more balanced approach between performance and educational orientation is proposed, introducing variable training sessions according to the needs of young people

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I**nstitutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki. According to Regulation (EU) 536/2014 and Directive 2001/20/EC, research involving minimal risks for participants may be exempted from formal ethical review as it does not involve invasive or experimental interventions. In addition, according to Legislative Decree No. 211 of 24 June 2003, research that does not pose significant risks and is aimed solely at improving educational practices may be exempt from review and approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) or Ethics Committee.

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