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ARTÍCULO DE INVESTIGACIÓN

Cambios en las habilidades sociales de los niños refugiados

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Resumen. En un contexto global en constante cambio, el desarrollo de las habilidades sociales de los niños a través de la actividad física cobra cada vez mayor importancia. El objetivo de este estudio fue identificar las características del desarrollo de habilidades sociales mediante la actividad física en niños refugiados que asistían a organizaciones que ofrecían clases de actividad física, y analizar las características de los cambios en dichas habilidades a partir de datos observacionales. La metodología de investigación se basó en una revisión bibliográfica y empleó un diseño experimental observacional. Nueve niños participaron en el estudio y fueron observados durante 16 semanas, tres veces por semana, durante 1 hora y 15 minutos cada vez. El estudio reveló que 16 semanas de actividad física (fútbol) influyeron en los cambios en las habilidades sociales de los niños refugiados, incluyendo habilidades intrapersonales, interpersonales, motoras y de comunicación, lo que facilitó su integración en la sociedad de acogida.

Palabras clave: niños refugiados, habilidades sociales, actividad física, experimento social.

Changes in the social skills of refugee children

Abstract. In a rapidly changing global context, developing children's social skills through physical activity is becoming increasingly important. The aim of this study was to identify the characteristics of social skill development through physical activity in refugee children attending organizations offering physical activity classes and to analyze the characteristics of social skill changes during physical activity based on observational data. The research methods were based on a literature review and utilized an observational experimental design. Nine children participated in the study, and were observed during physical activity classes for 16 weeks, three times a week for 1 hour and 15 minutes each. The study found that 16 weeks of physical activity (football) influenced changes in refugee children's social skills, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, motor, and communication skills, which facilitated their integration into the host society.

Keywords: refugee children, social skills, physical activity, social experiment.

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, the issue of refugees is becoming increasingly relevant due to the mass influx of refugees, whose migration is triggered by military conflicts. In 2021, nearly 90 million people worldwide were forced to flee their home countries, such as Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Afghanistan, Syria, Myanmar, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Furthermore, on 24 February 2022, due to the war in Ukraine, 8,108,448 people were forced to leave their home country (Operational Data Portal, 2023), whilst more than 7.1 million were internally displaced. Poland, which borders Ukraine, has received the largest number of refugees compared to other EU countries (Nazaruk et al., 2024).

Perhaps the most vulnerable group of refugees are children, who account for the largest percentage of forced migration (Grandi, 2022; UN 2022; Jaroszewicz et al., 2022; Official Statistics Portal, 2023). Research indicates that 81.4 per cent of people experience a traumatic event (e.g. a natural disaster, being in or fleeing a war zone, sexual violence, etc.) during their lifetime (Kvedaraite et al., 2022), and the impact of a traumatic event on a refugee causes physical and emotional disorders. It has been proven that physical activity is an innovative tool enabling refugees to integrate safely into the host country and adapt more easily to their new environment (Whitley & Gould, 2011).

Globally, the number of sports programmes designed to promote various integration processes is growing rapidly. Various physical activities, and team activities in particular, are an excellent strategy for refugee children to cope with the various challenges of integration (Stura, 2019; Anderson et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2019; Svensson et al., 2017; UN, 2019).

In a rapidly changing global context, the development of children's social skills through physical activity is becoming increasingly important (Opstoel et al., 2020). Social skills are activated and refined only through interaction with one's environment and direct engagement

with the outside world (Aldridge et al., 2018). Wright et al. (2011) argue that as children improve their social skills, they will adapt more effectively in adulthood. Research indicates that children can develop social skills through regular participation in physical activity. Physical activity can promote positive youth development, through which life skills, psychosocial and behavioural traits are acquired that last throughout an individual's lifetime (Weiss, 2011). According to Opstoel et al. (2020), various physical activities can be regarded as suitable tools for fostering social skills when educating children from any culture.

Children's development begins with the challenges of social life. They learn to adapt to changing group norms, morals or cultural traditions (Mayar, 2013; Dewi et al., 2020). A lack of social skills in children manifests itself in the development of emotional and behavioural disorders. The development of social skills aims to enhance the ability to perform basic social behaviours, which are essential for productive success in host communities (Spence, 2003).

To date, researchers have shown relatively little interest in the development of social skills in refugee children through physical activities. There is a lack of research analysing the development of social skills in refugee children through physical activity; therefore, new strategies and solutions must be sought to help reduce the challenges these children face in integrating into society (Collison et al., 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

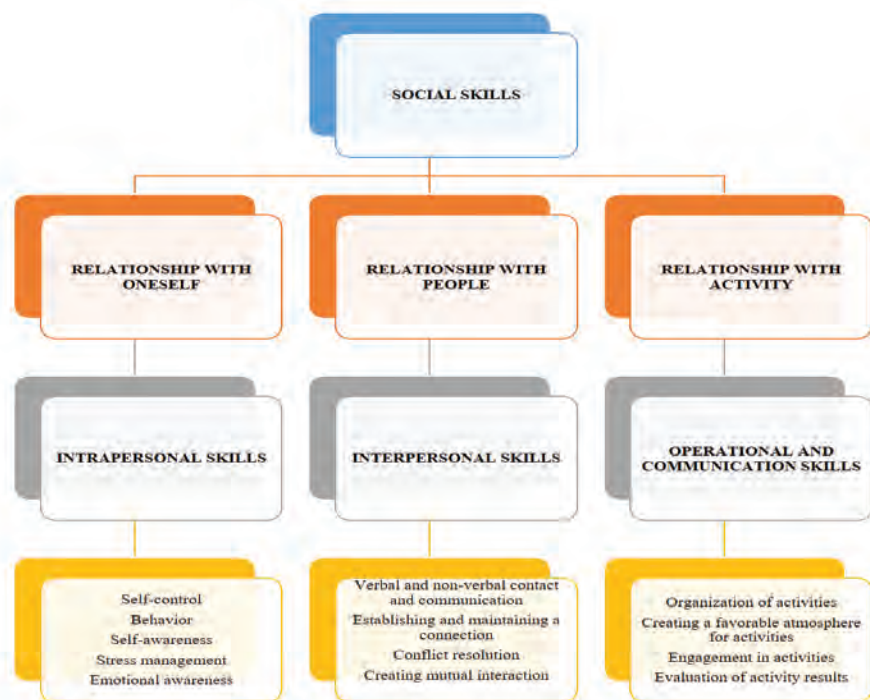
Development of social skills through physical activity

Societies in every country are changing rapidly and facing the complex life challenges of refugee children in host communities; to overcome these, social skills are becoming increasingly important for success in social situations (Radley, Dart, 2022; Pannebakker et al., 2019).

Del Prette et al. (2021) define social skills as social behaviour that is valued within a particular culture, a construct that is highly likely to yield favourable outcomes for an individual, a group of individuals or a community, and which can contribute to socially competent interaction when performing interpersonal tasks.

The concept of the construct under analysis is multifaceted in scientific research. Researchers examining social skills in their scientific works (Gresham and Elliot, 1987; Kemerienė et al., 2001; Gresham, 2002; Šniras, Malinauskas, 2006; Raudeliūnaitė, 2007; Vosylienė, 2009; Gudžinskienė, 2023; Panayiotou, 2022; de Sousa, Peixoto, and Cruz, 2023; Mačėnaitė, 2024) define social skills in a similar manner by analysing intrapersonal interpersonal, and activity and communication skills. The areas of social skills categorisation are presented in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. Areas of social skills classification (compiled based on Gresham (2002), Raudeliūnaitė (2007), Kemeriene et al., 2001).



Source: Compiled by the authors based on Gresham (2002), Raudeliūnaitė (2007), Kemeriene et al., 2001).

Figure 1 shows that intrapersonal, interpersonal, and activity and communication skills are all related to an individual's ability to respond to, understand and control their own psyche, to communicate through verbal and non-verbal contact, and to cooperate with those around them. There are two main types of social skills – basic and complex – and the former must be learnt in order to acquire the latter. The learning process begins in childhood and develops mainly during adolescence, when adult communication and relationship skills are acquired. Social skills are an essential means of channelling social relationships into personal well-being (Radley, Dart, 2022; Pannebakker et al., 2019).

Children and young people with a lack of social skills are at greater risk of experiencing significant difficulties at school and beyond (Panayiotou, Santos, Black, & Humphre, 2022). Various methodologies can be employed to measure social skills, particularly systematic observations, semi-structured interviews, sociometric assessments, self-assessment scales, role-playing tests, problem-solving scenarios and standardised behavioural assessment scales (Whitcomb, 2022).

In a rapidly changing global context, the development of children's social skills during physical activity is becoming increasingly important (Opstoel et al., 2020). Social skills are activated and refined solely through interaction with one's environment and direct engagement with the outside world (Aldridge et al., 2018). Wright et al. (2011) argue that as children improve their social skills, they will adapt more effectively in adulthood. Research indicates that children can

develop social skills through regular participation in physical activity. Physical activity can promote positive youth development, through which life skills, psychosocial and behavioural traits are acquired that last throughout an individual's lifetime (Weiss, 2011). According to Opstoel et al. (2020), various physical activities can be considered suitable tools for developing social skills when educating children from any culture.

A lack of social skills in children manifests itself in the development of emotional and behavioural disorders. The aim of social skills training is to enhance the ability to perform basic social behaviours, which are essential for productive success within host communities (Spence, 2003).

Wright et al. (2020) argue that during physical activity, social skills learning competencies—such as self-awareness, interpersonal skills and responsible decision-making—are effectively integrated. Orr et al. (2021) state that children and young people with social skills difficulties face challenges that hinder their participation in their community and in the process of physical literacy. The study revealed that incorporating physical literacy into the community's daily activities has a positive impact on the development of social skills. Social skills training programmes for children and young people have a positive impact on the development of social skills, such as conveying knowledge through physical exercises, building self-confidence and trust in others, improving interpersonal skills, and distinguishing not only positive but also negative emotions (de Mooij et al., 2020).

The benefits of physical activity programmes provide every child with the opportunity to improve their physical fitness, enhance their psychological well-being, and, through physical activity, develop social skills; it has been observed that this leads to stronger, more sustainable social relationships (Sibson et al., 2020).

The significance of physical activity for refugee children

The international scientific community widely recognises the benefits of physical activity for the physical and mental health and well-being of children and adolescents. Physical activity helps children build a strong body, maintain stable mental health, and foster healthy relationships with peers and adults (Bull et al., 2020; Sjögren Forss et al., 2021). Refugee children face low levels of physical activity. A report by the United Nations Children's Fund (hereinafter UNICEF) states that more than 80 per cent of children worldwide, including refugee children, do not meet the recommendation to engage in 60 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity per day. Research has shown that participation in physical activities can help refugee children form social bonds with their peers, transcending national borders and language barriers. As refugee children have limited opportunities to participate in organised sport and exercise, their engagement in informal physical activity, such as active play, is particularly important (Chen et al., 2021; Sjögren Forss et al., 2021).

For several decades, it has been recognised that participation in physical activity programmes is beneficial for children and young people in at-risk groups; however, it is only in the last decade that the potential benefits for refugee children and young people have been more actively explored. A study by Capalbo and Carlman (2022) demonstrated that participation in physical activity programmes designed for refugee children can help them reduce post-traumatic stress,

interact more effectively with peers and adults, and learn positive values. Adamakis's (2022) study revealed that the mental and psychosocial well-being of refugee children and young people improved. The programme actively enabled refugee children and young people to participate in physical activities such as football, basketball, volleyball, and endurance and strength training, which also fostered team building, promoted tolerance, and broke down gender barriers.

Researchers state that for many refugee children and young people, football is a popular physical activity that holds significant social value within their own communities and provides an opportunity to forge links with new communities (Pink et al., 2020). A review of research conducted by Spaaij et al. (2019) highlighted that football is the most frequently cited sport in studies involving refugees, and that the benefits of physical activity for them include social inclusion and holistic well-being. The potential benefits of physical activity programmes for refugee children and young people could help alleviate the stress experienced during integration into host communities. A study by Whitley & Gould (2011) found that football is a popular international activity that can bring people from different cultures together and provide a safe space for refugees as they settle into a new environment.

Olliff (2008) noted that physical activity can provide a space where refugee children and young people can regularly participate in their chosen physical activity, build trust with peers and adults, and reflect on their experiences. Participation in such physical activities serves as a form of therapy that helps them escape the daily challenges of life in a foreign country and learn more about the community into which they are integrating. Koopmans & Doidge (2022) analysed the 'Sport Development and Peace' project, a sports initiative running in a refugee camp in Uganda. The results of the study revealed that by participating in sports and games, refugee children strengthened their trust not only in themselves but also in their peers and adults. The study showed that participation in various games also allowed refugee children and young people to experience setbacks, which in turn enables them to develop skills and confidence. A study by Doidge, Keech, & Sandri (2020) identified three key areas for successful integration: firstly, a positive attitude towards refugees on the part of coaches can facilitate integration; secondly, engaging in physical activity in a safe, pleasant and welcoming environment; thirdly, sport is a positive social activity for young people of refugee background if the focus is on enjoyable moments and social interaction rather than solely on sporting skills. An analysis of the study by O'Donnell, Stuart, Barber & Abkhezr (2020) revealed that refugees from socially and economically disadvantaged communities who participated in sport experienced fewer difficulties than refugee children and young people from the same communities who did not participate in sport. The study showed that participation in sporting activities can act as a preventive factor against emotional and behavioural problems among refugee children and young people. Previous research has demonstrated how sport-based programmes can promote the development of moral, social, emotional and behavioural competencies. Research by Whitley, Massey & Wilkison (2018) suggests that sport can have a positive impact on the lives of refugee youth if the right environment is created, along with opportunities to develop physical, personal and social skills, and meaningful interaction with adults and peers. In a sporting environment, children and young people can gain positive experiences, such as a sense of community, and develop various skills, such as personal responsibility, time management, emotional regulation, teamwork, self-confidence, leadership skills and conflict resolution skills. Young people can also gain benefits

unrelated to the immediate sporting environment (e.g. social capital, transfer of life skills). Physical activities can help refugees learn the social skills needed to adapt to life in the host community (Middleton et al., 2021; Kaya, Faulkner, Baber, & Rotich, 2022).

Researchers investigating the benefits of physical activity for refugees (Purgato et al., 2021; Nilsson et al., 2021; Knappe et al., 2019; Filippou et al., 2024) argue that physical activity recommendations should be provided not only to the general public but also to the refugee population. Regular physical activity promotes and protects the health of people of all ages and abilities. Although research on this population is limited, it has been found that insufficient physical activity is prevalent among refugees.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Observation method

Observation is one of the qualitative research methods in the social sciences. As a scientific method, observation can be used as the primary research method or as one of several complementary qualitative methods (Nicholls, 2017; Ciesielska et al., 2018). This method allows for the study of people in their natural environment, so the researcher spends a significant amount of time in that environment with the research participant(s) to gain a more detailed understanding of the subjects (Baker, 2006). According to Ciesielska et al. (2018), the term 'observation' encompasses several types, approaches and methods that must be adapted to the research problem and scientific context. Furthermore, observation can be regarded as the foundation of most people's everyday social life. During observation, we can not only observe but also evaluate (using evaluation criteria) and draw conclusions. The study employs direct observation, which takes place in a natural environment during physical activity sessions and for the assessment of activities (Gouveia et al., 2021). *The observation instrument* was developed based on theoretical analysis, highlighting the most important social skills, which consist of specific abilities. Social skills were assessed according to specific abilities on a scale of 1 to 5 (the observation protocol's assessment scores were based on a Likert scale: 1 – very poor skills, 2 – poor skills, 3 – satisfactory skills, 4 – good skills, 5 – very good skills). The average score for each of these skills indicates their level (level is understood here as the degree of quality of the skills measured by scores: from level 1 to level 5, etc.). The observation method aims to reveal the development of social skills during physical activity, such as adherence to rules, respect for oneself and others, self-confidence, verbal and non-verbal communication skills, and appropriate decision-making. The observation was conducted in accordance with Kardelis' (2016) recommendations. The study participants were observed at the start of the physical activity session, during the physical activity session, and at the end of the physical activity session.

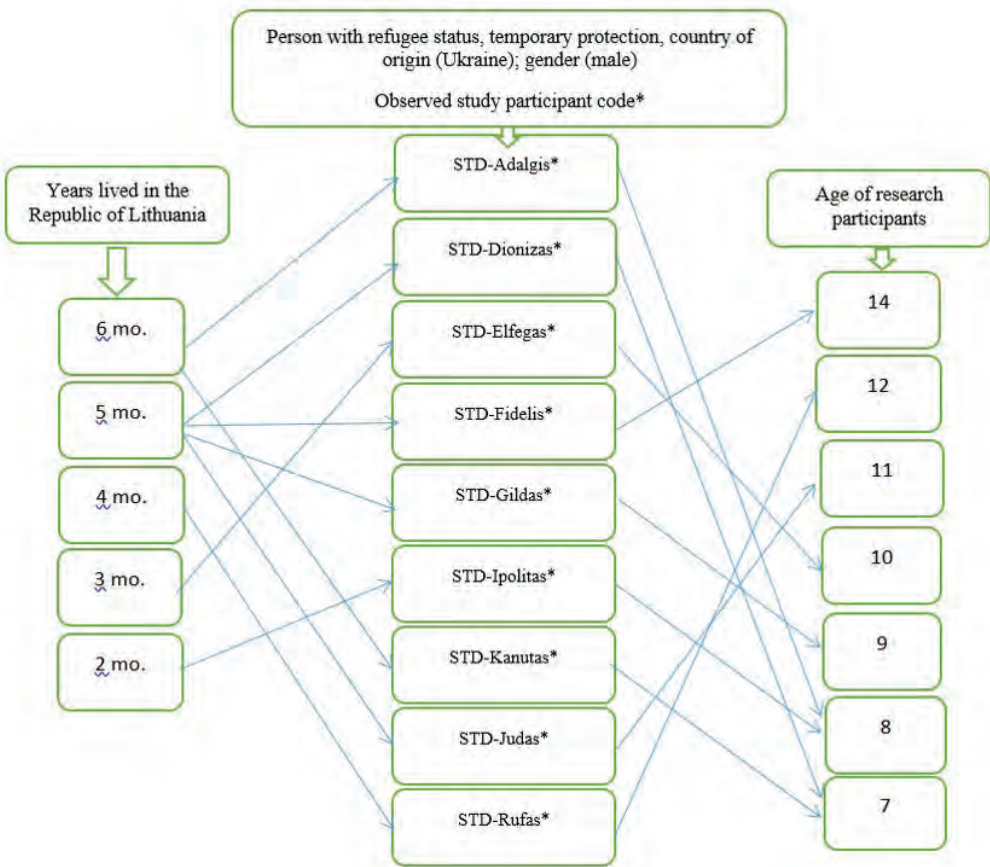
The study participants were unaware that they were being observed and therefore behaved naturally. The qualitative research observation protocol was developed based on studies conducted by researchers investigating social skills (Combs, Slaby, 1977; Gresham and Elliot, 1987; Gresham, 2002; Kemerienė et al., 2001; Šniras, Malinauskas, 2006) on essential (basic) social skills, which are most important for the positive socialisation of the child.

Participants in the observational study (hereinafter referred to as STD) were given pseudonyms and identified as STD-Bogumilas, STD-Damazas, STD-Adalgis, STD-Dionizas, STD-Elfegas, STD-Fidelis, STD-Gildas, STD-Ipolitas, STD-Kanutas, STD-Judas, STD-Rufas.

Sample selection method

The research participants were selected using a purposive sampling method. Researchers widely employ this method in qualitative research to identify cases containing more information related to the phenomenon of interest. Purposive sampling most commonly involves selection based on predetermined criteria (Patton, 2014; Palinkas et al., 2015), so the study participants selected were children with refugee status in the Republic of Lithuania. The characteristics of the qualitative study participants are presented in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2. Characteristics of participants in the qualitative observation (N=9).



Source: compiled by the authors.

The figure shows that the sample for the qualitative observational study consisted of 9 participants (N=9). Nielsen (2003) states that the sample size in qualitative research is not particularly relevant; a study can be conducted even with a sample of fewer than five participants. Although the sample size is small (N=9), the chosen observation method allowed for data saturation to be achieved.

Study date

Observation of nine Ukrainian children during physical activity in 2022, 16 weeks, 3 times per week, 1 hour 15 minutes per session. The study was conducted in September-December 2022, at the X Football Club, in the outdoor and indoor stadium, three times per week, according to a pre-determined schedule of classes, in which children of Ukrainian nationality with temporary protection status in the Republic of Lithuania were observed (n=9 males, average age ± 9.63).

RESULTS

Figure 3 presents the social skills results for the entire observed sample before and after the educational experimental study (mean scores), whilst Table 1 presents the overall assessment results. It is worth noting that the data obtained confirm changes in social skills during physical activity (football) before and after the educational experimental study.

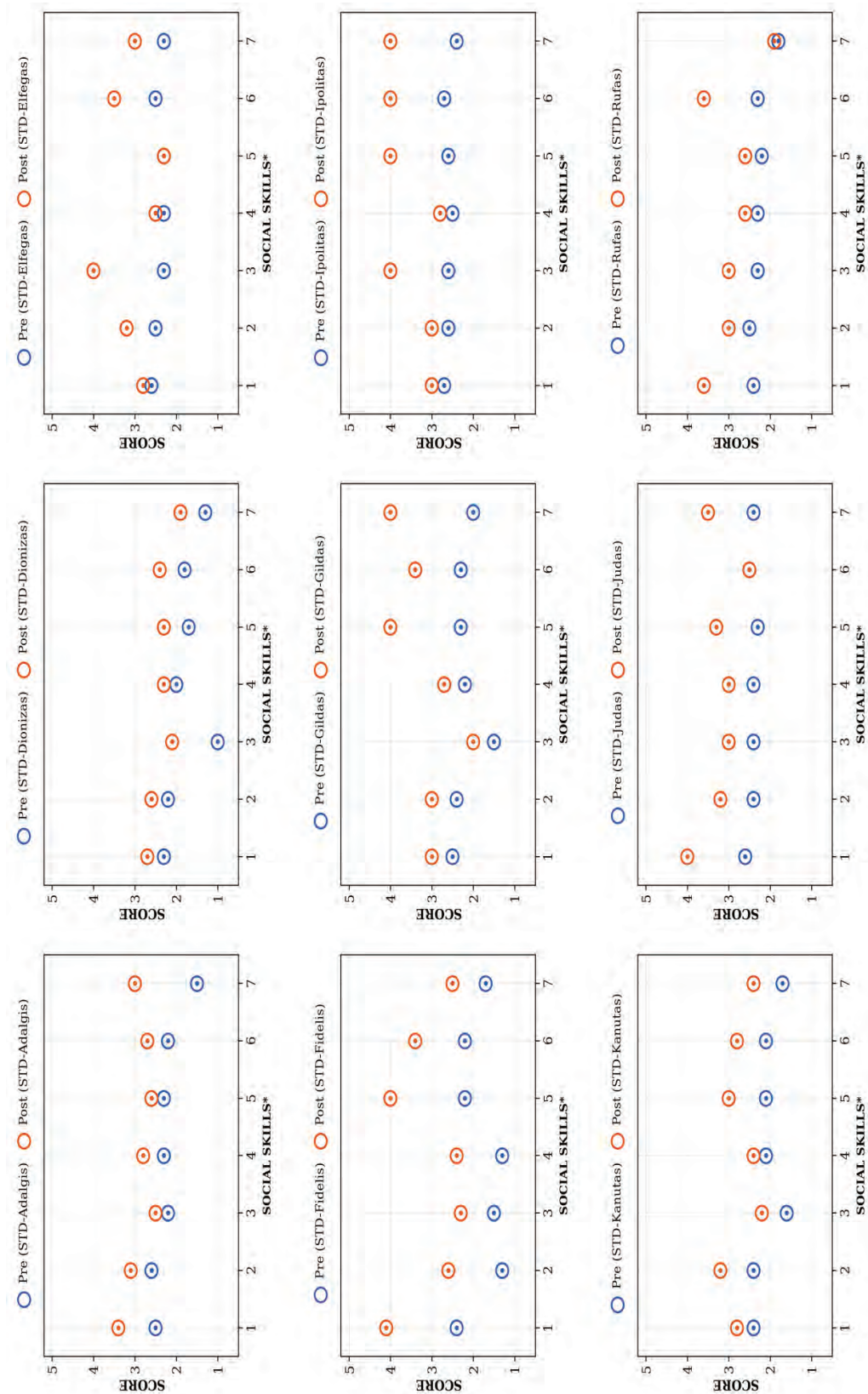
The figure shows that STD-Adalgis had satisfactorily developed several key social skills *prior to the study* – behaviour on the football pitch, communication skills, and self-awareness skills (mean score 2.45 ± 0.15), but had not sufficiently developed conflict resolution skills on the football pitch. The results obtained *after the study* show not entirely positive changes in key social skills. Minor changes were observed in the very well and well-developed skills of conflict resolution on the football pitch (mean score 2.0 ± 0.69) and self-awareness skills (mean score 2.48 ± 0.25). The greatest changes were observed in behaviour on the football pitch (mean score of 2.96 ± 0.40) and communication skills (mean score of 2.78 ± 0.22).

The results obtained during the observation show that there is not a single outstanding social skill that the STD-Dionizas study participant had not developed or had not developed excellently prior to the study. *Prior to the study*, the participant STD-Dionizas had well-developed behaviour on the football pitch, communication skills, and self-awareness (mean score of 2.17 ± 0.15). The results obtained *after the study* show positive changes in all essential social skills.

The figure shows the average scores for STD-Elfegas' key social skills before and after the main study. *Before the study*, the average score for all skills was 2.37 ± 0.14 . *After the study*, positive changes were observed in all skills (average score 3.06 ± 0.57). During the study, it was observed that the participant STD-Elfegas actively participated in the sessions and responded to the trainer's feedback.

The results of the key social skills of the study participant STD-Fidelis before and after the main study are discussed. It was observed *prior to the study* that several skills were poor (communication skills, emotional awareness, self-awareness skills, conflict resolution skills on the football pitch – average score of 1.42 ± 0.21) and were satisfactorily developed (behaviour on the football pitch, self-control skills, stress management skills – average score of 2.32 ± 0.12). The results obtained *after the study* show positive changes compared to the pre-study situation in poorly developed skills (communication skills, emotional awareness, self-awareness, conflict resolution skills on the football pitch, mean score 2.44 ± 0.10) and in areas where skills were insufficiently developed (behaviour on the football pitch, self-control skills, stress management skills, mean score 3.83 ± 0.29).

FIGURE 3. Evaluation of core social skills of observational study participants (STD) before and after the study.



Note: Social skills* 1-behavior on the football pitch; 2-communication skills; 3-feeling awareness skills; 4-self-awareness skills; 5-self-control skills; 6-stress management skills; 7-conflict resolution capabilities on the football pitch.

TABLE 1. Mean scores for the assessment of social skills among study participants (N=9) during observation.

Social Skill Domain and Components	Pre-Intervention Mean (SD)	Post-Intervention Mean (SD)	Mean Shift (Δ)	Status
1. Behavior Components on the Football Pitch				
Component 1.1	1.00 (0.00)	3.66 (0.50)	+2.66	Significant Improvement
Component 1.2	1.20 (0.42)	2.27 (1.37)	+1.07	Moderate Improvement
Component 1.3	1.66 (0.70)	3.33 (0.50)	+1.67	Significant Improvement
Component 1.4	1.44 (0.52)	3.00 (0.50)	+1.56	Significant Improvement
Component 1.5	1.77 (0.66)	3.00 (0.70)	+1.23	Significant Improvement
Component 1.6	1.66 (0.70)	3.00 (0.70)	+1.34	Significant Improvement
Component 1.7	1.77 (0.83)	3.44 (0.52)	+1.67	Significant Improvement
2. Communication Skill Components				
Component 2.1	1.11 (0.33)	3.11 (0.78)	+2.00	Significant Improvement
Component 2.2	1.66 (0.86)	2.88 (0.60)	+1.22	Significant Improvement
Component 2.3	1.44 (0.72)	2.55 (0.52)	+1.11	Significant Improvement
Component 2.4	1.77 (1.09)	2.77 (0.83)	+1.00	Moderate Improvement
Component 2.5	1.88 (0.78)	3.00 (0.50)	+1.12	Significant Improvement
Component 2.6	1.66 (1.00)	2.77 (0.66)	+1.11	Moderate Improvement
Component 2.7	2.22 (0.97)	3.22 (0.83)	+1.00	Moderate Improvement
Component 2.8	2.23 (1.00)	3.33 (0.50)	+1.10	Significant Improvement
3. Feeling Awareness Components				
Component 3.1	1.55 (0.52)	3.22 (0.75)	+1.67	Significant Improvement
Component 3.2	2.00 (0.50)	3.00 (0.86)	+1.00	Moderate Improvement
4. Self-Awareness Components				
Component 4.1	1.55 (1.13)	2.77 (0.83)	+1.22	Moderate Improvement
Component 4.2	1.77 (0.44)	3.11 (0.92)	+1.34	Significant Improvement
Component 4.3	2.66 (0.50)	3.11 (0.60)	+0.45	Slight Progress
Component 4.4	1.77 (1.09)	3.11 (0.92)	+1.34	Significant Improvement
5. Self-Control Components				
Component 5.1	1.66 (0.86)	3.33 (0.70)	+1.67	Significant Improvement
Component 5.2	1.88 (0.60)	3.11 (0.92)	+1.23	Significant Improvement
Component 5.3	2.44 (0.52)	3.22 (0.66)	+0.78	Moderate Improvement
6. Stress Management Components				
Component 6.1	1.66 (0.50)	3.11 (1.05)	+1.45	Significant Improvement
Component 6.2	2.22 (0.44)	3.11 (0.60)	+0.89	Moderate Improvement
Component 6.3	2.44 (0.88)	3.55 (0.72)	+1.11	Significant Improvement
Component 6.4	2.33 (0.70)	2.88 (0.92)	+0.55	Slight Progress
7. Conflict Resolution Components				
Component 7.1	1.00 (0.00)	3.22 (1.20)	+2.22	Significant Improvement
Component 7.2	1.66 (1.00)	3.33 (1.00)	+1.67	Significant Improvement
Component 7.3	1.66 (1.00)	3.11 (1.05)	+1.45	Significant Improvement
Component 7.4	1.77 (0.44)	3.00 (1.32)	+1.23	Significant Improvement

Source: compiled by the authors.

sigue ➡

Note: *Components of social skills** 1.1. Follows the planned activity schedule; 1.2. Follows instructions/directions given during the activity; 1.3. Is able to say thank you; 1.4. Is able to respond to encouragement/comments; 1.5. Does not react to strangers near the football pitch; 1.6. Is attentive; 1.7. Listens to the coach or a peer. 2.1. Is permitted to communicate with others in their native language (Arabic, Ukrainian, etc.); 2.2. Easily joins in with group activities; 2.3. Expresses themselves both verbally and non-verbally; 2.4. Easily establishes and maintains a good relationship with coaches; 2.5. Easily establishes and maintains good relationships with peers; 2.6. Communicates actively; 2.7. Is able to listen and listens actively; 2.8. Engages in sincere reflection (feedback). 3. 1. Is able to manage both positive and negative emotions; 3.2. Is able to identify their feelings and express them. 4.1. Recognises their weaknesses; 4.2. Is able to show their feelings; 4.3. Is able to perform what they know best; 4.4. Able to describe their feelings. 5.1. Able to take on a leadership role/responsibility; 5.2. Able to understand the influence of needs, rights and responsibilities on decision-making; 5.3. Able to work as part of a team. 6.1. Reacts appropriately to defeat; 6.2. Reacts appropriately to victory; 6.3. Expresses dissatisfaction; 6.4. Is able to say 'NO' or 'YES'. 7.1. Provocative conflict; 7.2. Tends to blame others in conflict situations; 7.3. Able to resolve disputes without fighting; 7.4. Able to accept another person's opinion during a conflict.

Note. Values are expressed as Mean (Standard Deviation). Δ indicates the absolute shift in mean score.

* Indicates component tracked in alignment with football-field physical interaction criteria

The figure shows the mean scores for the essential social skills of study participant STD-Gildas before and after the main study. It is observed *prior to the study* that several skills are poorly developed (emotional awareness skills, with an average score of 1.5 ± 0.70) and satisfactorily developed (behaviour on the football pitch, communication skills, self-awareness skills, self-control skills, stress management skills, conflict resolution skills on the football pitch, with an average score of 2.29 ± 0.15). The results obtained *after the study* show positive changes in skills that were poorly and inadequately developed prior to the study (emotional awareness skills: mean score of 1.83 ± 0.26 , behaviour on the football pitch: mean score of 2.76 ± 0.24 , communication skills: mean score of 2.75 ± 0.26 , self-awareness skills: mean score of 2.46 ± 0.23 , self-control skills: mean score of 3.25 ± 0.79 , stress management skills: mean score of 2.90 ± 0.50 , conflict resolution skills on the football pitch: 3.16 ± 0.91 points).

The results of the study participant STD-Ipolitas' essential social skills before and after the main study are discussed. It was observed that *prior to the study*, the scores for most essential social skills were satisfactory (an average of 2.57 ± 0.11 points). This indicates that the social skills of the study participant STD-Ipolitas have been developed to a satisfactory level. The results obtained *after the study* show positive changes in the skills that were developed to a satisfactory level prior to the study (mean score of 3.23 ± 0.58).

The figure shows that the study participant STD-Kanutas had poorly developed skills in emotional awareness, stress management and conflict resolution on the football pitch *prior to the study* (mean score of 1.71 ± 0.23), whilst his behaviour on the football pitch, communication skills, self-awareness skills and self-control skills, with an average score of 2.24 ± 0.24 . The results obtained *after the study* show positive changes in all essential social skills, with an average score of 2.71 ± 0.37 .

The figure shows the mean scores for essential social skills on the STD-Judas scale before and after the main study. *Before the study*, the average score for all skills was 2.48 ± 0.10 . *After the study*, positive changes were observed in all skills, with an average score of 3.26 ± 0.40 .

The figure shows that there is not a single specific social skill that the STD-Rufas study participant had not developed or developed to a high standard prior to the study. *Prior to* the study, the STD-Rufas participant had poorly developed conflict resolution skills on the football pitch, with an average score of 1.81 ± 0.08 . The results obtained *after the study* show positive changes in all essential social skills.

DISCUSSION

The observational method chosen for this qualitative study helped to reveal changes in the development of social skills through physical activity. The data obtained from our educational experimental study show that changes in social skills occur through physical activity. Observation of the study participants revealed that children lack social skills relating to both their relationships with others (interpersonal skills) and their relationship with themselves (intrapersonal skills). The results of a study conducted by Levent et al. (2017) showed that the main challenge for refugees in Turkey in successfully integrating into society is a lack of verbal communication; similarly, Alkalay et al. (2021) state that refugee children experience language difficulties during their adaptation in a foreign country. Temel et al. (2023) state that refugee children in host countries face language difficulties and tend to be shy, with weak social skills, whilst Barry et al. (2018) highlight that every individual requires social skills for effective conflict resolution, the ability to ask for help when needed, establishing and maintaining connections, and fostering mutual interaction. Gülceğül (2020) notes that the problems experienced by refugees do not differ according to their nationality. Behroz-Sarcheshmeh et al. (2017) state that individuals acquire social skills during the socialisation process, and note that the development of social skills has a positive impact on self-control and cooperation skills. The results of the study suggest that refugee children, after attending football sessions for sixteen weeks, strengthened not only their interpersonal but also their intrapersonal skills. The nine Ukrainian refugee children who participated in the study improved their conflict resolution (6 children), communication (4 children), behaviour (4 children), emotional awareness (5 children) and stress management (6 children). The results clearly show that the development of social skills through physical activity helps to effectively resolve conflict situations and express feelings confidently (Gökel et al., 2017).

Of the 9 refugee children who participated in physical activity, 6 showed an improvement in their stress management skills, whilst 3 showed no change. Zhang et al. (2024) and Perchtold-Stefan et al. (2020) state that physical activity is recognised not only as an important stress management strategy but also as a means of improving an individual's well-being, and that individuals who regularly engage in any form of physical activity demonstrate improved cognitive functions. Bernstein et al. (2017) also stated that any form of physical activity promotes greater emotional flexibility and thus improves resilience when recovering from stressful events.

The results of our study show a consistent improvement in all social skills among one participant through participation in physical activity (football sessions). Weiss (2011) argues that

children can develop social skills through regular participation in any form of physical activity. Opstoel et al. (2020) mention that various physical activities can be considered a suitable tool for developing social skills when educating children from any culture. According to Gillham et al. (2000), social skills are one of the key factors that help children adapt effectively to any environment. Programmes designed to teach children social skills have a positive impact on the development of social skills, such as conveying knowledge through physical exercises, building self-confidence and trust in others, improving interpersonal skills, and to distinguish not only positive but also negative emotions (de Mooij et al., 2020). The benefits of physical activity programmes provide an opportunity for every child to strengthen themselves physically on a personal level; psychological well-being improves, and through the development of social skills via physical activity, it has been observed that social relationships become stronger and more sustainable (Sibson et al., 2020).

Hammack et al. (2018) emphasised the importance of social skills for an individual's purposeful activity. During the sixteen-week observation period, the participants' positive attitude towards the activities became evident. Refugee children willingly engaged in the activities offered to them (football sessions). Olliff (2008) noted that physical activity can provide a space where refugee children can regularly participate in their chosen physical activities, build trust with peers and adults, and reflect on their experiences. Participation in such physical activities serves as a form of therapy that helps them escape the daily challenges of life in a foreign country, learn more about the community into which they are integrating, and fosters a supportive environment for their activities. Whitley et al. (2018) argue that sport can have a positive impact on the lives of refugee children if the right environment is created, along with opportunities to develop physical, personal and social skills, and meaningful interaction with adults and peers. In a physical activity setting, children can gain positive experiences, such as a sense of community, and develop various skills, such as personal responsibility, time management, emotional regulation, teamwork, self-confidence, leadership skills and conflict resolution skills. Children can also gain benefits unrelated to the immediate physical activity setting (e.g. social capital, transfer of life skills). Physical activity can help refugees learn the social skills needed to adapt to life in the host community (Middleton et al., 2021; Kaya, Faulkner, Baber, & Rotich, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of scientific literature reveals that the development of social skills among refugee children during physical activity sessions in organizations is characterized by integrality, where physical activity becomes a platform for the expansion of intra-personal and inter-personal competencies. The main features of this development manifest through direct social interaction, allowing children to cultivate self-awareness, emotional control, and the ability to cooperate, which directly reduces adaptation challenges within the host community. Physical activity acts as a holistic tool that helps overcome language and cultural barriers through game-based and structured situations, strengthening self-confidence and encouraging responsible decision-making. It is observed that any form of physical activity provides a safe space for building social connections, helping children transform negative emotions into constructive behavior and sustainable interpersonal relationships.

In this study, we found that 16 weeks of physical activity (football) had an impact on changes in the social skills of refugee children, relating to intrapersonal, activity-based and communication skills, which helped them to integrate more easily into the host community.

We believe that these findings may be useful to researchers analysing social integration issues related to the development of social skills through physical activity among refugee children, and will encourage further research into various physical activities for refugee children, as, to date, researchers have shown relatively little interest in the development of social skills in refugee children through physical activity, and this area remains under-researched.

Author contribution statement

Alma Paškevičė: participated in preparing the original draft, reviewing, editing, and supervising the work. She was responsible for all sections. The final reflections were prepared jointly. **Jūratė Požėrienė:** participated in preparing the original draft, reviewing, and editing the work. The final reflections were prepared jointly. Both authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript. They also incorporated the requirements of this scientific journal.

Institutional review board statement

The research was conducted in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Lithuanian Sports University, approval number-SMTEK-60. Approval Date: 14 September 2021.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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