

Football as a Developmental Ecosystem: Metaphorical Interpretations of Football Experiences Among Children Aged 10–14

Gelişimsel Bir Ekosistem Olarak Futbol: 10–14 Yaş Arasındaki Çocukların Futbol Deneyimlerine İlişkin Metaforik Yorumlar

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Öz

Bu çalışma, 10–14 yaş arası çocukların futbol akademilerinde futbol oynama deneyimlerine atfettikleri metaforik anlamları incelemektedir. Çalışma, çocukların seslerini ön plana çıkararak, bu anlamların Pozitif Gençlik Gelişimi'nin (PYD) beş temel boyutu olan Yeterlilik, Özgüven, Bağlantı, Karakter ve Şefkat/Merhamet ile nasıl örtüştüğünü incelemektedir. Türkiye'deki futbol akademilerine kayıtlı 10–14 yaş arası 100 çocukla fenomenolojik nitel bir araştırma tasarımı uygulanmıştır. Veriler, "Futbol oynarken kendimi..... gibi hissedirim, çünkü....." şeklinde açık uçlu bir metafor sorusu kullanılarak toplanmıştır. Veriler içerik analizi yoluyla incelenmiş ve elde edilen kodlar ile alt temalar PYD 5C çerçevesine göre düzenlenmiştir. Kodlayıcılar arası uyum %90 olarak belirlenmiş, uyumsuzluklar ise tartışma ve uzlaşma yoluyla çözülmüştür. Bulgular, çocukların futbolu bireysel, ilişkisel ve prososyal boyutları kapsayan çok boyutlu bir gelişim bağlamı olarak algıladıklarını göstermektedir. Yeterlilik en sık temsil edilen boyut olarak ortaya çıkarken, Karakter, Özgüven, Bağlantı ve Şefkat/Merhamet de çocukların metaforlarında yansıtıldı. "Çita" ve "duvar" gibi metaforlar fiziksel ve spora özgü yetenek algılarını temsil ederken, "aile", "meşale" ve "fidan dikmek" ise aidiyet, destek ve başkalarına özen gösterme ile ilgili anlamları aktardı. Toplu olarak bu bulgular, çocukların futbolu yalnızca atletik performans için bir bağlam olarak değil, aynı zamanda yetenek, özeğ, disiplin, sosyal aidiyet ve prososyal ilginin bir arada var olduğu bir ortam olarak da deneyimlediklerini göstermektedir. Bulgular ayrıca, çocukların spor deneyimlerine ilişkin metaforik anlatılarını düzenlemek için PYD 5C çerçevesinin yararını ortaya koyarken, bu boyutları sıralı veya nedensel bir gelişim süreci olmaktan ziyade birbiriyle ilişkili anlam alanları olarak vurgulamaktadır. Çocukların deneyimsel anlatılarını merkeze alan bu çalışma, metafor analizinin çocukların futbolu çok boyutlu bir gelişimsel ve sosyal ortam olarak nasıl algıladıklarını nasıl aydınlatılabileceğini göstererek, spor literatürü aracılığıyla PYD'ye katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Olumlu Gençlik Gelişimi, Futbol Akademileri, Metafor Analizi, Çocuk Sporcular, 5C Modeli, Gençlik Spor

Abstract

This study explores the metaphorical meanings that children aged 10–14 attribute to their experiences of playing football in football academies. By foregrounding children's voices, the study examines how these meanings correspond to the five core dimensions of Positive Youth Development (PYD)—Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring/Compassion. The study used a phenomenological qualitative design with 100 children aged 10–14 enrolled in football academies in Türkiye. We collected data using an open-ended metaphor prompt: "When I play football, I feel like, because.....". We analyzed the data using content analysis and organized the resulting codes and subthemes according to the PYD 5C framework. Inter-coder agreement was 90%, with discrepancies resolved through discussion and consensus. The findings indicate that children perceive football as a multidimensional developmental context encompassing individual, relational, and prosocial dimensions. Competence emerged as the most frequently represented dimension, while Character, Confidence, Connection, and Caring/Compassion were also reflected in the children's metaphors. Metaphors such as "cheetah" and "wall" represented perceptions of physical and sport-specific capability, whereas "family," "torch," and "planting a sapling" conveyed meanings related to belonging, support, and care for others. Collectively, these findings suggest that children experience football not only as a context for athletic performance but also as a setting where perceptions of capability, self-worth, discipline, social belonging, and prosocial concern coexist. The findings further demonstrate the utility of the PYD 5C framework for organizing children's metaphorical accounts of sport experiences while emphasizing these dimensions as interrelated domains of meaning rather than a sequential or causal developmental process. By centering children's experiential narratives, this study contributes to PYD through sport literature by illustrating how metaphor analysis can illuminate children's understandings of football as a multidimensional developmental and social environment.

Keywords: Positive Youth Development, Football Academies, Metaphor Analysis, Child Athletes, 5C Model, Youth Sport

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INTRODUCTION

The subjective experiences young people gain through sports can significantly affect their future social adaptation and personal well-being (Danish et al., 2004; Jones & Lavallee, 2009). In this context, the academic literature has extensively examined children's and early adolescents' participation in sports activities, not only in terms of physical development but also in the psychosocial benefits it provides (Eppright et al., 1997; Chowdhury, 2023). While traditional approaches have largely addressed youth development through the lens of preventing risks and problem behaviors (Larson, 2000), contemporary approaches have brought to the forefront the Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach, which focuses on young people's strengths, capacities, and developmental potential rather than their shortcomings (Damon, 2004; Lerner et al., 2011). From a PYD perspective, sports are viewed as a crucial developmental context that supports young people's social, emotional, and cognitive development (Holt et al., 2017).

Football is a dynamic team sport that requires intra-team cooperation, coordination, decision-making, and acting toward a common goal (Clemente et al., 2014). These structural characteristics make football an important sporting environment from the perspective of the Positive Youth Development approach, which aims to support individual and social development (Holt, 2016). Football academies, by contrast, are structured sports environments that can support the technical and tactical skills of child and youth athletes, as well as their social and psychological development (Li et al., 2014; Hauser et al., 2024). In the PYD literature, youth development is conceptualized through five core dimensions: Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring (Lerner et al., 2005a). In the context of sports, these dimensions relate to young athletes developing positive self-perceptions beyond their athletic skills, forming interpersonal relationships, assuming social and moral responsibilities, and developing sensitivity toward others (Vierimaa et al., 2012; Holt, 2016). However, the developmental potential of sports environments is not limited solely to the content of the educational programs offered; rather, it is shaped by the interaction of multidimensional factors such as the environmental conditions in which athletes find themselves, their interpersonal relationships, support mechanisms, and developmental opportunities (Li et al., 2014; Vierimaa et al., 2012; Hauser et al., 2024).

The age range of 10–14 is a critical period when children's cognitive, emotional, and social development is significantly shaped, and their abstract thinking skills begin to develop progressively (Piaget, 1972). During this period, the sports environment can be viewed not merely as a setting where young athletes develop their physical and athletic skills, but as a crucial developmental context in which various dimensions of their athletic development take shape (Côté & Hay, 2002). However, children and early adolescents may not always be able to explain the complex emotional and social experiences they encounter in the sports environment through direct verbal expression. In this regard, metaphors are considered an important tool that enables individuals to express their abstract emotions, thoughts, and experiences through more concrete and meaningful images (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphorical expressions reveal individuals' perceptions of a specific experience and the subjective meanings they ascribe

to it, thereby offering researchers the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiential world (Aubusson, 2002; Carpenter, 2008). Therefore, examining how football academy students make sense of their football-playing experiences through their own words and metaphors is important for understanding how these experiences relate to the core dimensions of the Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach.

Despite developments in the Positive Youth Development (PYD) literature, qualitative evidence on how young athletes make sense of their experiences in sports settings from their own perspectives remains an area needing further development. While qualitative studies on PYD through sports have revealed positive outcomes related to young people's personal, social, and physical development, these studies still need a more detailed examination of these experiences through the lens of young people's own perspectives and meaning-making processes (Holt et al., 2017). In this context, research approaches that center the voices of children and adolescents can significantly contribute to understanding psychosocial processes in sports settings from their perspective. However, in the context of football academies in Turkey, few studies examine the meanings 10–14-year-old children ascribe to their football-playing experiences through their own expressions and metaphors. Accordingly, the present study aims to reveal the meanings that football academy students aged 10–14 ascribe to their football-playing experiences through metaphors and to interpret the resulting metaphorical meanings within the framework of the five core dimensions of the Positive Youth Development approach (Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring). This study is expected to contribute to a better understanding of the psychosocial dimensions of children's football experiences through their own expressions and to shed light on practices that help coaches better understand young athletes' experiences.

METHOD

Research Design

This study used a qualitative approach to explore the subjective experiences of children aged 10–14 regarding playing football and the meanings they ascribe to it in their own words. Because the study examined how children perceive their football experience and the meanings through which they construct it, it followed a phenomenological design. The phenomenological approach aims to reveal individuals' lived experiences of a specific phenomenon and the meanings they ascribe to these experiences from the participants' own perspectives (Patton, 2014). Accordingly, this study defined the phenomenon as children's experience of playing football.

The study used metaphors to uncover children's subjective interpretations of their football experience. Metaphors are important sources of qualitative data that enable individuals to express experiences—which may be difficult to articulate directly—through concrete, familiar, or symbolic images. Accordingly, the participants' metaphors

were evaluated not merely as figures of speech, but as data units that convey perceptions and interpretations related to the football experience.

The 5C model of the Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach served as the theoretical analytical framework for interpreting and categorizing the metaphors that emerged in the study. In the model proposed by Lerner and colleagues (2005a), positive youth development is addressed through five core dimensions: Competence, Confidence, Character, Connection, and Caring/Compassion. In this study, these dimensions were not treated as themes derived directly from the data, but rather as theoretical categories used to interpret the meanings emerging from the participants' metaphorical expressions and to categorize them at a higher level.

Research Group

The study sample included 100 children aged 10–14 who were receiving football training at various football academies in Turkey. When selecting participants within this age range, the researcher considered their cognitive and linguistic competence to describe their football experiences in their own words, as well as their ability to reflect the developmental characteristics of both childhood and early adolescence.

The study employed a purposive sampling method to select participants. We specifically targeted children aged 10–14 who were enrolled in football academies and possessed the linguistic and cognitive ability to reflect on their experiences through metaphors. Within this purposive framework, the selection was further narrowed to academies accessible to the research team.

Data Collection Tool and Process

In this study, we collected data using a structured form that included the statement, “When I play football, I feel like, because.....” We used an “open-ended metaphor form” to enable children to convey their experiences in their own words. During data collection, participants were asked what they compared football to and why, allowing them to express their world of experience without confining it to an external framework.

Participants were told there were no “correct” or “incorrect” metaphors; what mattered was that they express their football experiences in accordance with their own thoughts. No metaphors or categories were presented to the participants; thus, the researchers made an effort to prevent the children from expressing their football experiences within conceptual boundaries predetermined by the researcher.

During data collection, participants were asked to fill out the form individually and in their own words. Given the participants' ages, we took care to ensure the clarity of their statements; when necessary during data collection, we explained the meaning of the form instructions, but provided no guidance on the responses participants would give.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using content analysis. The data analysis process involved four stages: first, the researcher identified metaphors and examined the data by reviewing the statements of all 100 participants. Each participant's metaphor and their corresponding “because” statement were evaluated together to ensure they provided a

meaningful connection to the football experience. All 100 participants provided valid metaphorical expressions that clearly conveyed their perceptions; therefore, no data were excluded from the analysis. Subsequently, in the metaphor coding stage, metaphorical statements were treated as units of analysis. Each participant's metaphor was first associated with an open code based on the rationale the participant provided when explaining the metaphor. At this stage, the fundamental principle of analysis is to focus on the meaning attributed to the metaphor rather than the metaphor itself. For example, in a participant's statement:

"Playing football is like being a fox, because I'm cunning," the "fox" metaphor was coded based on the meaning of "cunning" articulated in the participant's own rationale, rather than on the full range of possible cultural meanings the metaphor might carry. Similarly, the "family" metaphor was placed in the "Connection" category—denoting a sense of belonging and togetherness—or in the "Caring/Compassion" category—denoting mutual protection—based on the participant's explanation. This approach accounted for the fact that the same metaphor could carry different meanings for different participants, and the participant's explanation served as the primary analytical criterion for categorizing metaphors. Next, during subtheme development, codes expressing similar meanings were compared and consolidated into higher-level subthemes. In this process, for example, expressions such as "running fast" and "moving swiftly" were evaluated within the context of physical/athletic performance. At the same time, statements like "I'm very hardworking" and "I work very hard" were grouped under the theme of diligence. In the fourth stage, the codes and subthemes created were classified into five overarching categories based on Lerner and colleagues' (2005a) Positive Youth Development 5C model: Competence, Character, Confidence, Connection, and Caring/Compassion. In this stage, the 5C model served as the theoretical categorization system. In other words, the study did not develop a new PYD model based on the children's metaphors; instead, it examined how the meanings the children generated corresponded to the existing PYD framework.

Credibility and Inter-Coder Reliability

To ensure the study's reliability and analytical consistency, two researchers independently coded the entire dataset. During coding, each participant's metaphor and rationale were evaluated together, and appropriate codes and categories were determined based on the resulting units of meaning. When the two researchers' independent codings were compared, they agreed on 90 of 100 data units, while they disagreed on 10. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using the formula proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994): $\text{agreement} / (\text{agreement} + \text{disagreement}) \times 100$. Accordingly, inter-coder agreement was 90%. An agreement level of 80% or higher is considered acceptable in qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Regarding the 10 data units where disagreement was observed, the two researchers reconvened to jointly evaluate the meanings of the relevant metaphors and the justifications provided by the participants in their "because" statements. As a result of the discussion and mutual evaluation, the researchers resolved all differences by consensus, and they carried out the final coding and categorization in accordance with these joint decisions. Thus,

during the analysis process, inter-researcher consistency was ensured through independent coding, and disagreements were resolved through consensus.

FINDINGS

Table 1. Metaphor Frequencies

5C Dimension	Metaphor Frequency
Competence	40
Character	17
Confidence	15
Connection	17
Caring/Compassion	11
Total	100

Table 2. Metaphors, Codes, Subthemes, and Categories Related to Football

Category	Subtheme	Code	Metaphor
Competence	Game Intelligence, Technical Proficiency, Defensive Proficiency, Offensive Proficiency, Physical Performance, Athletic Performance, Goaltending Performance, Strategic Play, Versatility, Task Performance, Competitiveness	Speed, Technical skill, Defensive skill, Physical strength, Agility, Goalkeeping skill, Strategic thinking, Stamina, Jumping, Finishing, Shooting, Competitiveness, Sense of Duty, Versatility	Cheetah (11), Wall (4), Magician (3), Fox (2), Panther (2), Lion (2), Eagle (1), Gorilla (1), Missile (1), Octopus (1), Hulk (1), Dog (1), Messi (1), Osimhen (1), Machine (1), Pilot (1), Ninja (1), Strong (1), Pizza (1), Cicada (1), Car Race (1), War (1)
Character	Determination, Discipline, Adherence to Rules, Leadership, Responsibility, Openness to Growth	Diligence, Discipline, Leadership, Perseverance, Openness to Growth	Ant (3), Leader (3), Disciplined (3), Bee (2), School (2), At school (1), Ship captain (1), I'm ambitious (1), Eager (1)
Confidence	Self-confidence, Psychological well-being, Intrinsic motivation, Autonomy, Enthusiasm, Self-expression	Happiness, Excitement, Intrinsic motivation, Self-confidence, Autonomy, Relaxation, Self-expression	Happy (5), Excited (3), Free (3), Beautiful (2), Relaxed (1), All eyes are on me (1)
Connection	Sense of Belonging, Team Cohesion, Social Bonds, Having Fun Together, Team Harmony	Sense of Belonging, Collaboration, Social Bonds, Team Commitment, Team Cohesion, Shared Fun	Brotherhood (4), In the Park (3), Family (2), At the Amusement Park (2) Home (1), At Home (1), Team (1), Bridge (1), Chain (1), Hyena (1),
Caring / Compassion	Empathy, Mutual Aid, Protection, Solidarity, Growing Together	Protection, Mutual Aid, Empathy, Sharing, Growing Together	Share (4), Minecraft (2), Family (1), Torch in, Press the Heal button (1), Reach out (1), Share headphones (1), Plant a sapling (1)

An examination of Table 1 and Table 2 shows that the metaphors children aged 10–14 created about playing football fall under the five dimensions of the PYD approach (Lerner et al., 2005b): Competence, Character, Confidence, Connection, and Caring/Compassion. Competence appears most frequently in participants' metaphorical perceptions of playing football, followed by Confidence, Character, Caring/Compassion, and Connection. Overall, children associate their football experience primarily with demonstrating physical and technical competence, while also linking it to developmental dimensions such as self-confidence, character development, social relationships, and caring for others. The Competence dimension consists of metaphors that express the physical, technical, and tactical skills children believe they possess while playing football. Under this dimension, subthemes include physical performance, technical proficiency, defensive and offensive skills, athletic performance, game intelligence, strategic thinking, and competition. Participants most frequently described their football experience using metaphors such as cheetah, wall, magician, fox, panther, lion, eagle, gorilla, missile, Hulk, dog, Messi, and Osimhen. In particular, the repeated use of the “cheetah” metaphor, with

explanations such as “I run fast” and “I move very quickly,” suggests that children interpret their football experience largely through the lens of physical speed and mobility. For example, one participant stated, “When I play football, I feel like a cheetah because I run fast.” Similarly, the “wall” metaphor represents defensive proficiency with the explanation “I don’t let the ball get past me.” In contrast, the “magician” metaphor represents technical skill with the explanation “I make good dribbles.” The explanations for the “fox” metaphor—such as “I’m cunning” and “I take the ball without giving it away”—indicate that children see football not merely as a physical activity but as a process that requires strategic thinking and the ability to generate appropriate solutions in the game. The “Character” dimension consists of subthemes such as diligence, discipline, adherence to rules, taking responsibility, leadership, and openness to growth. In this category, metaphors and expressions such as “ant,” “bee,” “disciplined,” “school,” “leader,” “ship’s captain,” “I’m ambitious,” and “I’m eager” stand out. In particular, the ant and bee metaphors, linked to statements like “I work very hard” and “I’m very hardworking,” show that, from the children’s perspective, football requires effort, work, and dedication. In addition, explanations of the phrase “disciplined,” such as “I follow the rules” and “I do what the coach says,” reveal that the football experience is associated with following rules and self-regulation. In the “ship captain” metaphor, leadership and taking responsibility come to the forefront with the statement “I’m the one who steers the team into port.” These findings indicate that the football experience is perceived as multidimensional, encompassing not only children’s athletic performance but also their perceptions of character traits such as discipline, responsibility, and leadership. In the “Confidence” dimension, the positive emotions children experience while playing football, their positive self-evaluations, their sense of freedom, and feeling good about themselves through football come to the forefront. The subthemes of self-confidence, psychological well-being, intrinsic motivation, autonomy, enthusiasm, and self-expression explain this dimension. In this category, expressions such as “happy,” “excited,” “beautiful,” “comfortable,” “free,” and “all eyes are on me” stand out. For example, one participant stated, “I feel beautiful when I play football because it gives me confidence.” Another participant’s statement, “free, because I do everything the way I want,” shows that the football experience is associated with autonomy and the freedom to express oneself. The repetition of the “happy” and “excited” metaphors further reveals that football creates a powerful positive emotional experience for children. The “Connection” dimension consists of metaphors through which children interpret football as an experience of being with teammates, developing a sense of belonging, forming social relationships, and acting in unison. Within this category, we identified the subthemes of belonging, team unity, social bonds, team harmony, and having fun together. Metaphors such as family, home, house, team, bridge, chain, brotherhood, hyena, park, and amusement park were evaluated under this dimension. For example, one participant said, “When I play football, I feel like I’m part of a family because we’re always together.” In contrast, another participant used the expression, “bridge, because we build relationships within the team.” The explanation of the “chain” metaphor as “we are connected” clearly highlights the perception of mutual connection within the team. These findings indicate that children perceive football not merely as a setting for

individual performance, but also as a social environment where relationships form and a sense of belonging develops. In the Caring/Compassion dimension, meanings such as recognizing others' needs, supporting friends, protecting, sharing, empathy, and solidarity come to the fore. This dimension is represented by the subthemes of empathy, cooperation, protection, sharing, solidarity, and growing together. Metaphors used by participants such as "sharing headphones," "pressing the 'heal' button," "planting a sapling," "reaching out," "family," "a torch in Minecraft," and "sharing" stand out in this category. For example, one participant said, "Playing football is like reaching out, because we help those who fall," directly linking football to helping and supporting others. Similarly, the metaphor "it's like pressing 'heal,' because I look out for my friends" conveys protecting teammates and looking out for their well-being. The "sharing headphones" metaphor, explained as "the person next to me feels that same wonderful emotion," aligns with the Caring/Compassion dimension through shared emotional resonance and shared feelings. These metaphors demonstrate that children's football experiences encompass not only "being together" but also higher-level prosocial meanings, such as caring for, supporting, and protecting their teammates' emotions and needs. Overall, the meanings children ascribe to playing football reveal a multidimensional structure that expands from individual competence toward social and relational development. While the Competence dimension emphasizes athletic competencies such as speed, strength, technical skill, and game intelligence, the Character and Confidence dimensions highlight hard work, discipline, leadership, self-confidence, freedom, and positive emotions. In the "Connection" and "Caring/Compassion" dimensions, football is seen as a way to form bonds with teammates, foster a sense of belonging, promote cooperation, and cultivate empathy and solidarity. This suggests that children interpret their football experience not only through athletic performance but also through personal development, psychological resilience, and social relationships.

DISCUSSION

Children's Perception of Football as a Domain of Development

This study found that the metaphorical meanings children aged 10–14 ascribe to their football experiences align with the 5C model (Competence, Character, Confidence, Connection, Caring/Compassion) of the Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach proposed by Lerner et al. (2005b). The findings indicate that the Competence dimension was dominant, with 40 metaphors; however, the Character (17), Connection (17), Confidence (15), and Caring/Compassion (11) dimensions also carried significant weight. This distribution shows that football is a multidimensional experience for children that cannot be reduced to athletic performance alone; it also encompasses individual and social development.

The PYD approach evaluates young people based on their strengths and interactions with environmental opportunities rather than through a risk-based perspective (Lerner et al., 2012; Lewis, 2011). Participants, whose metaphorical expressions reflect the core elements of the 5C model (Geldhof et al., 2015), position the football field not merely as

a venue for physical activity but as a developmental context where they reconstruct themselves and their social environments. While this finding parallels previous qualitative studies emphasizing that sports serve as an important setting for PYD (Jones et al., 2011; Holt, 2016), it differs methodologically. Rather than inquiring about these developmental dimensions through standardized scales, our study elicited them by drawing on the children's own metaphorical worlds. Thus, the research makes the developmental outcomes of sports visible through the children's own meaning-making processes, rather than through a researcher-centered conceptualization.

Competence: Understanding Football as a Domain of Ability

The "Competence" dimension's highest frequency in the study suggests that children perceive football primarily as a domain of ability and athletic proficiency. Metaphors such as "cheetah," "wall," "magician," "Hulk," and "Messi"—along with subthemes like speed, technical skill, defense, and game intelligence—suggest that children see themselves as "effective actors" on the football field. Examining the rationale behind these metaphors shows that perceived competence is not limited to physical strength alone (cheetah, gorilla); as seen in metaphors like "fox" or "magician," it also encompasses game intelligence, tactical timing, and problem-solving skills. This finding aligns with the PYD literature, which states that competence encompasses cognitive and strategic functioning beyond physical performance (Geldhof et al., 2015).

In particular, the use of the "fox" metaphor, with justifications such as "I'm cunning" and "I'll take the ball without the opponent noticing," shows that children conceptualize the game not merely as a physical activity but as a mental process that requires reading the opponent. The dominance of the "Competence" dimension indicates that the football experience serves as a performance-centered starting point for children; however, this perception of competence does not exclude the other four developmental dimensions (character, self-confidence, social bonds, and compassion). Indeed, the literature indicates that young athletes do not limit their experiences to athletic skills alone but integrate them with coach-peer relationships and life skills (Gerabinis & Goudas, 2019; Jones & Lavalley, 2009; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). Consequently, this focus on the Competence dimension can be interpreted as football serving as a foundation that nurtures other areas of development.

Character: Understanding Football as a Realm of Effort, Discipline, and Responsibility

In the study, the "Character" dimension ranked second, on par with "Competence," with 17 metaphors. Metaphors such as "ant," "bee," "disciplined," "leader," and "ship's captain" indicate that children perceive football not merely as a realm of athletic performance, but as a developmental arena grounded in discipline, work ethic, responsibility, and leadership. These findings align with the PYD literature, which defines the "Character" dimension as encompassing moral integrity, responsibility, self-regulation, and prosocial behavior (Lerner et al., 2005b; Vierimaa et al., 2018).

In particular, the "ant" and "bee" metaphors, while emphasizing effort and consistency in work, offer a critical distinction from competence. If Competence answers

the question “What can I do?” Character answers “How do I approach this process?” The emphasis on children’s compliance with coaches’ instructions and discipline confirms that football is a rule-based, structured social environment. In this context, the “school” metaphor suggests that the field is not merely a place to acquire skills but a developmental context where behavioral norms are learned. This implicit perception aligns with findings supporting the transferability of self-regulation skills developed in a sports environment to academic or other areas of life (Pierce et al., 2022; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). However, rather than treating this finding as a causal claim that “football directly fosters character education,” it should be interpreted cautiously as indicating that children see the sports environment as a learning setting where social behavior and relationships are shaped.

Within the “character” dimension’s subthemes of leadership and responsibility, the “ship’s captain” and “leader” metaphors stand out. The expression “steering the team into port” suggests the child sees themselves not merely as a player but as an active agent who shapes the team’s direction. As the literature emphasizes, structured sports environments offer young people the opportunity to develop leadership skills (Holt et al., 2017; Pierce et al., 2022). The “ship’s captain” metaphor—which concretizes leadership not merely as a title but as the responsibility to guide the group toward a specific goal—is one of the strongest pieces of evidence showing how prosocial orientations integrate with character development.

Confidence: Understanding Football as a Space for Positive Self-Concept and Emotional Experience

In the study, the “Confidence” dimension—represented by 15 metaphors—shows that children see football not merely as a space to demonstrate their athletic skills, but as an experience where they feel positive about themselves, develop self-worth, and express themselves freely. These findings align directly with the conceptualization of “Confidence” in the 5C model (Lerner et al., 2005b). The association of children’s statements such as “I run fast” with “Competence,” and statements like “I’m gaining confidence” and “I feel free” with “Confidence,” clarifies the conceptual distinction between “can-do” (functional competence) and “being” (psychological well-being) in children’s football experiences.

The high frequency of the metaphors “happiness” ($f=5$) and “excitement” demonstrates that football generates a high level of positive emotional intensity and engagement for children. Children’s use of the phrase “I’m gaining confidence” indicates that football bridges the gap between perceived self-efficacy and self-worth (Geldhof et al., 2015). These metaphors confirm that, in children’s minds, football is encoded not as an external performance activity but as a space for subjective well-being.

In particular, the “free” metaphor—based on the rationale that “I do everything the way I want”—supports the idea that football provides an environment that meets the need for autonomy. As the literature emphasizes, coaches’ approaches that support autonomy significantly increase young athletes’ intrinsic motivation and enjoyment of the sport (Álvarez et al., 2009; Koh & Camiré, 2015). Children’s ability to position

themselves as active agents on the football field is directly related to their perception of autonomy in decision-making processes within the game.

This study's original contribution is making the "Confidence" dimension visible through children's own metaphorical narratives. Rather than offering stock answers such as "my self-confidence is increasing," children have constructed their own experiential worlds using images of happiness, excitement, and freedom. Consequently, while children describe what they can do in the "Competence" dimension and how they behave in the "Character" dimension, they center the "Confidence" dimension on how they feel while playing football, framing the sport as a holistic tool for emotional empowerment.

Connection: Understanding Football as a Space for Belonging and Social Relationships

The "Connection" dimension, represented by 17 metaphors in the study, reveals that children view football not merely as a space for individual performance, but as a context for belonging and social integration. Metaphors such as "family," "home," and "brotherhood" indicate that the football team serves as a social structure that provides children with emotional security and closeness. These findings align with the meaningful relationships formed within the social environment, as predicted by the Connection dimension within the PYD framework (Jelicic et al., 2007; Holt et al., 2017). The children's emphasis on "sharing both sorrow and joy" transforms the football experience from an individual "I" perspective to a collective "we" experience; it confirms the decisive role of peer support and a sense of belonging in the sports environment on young people's positive developmental outcomes (Holt et al., 2017; Arnold & Massey, 2026).

Social bonds within the "Connection" dimension are not limited to a single form. While the "chain" and "bridge" metaphors symbolize relational attachment and mutual dependence, the "park" and "amusement park" metaphors highlight the importance of shared fun and enjoyable experiences in establishing social bonds. As the literature emphasizes (Asher & McDonald, 2010; Eime et al., 2013), peer interaction and fun—alongside competition—are critical motivational factors in sustaining children's participation in sports. The fact that children's social bonding processes are not always limited to task-oriented interactions demonstrates the power of spontaneous interaction inherent in play for socialization.

In conclusion, "Connection" reveals that football exhibits a multilayered structure in the child's mind along the axis of belonging → relationship-building → acting together. Beyond supporting individual development, football is a context where social norms and peer solidarity are internalized and where social development takes place. The key point is that the data reveals not so much that football creates a sense of belonging, but that children interpret their football experiences through the themes of belonging and social connection.

Caring/Compassion: Interpreting Football as a Domain of Prosocial Orientation

In the study, the Caring/Compassion dimension—represented by 11 metaphors—includes empathy, mutual aid, and prosocial orientations. Metaphors such as "sharing headphones," "pressing the 'heal' button," "a torch in Minecraft," and "planting a sapling"

demonstrate that children interpret the football experience not merely as a means of belonging to a group, but as a way to recognize others' needs, protect them, and contribute to the common good (prosocial behavior). This finding clarifies the conceptual distinction between the "being connected" focus of the Connection dimension and the "caring about the well-being of others" focus of the Caring/Compassion dimension (Geldhof et al., 2015). "Moving as a team" (Connection) gives way to direct helping behaviors such as "picking up a fallen teammate" or "looking out for a friend."

The metaphors "healing" and "reaching out" show that children project symbols from digital culture or everyday life onto cooperation on the football field. In particular, the "torch in Minecraft" metaphor reveals that the child defines their role not only through individual performance but also through the theme of "illuminating the path for others and protecting them." This situation highlights the fine line between responsibility in the "Character" dimension and benefiting others in the "Caring" dimension; the fundamental issue is no longer simply taking on responsibility, but using that responsibility to benefit others (Gano-Overway et al., 2009). The "sharing headphones" metaphor, by contrast, points directly to emotional sharing and empathy, showing how positive emotions shift from individual experiences into a collective emotional state.

One of the study's most powerful metaphors, "planting a sapling," symbolizes football as a process of growing together. This metaphor perfectly embodies the core assumption of the PYD approach—that individual development is intertwined with the social context (Lerner et al., 2005b). The fact that social development in the children's metaphors exhibits an intertwined rather than categorical structure demonstrates that they perceive the football experience not as a collection of independent developmental processes, but as a pattern of experiences that nourish one another.

Reading the 5 Cs Together: The Emergence of Football as a Developmental Context

A holistic analysis of the five dimensions shows that children make sense of their football experiences not as disconnected categories, but within a nonlinear developmental pattern ranging from individual competence to prosocial orientation. In children's minds, this pattern represents the following developmental continuum:

Individual Competence → Positive Self-Concept → Character → Social Bond → Prosocial Orientation

Rather than a linear causality, this model presents a "semantic hierarchy" in which children first recognize their own capabilities in a sports setting; this awareness then nourishes processes of self-worth (self) and discipline (character); and finally, these internal gains transform into bonds with others and compassion (prosocial orientation). Our research argues that this structure is not a rigid deterministic model; rather, it is an interpretive conceptual map in which children's football experience evolves from a self-centered pursuit of success to a "we"-centered climate of solidarity.

This finding provides significant evidence that the 5C model in the PYD literature can be interpreted not only as a static classification but also as a dynamic developmental

process within the context of sports. Viewed through this map of meaning, football is not merely a sporting activity; it is reconceptualized as an integrated developmental ecosystem where children can integrate their own inner potential with prosocial values such as social responsibility and compassion.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the use of convenience sampling restricts the generalizability of the results, as the participants were selected from specific football academies accessible to the researcher. Future studies could employ stratified or random sampling to include a more diverse range of children from different geographical and socio-economic backgrounds.

In addition to the data were collected using a single open-ended metaphor prompt. While this allowed for spontaneous and authentic responses, it may not capture the full depth of children's experiences that a semi-structured interview or multiple prompts might reveal.

Also, as this research is based on cross-sectional data, it provides a snapshot of how children make sense of their football experiences at a specific point in time. It is crucial to emphasize that this study does not establish a causal relationship between football participation and developmental outcomes. Rather, we demonstrate that children interpret their sports experiences through the specific meaning-making processes aligned with these developmental dimensions. Thus, the findings illustrate the children's perspective on the multidimensional nature of their environment rather than providing evidence of developmental changes over time. Longitudinal studies are warranted to explore how these metaphorical perceptions evolve as children progress through their athletic and developmental journeys.

CONCLUSION

Children's metaphors suggest they see football not merely as a sport played well, but as a multidimensional developmental and social space where they feel capable of accomplishing things, see themselves as valuable and competent, develop effort and responsibility, form bonds with others, and care about their teammates. Indeed, this suggests that, from the children's perspective, the football experience is perceived not as an environment where the 5 Cs of PYD emerge separately, but rather as an integrated developmental context in which competence, self, character, social bonds, and prosocial orientation gain meaning in an interrelated manner.

This study's original contribution is to reveal these developmental meaning domains related to children's football experience not through pre-structured scale items, but through the children's own metaphorical narratives. Thus, while the PYD's 5C framework provides a theoretical basis for explaining how children make sense of their football experiences, the metaphors reveal the everyday and cultural images through which children express these developmental meanings.

Kısaltmalar / Abbreviations

PYD — Positive Youth Development (PYD)

5C — Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring/Compassion

Beyanlar / Declarations

Etik Onay ve Katılım Onayı / Ethics approval and consent to participate

Bu çalışmanın hazırlanması ve yazımı sürecinde, "Yükseköğretim Kurumları Bilimsel Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği Yönergesi"ne uygun olarak bilimsel, etik ve atıf ilkelerine bağlı kalınmıştır. Çalışma sırasında toplanan veriler üzerinde herhangi bir değişiklik yapılmamış olup, bu makale değerlendirilmek üzere başka herhangi bir akademik yayın platformuna gönderilmemiştir. Çalışmada kullanılan veri toplama süreçleri ve araçları, Erzincan Binali Yıldırım Üniversitesi İnsan Araştırmaları, Sağlık ve Spor Bilimleri Etik Kurulu tarafından etik açıdan incelenmiş ve onaylanmıştır (Toplantı Tarihi: 24 Temmuz 2026; Protokol No.: 07/18). Yazarlar, bu makale ile bağlantılı olarak ortaya çıkabilecek olası etik ihlallerin tüm sorumluluğunu üstlenirler.

Bu çalışma 10–14 yaş aralığındaki insan katılımcıları kapsadığından, reşit olmayan bireylerle yürütülen araştırmalara ilişkin etik standartlara titizlikle uyulmuştur. Veri toplama sürecinden önce, tüm katılımcıların ebeveynlerinden veya yasal vasilerinden yazılı bilgilendirilmiş onam alınmıştır. Ayrıca, çalışmanın amacı ve niteliği çocuklara yaşlarına uygun bir dille açıklanmış ve metafor formlarını doldurmadan önce kendi gönüllü katılımları (onayları) alınmıştır. Katılımcılara, katılımlarının gönüllülük esasına dayandığı ve diledikleri zaman herhangi bir olumsuz sonuçla karşılaşmaksızın çalışmadan ayrılacakları bilgisi verilmiştir.

During the preparation and writing of this study, scientific, ethical, and citation principles were adhered to in accordance with the "Guidelines on Scientific Research and Publication Ethics for Higher Education Institutions." No changes were made to the data collected during the study, and this article has not been submitted to any other academic publication platform for review. The data collection procedures and tools used in this study were ethically reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee for Human Research, Health, and Sports Sciences at Erzincan Binali Yıldırım University (Meeting Date: July 24, 2026; Protocol No.: 07/18). The authors accept full responsibility for any potential ethical violations that may arise in connection with this article.

This study involved human participants aged 10–14; therefore, ethical standards for research with minors were strictly followed. Written informed consent was obtained from the parents or legal guardians of all participants prior to data collection. Additionally, the purpose and nature of the study were explained to the children in an age-appropriate manner, and their voluntary participation (assent) was obtained before they filled out the metaphor forms. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

Veri Ve Materyal Erişilebilirliği / Availability of data and material

Bu çalışmanın bulgularını destekleyen veriler, makul talepler üzerine sorumlu yazardan temin edilebilir. Veri seti yalnızca akademik amaçlar için erişilebilir olacak ve verilerin herhangi bir kullanımı, orijinal çalışmayı referans gösterecek ve katılımcıların gizliliğini koruyacaktır.

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The dataset will be accessible only for academic purposes, and any use of the data will recognize the original study and maintain the confidentiality of the participants.

Çıkar Çatışması / Competing interests

Yazarlar, bu makalede sunulan çalışmayı etkileyebilecek herhangi bir çıkar çatışması veya kişisel ilişkiye sahip olmadıklarını beyan etmektedirler.

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Yazar Katkıları / Authors' Contribution Statement

Yazarlar, makalenin tüm aşamalarını yürütmüş, içeriğini eleştirel olarak gözden geçirmiş ve makalenin son halini onaylamıştır.

The authors conducted all stages of the study, critically reviewed the content, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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