

Examining the impact of the funding system on organized youth sport in Portugal: implications for research and practice

Examinar el impacto del sistema de financiación en el deporte juvenil organizado en Portugal: implicaciones para la investigación y la práctica

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Abstract. The purpose of this critical commentary is to provide insights about the impact of funding structures on youth sport research and programming, with a particular focus on research priorities and access to quality youth sport experiences across competitive youth sport programs. Portugal is used as a case study to provide insights about how funding structures may be strategically positioned to positively influence competitive youth sport programs and associated research efforts. The field of competitive youth sports constitutes a complex network influenced by cultural, social, and political factors, where multiple decision makers are driven by funding requirements, performance ideals, and societal norms. This context, although promising, faces challenges such as the prevalence of a lucrative market that prioritizes competitive outcomes, exacerbating inequalities and inherently neoliberal ideals. A strong emphasis placed by funding on winning and performance development may undermine other concerns to emerge across competitive youth sport programs. Furthermore, research programs play a crucial role in understanding and providing novel pathways for competitive youth sport. However, there are challenges in seeking funding and academic recognition for these endeavours, which can create a disconnect between knowledge creation and actual needs. This reflection seeks to stimulate an open and constructive dialogue, calling on all actors that are part of the competitive youth system to develop collaborative efforts to make competitive youth sport a holistic experience accessible to all.

Keywords: youth, development, management, policy, coach.

Resumen. El propósito de este comentario crítico es brindar información sobre el impacto de las estructuras de financiamiento en la investigación y programación de deportes juveniles, con un enfoque particular en las prioridades de investigación y el acceso a experiencias deportivas juveniles de calidad a través de programas deportivos juveniles competitivos. Portugal se utiliza como caso ejemplar para proporcionar ideas sobre cómo las estructuras de financiación pueden posicionarse estratégicamente para influir positivamente en los programas deportivos juveniles competitivos y los esfuerzos de investigación. El campo de los deportes juveniles competitivos constituye una red compleja influenciada por factores culturales, sociales y políticos, donde múltiples tomadores de decisiones están impulsados por requisitos de financiación, ideales de rendimiento y normas sociales. Este contexto, aunque prometedor, enfrenta desafíos como un mercado que prioriza resultados competitivos, exacerbando las desigualdades y los ideales inherentemente neoliberales. Un fuerte énfasis puesto por la financiación en la obtención de victorias puede socavar otras preocupaciones que emergen en los programas deportivos juveniles competitivos. Además, los programas de investigación desempeñan un papel crucial a la hora de comprender y proporcionar vías novedosas para el deporte juvenil competitivo; sin embargo, existen desafíos a la hora de buscar financiación y reconocimiento académico para estos esfuerzos, lo que puede crear una desconexión entre la creación de conocimiento y las necesidades reales. Esta reflexión busca estimular un diálogo abierto, llamando a todos los actores que forman parte del sistema juvenil competitivo a desarrollar esfuerzos para hacer del deporte juvenil competitivo una experiencia holística accesible para todos.

Palabras clave: juventud, desarrollo, gestión, política, entrenador.

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Introduction

The purpose of this critical commentary is to instigate reflexivity related to the impact of funding allocation for the delivery of competitive youth sport programs and associated research. Competitive youth sport programs can include youth ranging between 12 and 18 years old and often focus on performance development and competitive regional and national results. Nonetheless, to meet the dynamic needs of youth athletes, such programs should also seek to achieve a variety of objectives, specifically biopsychosocial development (Camiré, 2015). To support the healthy development of youth athletes, Bean et al. (2021) forwarded that, regardless of the context (i.e., competitive, recreational), youth sport programs should attempt to include diverse features such as supportive relationships, opportunities to belong and positive social norms. However, despite the importance of supporting biopsychosocial development, multiple challenges and conflicting purposes, such as a winning-at-all-costs agenda, exist throughout the youth sport system (Dorsch et al., 2022; Camiré, 2015).

In the current critically reflexive exercise, Portugal is used as a case study to provide insights about how funding

allocation may be strategically positioned to positively influence the delivery of competitive youth sport programs and associated research efforts. Within this unique sociopolitical context, youth sport programs' funding is often gleaned from public funds made available by the federal government through parish councils and city halls. However, funding to conduct research related to competitive youth sport programs often comes through the government, particularly through the state's foundation (i.e., Foundation for Science and Technology), research centers and other governmental agencies. It should be noted that competitive youth sport programs represent most youth sport programs delivered across Portugal, justifying the need to account for these dynamic and intertwined systems.

Based on the current state of affairs and the agenda of the Portuguese government through a specific law (Decreto-Lei n.º 41/2019), policymakers have raised awareness about the need to allocate funding to instigate change. This specific law highlights the need to foster quality of youth sport experiences at a variety of systemic levels: (a) resources made available to sport organizations (e.g., infrastructures, human capacity); (b) ensuring sustainability

(e.g., bridging the gap between short and long-term processes and outcomes); (c) better engagement and meaningful relationships between the government and sport practitioners (e.g., involving regular communication and constructive critique); (d) foster innovation to create better sport experiences across contexts (e.g., openness to youth's emergent developmental needs and novel approaches towards youth development). These factors have been defined under the premise of increasing sport participation rates, competitive opportunities and providing solid grounds for positive sport experiences that result in long-lasting participation (Carvalho, 2022). Therefore, emphasis must be placed on structural and systemic changes, rather than a focus on participation numbers. Increasing sport participation rates may need to be positioned as an outcome that needs to be paired with process-oriented guidelines (Brown et al., 2023). For instance, Brown et al. (2023) highlighted the need for sport administrators to consider several factors to deliver quality youth sport programs such as the need to foster fun and enjoyment, positive social relationships and opportunities to develop sport skills.

Nonetheless, this specific law among others, as well as the current processes for funding allocation to competitive youth sport programs, have not been able to contribute thus far to a decrease in episodes of violence in sport (Autoridade para a Prevenção e o Combate à Violência no Desporto, 2022; Pizarro et al., 2023). In tandem, research on competitive youth sport programs in Portugal is scarce, particularly with regards to studies that have attempted to dismantle the status quo, provide constructive critique and identify pathways moving forward (Santos et al., 2022). Based on this trend, it is necessary to envision and reimagine new ways to position funding to positively programming and research (Whitley et al., 2020). Conversely, if no changes occur, youth, coaches, parents and other actors may become victims of the sport system and succumb to the status quo. Furthermore, researchers may see their efforts to instigate change fail and become conformed to the ineffectiveness of research programs with regards to competitive youth sport. Therefore, this critical commentary aims to instigate an open and sincere discussion about the possibility of innovation and change associated with funding allocation and highlight potential impacts on competitive youth sport programming and associated research.

Theoretical Background

The Impact of Funding Structures on Practice and Research

Efforts have been made across a range of countries such as Australia, Norway, Canada and Ireland in an attempt to allocate public funding towards competitive youth sport programs (Barnes et al., 2016; Government of Ireland, 2018; Hoye & Nicholson, 2009; Skille & Säfvenbom, 2011). Beyond performance, funding allocation should be dedicated to efforts that enable all individuals, particularly

those who represent minoritized and marginalized identities, to access quality sport experiences. Such approach aims to avoid colorblindness (i.e., equality over equity). Quality sport experiences amongst competitive youth sport programs can translate into opportunities for athletes to develop motor skills, psychosocial skills, among many other aspects (Bean et al., 2021).

The issue of quality youth sport programming has been discussed in the youth development literature (e.g., Brown et al., 2023). However, understandings about funding allocation and quality youth sport programs across socio-cultural contexts, particularly with regards to competitive youth sport programs are still scarce. Additionally, if competitive youth sport programs are to fulfil their mission and foster meaningful outcomes for youth participants, research and researchers have a role to play in improving the quality of programming (e.g., Lindsey et al., 2023). Thus, research and practice may need to be positioned as interrelated variables within the ecology of competitive youth sport (Woods & Davids, 2023). Considering the impacts of funding allocation on research practices, researchers can potentially have sufficient social capital to enable an understanding about the “environmental subtleties” present in competitive youth sport and how they “can be used to successfully navigate through uncharted fields” (Woods et al., 2020 p. 10). Such understandings derived from research may help inform and provide pathways for diverse processes and priorities for funding allocation (Whitley et al., 2020).

The allocation of public funds directly to research can significantly shape the experiential landscape of youth sports participants and dictate the modality and feasibility of competitive youth sports programs (Dorsch et al., 2022). Such funding can also influence the capacity and/or openness of researchers to study the complex interconnected variables that constitute the youth sport system (Darnell et al., 2019; 2022; Whitley et al., 2018). Through this lens, researchers are positioned to unearth nuanced insights into competitive youth sports frameworks that can be used to instigate sustainable change in practice.

It is unquestionable that political agendas influence funding priorities, as well as the efforts made by researchers (Coalter, 2010; Kliethermes et al., 2021). A pertinent illustration of this dynamic is the fact that over the past decade there has been an increased focus on concussion in sport (McNamee et al., 2023). Perhaps as a response, there has been an increase in funding to support concussion research, as was the example followed by the Australian Football League (AFL). In turn, concussion research has influenced policy creation and implementation (Huang et al., 2020; Mott & Koroshetz, 2015; Waltzman & Sarmiento, 2019), highlighting the power of research to influence structural changes. For example, the AFL's Guidelines for the Management of Sport-Related Concussion were created and are continuously updated based on the findings of existent research. Additionally, a consensus statement was produced by the Concussion in Sport Group and multiple evidence-based guidelines for concussion prevention were identified

(Patricios et al., 2023). Another example is how funding directed at mental health in high performance sport has influenced the extent to which sport organizations embrace or not mental health promotion (Spiker & Hammer, 2019). Indeed, substantial funding has been directed towards high performance sport, which influences the efforts conducted by sport organizations – and subsequently have made performance development and winning the most relevant objectives in these settings (Richard et al., 2023).

Taking Portugal as a case study, in the next sections emphasis will be placed on deconstructing the mechanisms and processes that impact direct funding of research and competitive youth sport programs through public funds, as well as provide implications for research and practice that can yield new pathways for competitive youth sport.

The Current Funding Structure in Portugal: Implications for Competitive Youth Sport and Research Programs

Portugal is a country with 10.343.066 million residents (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2021) where 587.812 people participate in sport (67% of whom are youth). In Portugal, in similar fashion to other European countries, the government relies on a governmental agency (e.g., Portuguese Institute of Sport and Youth) to allocate funding to national (e.g., sport federations) and provincial (e.g., sport association and youth sport clubs) sport organizations who mainly deliver competitive youth sport programs. These organizations attempt to follow guidelines on three key domains: (1) organizing competitive events, achieving performance outcomes and increasing sport participation rates; (2) developing training initiatives; and (3) fostering human development (e.g., ethics in sport). Carvalho (2022) highlighted how funding allocation is mainly dependent on the number of practitioners involved in a specific sport. Public funding through governmental agencies is the prevalent form of funding for competitive youth sport programs.

For example, football/soccer is the only sport that has more than 180.000 athletes (and more coaches, referees and other practitioners) and, inherently, the one that receives more funding from governmental agencies. The second sport with more athletes is swimming, which is followed by a variety of other sports such as handball, volleyball, and basketball (Carvalho, 2022). Beyond the number of sport participants, which represents the most significant indicator to ensure funding for each sport organization in Portugal, they can also apply to attain additional funding opportunities by proposing research and/or intervention programs centered in topics such as ethics or gender equality in sport. However, these initiatives represent a minor part of the total funding made available for Portuguese sport organizations (Carvalho, 2022). In other words, initiatives centered around ethics in sport have not been supported significantly and have taken a secondary role in program development and delivery. For example, in 2020 a total of 12.777.591 euros was provided for sport organizations to organize competitions and develop initiatives to increase

adherence to sport that ensure equitable opportunities for youth. Conversely, in the same year, a total of 107.275 euros were allocated to fostering ethics in sport, which represents a significant funding gap between these objectives. Fostering ethics was the main type of secondary funding provided across the country.

Until 2022, the Portuguese Institute of Sport and Youth provided no funds that were explicitly directed at research programs centered on competitive youth sport. It is consensual that funding requirements and guidelines also have a significant impact on research and if/how research-to-practice partnerships do occur. Further, funding requirements and guidelines influence higher education institutions' practices towards knowledge creation and dissemination that can apply to competitive youth sport programs (Portuguese Institute of Sport and Youth, 2023).

Together, such discrepancies and funding priorities showcase product versus process-related governmental priorities and the impacts such policies may have on the delivery of competitive youth sport programs and associated research. It is clear that funding allocation is mainly dependent on participation rates and performance outcomes as football seems to overcome other sport organizations by far on these two indicators. Although funding the most popular sports may enable the sport system to meet the needs of a significant number of youth participants, it can also result in more funds being used to fulfil a performance agenda that negatively impacts development. More so, research on competitive youth sport programs is residual (e.g., Coutinho et al., 2023) as there are not substantial funds being provided for those research endeavours. This may help explain why previous studies have reported many pressures for youth to perform and the prevalence of negative coaching strategies (Santos et al., 2021; 2022), as well as the lack of emphasis provided by coach education programs on positive youth development content (Santos et al., 2023). Therefore, funding allocation seems to reinforce a culture of winning at all costs and seeking more easily accessible and profitable samples and contexts.

Practical, Theoretical, and Political Implications: Looking Back and Looking Forward

This section aims to raise questions that may need to be addressed in an effort to develop adequate expectations towards what competitive youth sport can do. Furthermore, this section can help recognize the limitations inherent to the efforts made by both scholars and practitioners within the current funding landscape.

Preliminary Considerations

It is important to note that neoliberal ideals influence funding allocation and the dynamics of youth sport, particularly youth's access to quality youth sport experiences (Coakley, 2010). For example, refusing to achieve neoliberal metrics such as increasing the number of sport participants or funded projects may potentially result in both

scholars and practitioners struggling in sustaining their careers and position in the system. This is the case because there are tremendous pressures for scholars and practitioners to satisfy the system's requirements and satisfy demands for funding. We, all that intervene in the youth sport and research systems, should consider that funding dictates much of what we can, need and decide to do. Individual agency should be considered in light of other social, political and cultural forces that, for instance, can make some scholars move away from writing a paper such as this one.

There may be the need to acknowledge and identify ways to move beyond (although being cognizant of) neoliberal expectations (Au, 2015; Bruff & Tansel, 2018). Naturally, those, certain scholars and practitioners who hold a privileged positionality within the youth sport system (e.g., tenure track academics, high-level sport administrators), may have the necessary power and social capital to foster changes by openly and explicitly advancing novel proposals for funding allocation. Thus, we, the authors, do not want to have hypocritical and polarized discourses towards neoliberal ideals, metrics and reasoning (e.g., making them inherently negative and the main issue in contemporary competitive youth sport). Also, we do not advocate for evangelic discourses towards research and practice (e.g., funding should not be allocated for sport organizations who have better performance outcomes). In other words, there is the need to avoid discourses that promote a responsibility of the self that translates into providing best practices, recommendations and obligations that all actors must fulfil to make competitive youth sport positive (e.g., coaches should make it happen, researchers must help).

The writing process of this manuscript is a concrete example of the challenges ahead. For several months, conversations were held with policymakers and the second author spoke at the national assembly¹. These conversations and public discussions showed how there is a gap between policymakers' perspectives on competitive youth sport and existent research. Specifically, youth sport is, in some cases, viewed only as a platform for increased competitiveness and performance development instead of a resource for biopsychosocial development. Concurrently, competitive youth sport is attached to a multitude of outcomes such as mental health, ethical behaviour and a healthy lifestyle. The power relations and oppressive forces such as the ones exerted by funders and sport organizations both on coaches and athletes can keep the status quo untouched. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the need to doubt, instigate and pose challenging questions.

Moving Beyond Normative Conceptualizations of Youth Sport

The rhetoric of sport automatically being a “laboratory par excellence” (Broch, 2022, p. 535) has taken a detri-

mental effect on funding allocation and resulted in few concrete changes, despite the negative outcomes (e.g., violence, discrimination) that we see in contemporary competitive youth sport (Autoridade para a Prevenção e o Combate à Violência no Desporto, 2022). To further describe our standpoint, it is important to acknowledge that Portuguese youth sport has been historically stagnant for several reasons. First, laws and updated policies are scarce and typically include suggestions and recommendations concerning youth development instead of obligations. Second, the absence of a sports ministry, as well as the lack of political action creates multiple barriers for change. Third, Portugal still does not have a strategic plan for sport, particularly youth sport, that includes updated concerns, objectives and requirements. Furthermore, accountability mechanisms that can help assess sport organizations' practices are still scarce (Diário da República n.º 252/2008; Diário do Governo n.º 283/1974). The current structure and legislation have not been able to move the needle towards more equitable practices, positive youth experiences and a biopsychosocial development mandate (MacDonald, 2023; Santos et al., 2021; 2023). More so, the current structure and legislation have also influenced the reach youth sport research can have. Indeed, research and evidence-based guidelines have become suggestions and recommendations, which policymakers and competitive youth sport programs can decide to use or not. Subsequently, researchers have wandered off to more profitable or productive research endeavors (e.g., Barbosa et al., 2020). This response from some researchers creates an inequity related to who benefits from certain types of research as certain population cohorts become pawns for more funding and publications (Koro et al., 2023).

Based on previous notions, several questions may need to be posed: *what can all actors of the system expect most youth sport organizations to do?*; and *what can research do for sport organizations that deliver competitive youth sport programs?*; *can the degrees of freedom and high levels of autonomy given to youth sport organizations become devices to maintain the status quo?* On one hand, youth sport organizations delivering competitive youth sport programs can make programming take a multitude of identities and shape youth development in a multitude of ways. On the other hand, youth sport organizations can also develop a winning at all costs philosophy that is present in the Portuguese youth sport system (Santos et al., 2021; 2023). More so, researchers are also not required to have a role in collaborating with youth sport organizations (i.e., community-based research) as they can also use their degrees of freedom to conduct research in any field that is later quantified in academia. Therefore, a balance between flexibility and a prescriptive mandate may be needed in Portugal to increase the likelihood of research and programming positively contributing to youth development.

¹See <https://canal.parlamento.pt/?cid=6617&title=audicao-publica-dos-politecnicos> for the second author's intervention in a public audience with the government.

Furthermore, academia, which subsequently is controlled by governmental agencies, as well as private universities have contributed towards creating narrow perspectives towards competitive youth sport practice through the territorialization of *research*. The territorialization of *research* refers to the process of creating delimitations (e.g., backyards) that determine what researchers can and should study, how and where, and keeping them aligned with a single stream of thought (e.g., discipline, field) as suggested by Moustakas and Bauer (2023). For instance, researchers in the United States of America are required in many grants to partake in interdisciplinary work through interprofessional collaborations. Based on expertise and resources, there are naturally delimitations for scholars' efforts but those may need to be broader (i.e., less limited) and enable more fluid and interconnected collaborations, thinking and doing to reflect how real-world problems that affect sport in Portugal. Thus, researchers can broaden their conceptualizations of research towards more transdisciplinary thinking by "... reaching out to colleagues elsewhere, providing mentorship, offering editorial positions, engaging with varied literatures and sources, or forming working groups or coalitions..." (Moustakas & Bauer, 2023, p.15).

As stated previously, in Portugal there are no quality control mechanisms to examine how youth have access to quality developmental opportunities in competitive sport. Also, there are no quality control mechanisms to determine how researchers use their position to reduce inequities and help improve the quality of competitive youth programs. In this plateau of high expectations, freedom and no control, only evident negative metrics (e.g., low participation numbers, low number of publications) can instigate change because they disrupt productivity (e.g., Malcolm et al., 2023; MacDonald, 2023). Indeed, legislation (Diário da República n.º 11/2007), past and current, have targeted deficit – suggesting the need for youth sport organizations to mitigate inequities (e.g., gender inequities) that can harm access to quality youth developmental experiences, participation rates and performance metrics (e.g., Kulick et al., 2019). Therefore, more state control could potentially help facilitate better experiences and outcomes in competitive youth sport.

Thus, among cultural, social and political factors, funding allocation plays a role in how researchers and practitioners think and do competitive youth sport. Without careful reflection on public law, existent legislation and funding requirements, what are the possibilities for our reach and motivation as scholars and practitioners? Must we, as scholars, embrace a sense of hope while waiting for decision makers such as coaches and parents to use the knowledge available? Should we deposit all responsibilities in competitive youth sport programs to deliver quality programming and facilitate access to all youth? Basically, doing what we cannot do as scholars – move beyond the system and the status quo? We would like to go a step further and even ask: (a) what can this manuscript do?; (b) what is the supposed objective of research?; and (c) should we become satisfied with the

possibility of creating awareness and generating more information about competitive youth sport (Koro et al., 2023)? These questions underpin our practice as researchers and refusing to answer them may just perpetuate and worsen the current state of affairs.

Moving Towards a Transformative Youth Sport Landscape

A direction and a set of options need to be made about competitive youth sport in Portugal. From a social justice orientation, the voices/experiences of youth must be considered and lead how we attempt to find answers and pathways for current challenges. Before updating law and legislation, there may be the need to answer at least these three questions: (a) what are competitive youth sport's objectives?; (b) what are competitive youth sport's targeted experiences?; and (c) what is the competitive youth sport's targeted short, medium and long-term outcomes?. We, as scholars, recognize, as it is our field of research, that sport for development, mental health and social justice are some critical components for competitive youth sport programming. However, Portuguese governmental agencies may have diverse understandings about what competitive youth sport should become in Portugal such as a platform for mental health promotion, positive social relationships and/or performance. Regardless of how researchers make sense what youth sport should be, there needs to be a strategic plan (i.e., a set of objectives, strategies and assessment procedures for youth sport practice and research) in place that paves the way moving forward. This strategic plan needs to be co-created by athletes, coaches, policymakers, parents, researchers and other actors. If a strategic plan for youth sport is not created in the upcoming years, this context can continue to be guided mainly by participation rates and performance metrics with negative impacts on youth.

Acknowledging all positions in the system, academia and governing bodies that control academia may need to question themselves about the status of neoliberal academia (Troiani & Dutson, 2021). As the world changes at a fast pace and contemporary competitive youth sport constantly becomes, academia can attempt to instigate and support critique, as well as move towards the unknown, the different and the non-conventional. Some conventional forms of solving issues have reached their limit and potential. More so, reinforcing previous notions, cataloguing researchers to fields and areas, today, serves a pernicious purpose of segmenting knowledge, which transdisciplinary thinking and research may address. However, transdisciplinary research should not be positioned as a procedure, method and/or a popular strategy that can be artificially used (Whitley et al, 2022). Instead, transdisciplinary research may enable researchers and practitioners to discuss funding criteria with pedagogy, psychology and many other fields in mind; can contribute to funding criteria that are inclusive of all populations (e.g., refugees) and new stages for sport (e.g., parkour); and understands how may need to become a truly educational and positive experience. If/once a strategic

plan has been defined and the previous questions discussed, research can then possibly become “with and for all” through a transdisciplinary focus or even any other focus that fits the core mandate – change that is meaningful and effective (influenced by what that means in context; Woods et al., 2020; Woods & Davids, 2023). For example, there is no data available about LGBTQIA+ youth’s experiences, as well as racial and ethnic minorities within the Portuguese youth sport system. Researchers have not embraced such need potentially because there are still pressures for them to conform to the norm, focus on performance development, as well as provide a positive outlook on what youth sport is (Santos et al., 2021). Furthermore, the need to attain funding, engage in less time-consuming data collection processes and publish can also play a role in these choices.

More than “collect data” and become empiricists, funding could be framed within a broader program for fostering partnerships between higher education institutions and the Portuguese Institute of Sport and Youth, among other sport organizations – this manuscript results from one of these partnerships. Reconciling research and practice is a surely needed step as research has been postulated by coaches as distant for real life problems (Santos et al., 2022).

Finally, reflecting on the need to develop asset-based policies and include more explicit quality indicators to fund competitive youth sport programming across the nation may be needed. Monitorization of these explicit quality indicators can be conducted by higher education institutions through co-developed research programs. Higher education institutions can have the necessary motivation and support to engage in such co-constructed effort. Moving forward, the present manuscript may create more questions and become part of an open and constructive discussion about competitive youth sport. This is the main purpose of research and practice – allow new ways for individuals to become, develop, discuss and critique. We also very transparently acknowledge that until at least some of these questions have been answered, careful consideration about research, its need and impacts may be warranted (Woods & Davids, 2024). It is time to position ourselves, as scholars and practitioners, as deeply entangled with all other parts of the system and move towards a collective set of concerns about competitive youth sport in Portugal. Maybe it is not time for a new research project, but instead to make youth sport our project.

In light of the reflections presented in this section, funding allocation towards research could focus on the several topics. First, depending on the changes made to the funding system, researchers could, then, examine how public policies, especially those related to competitive youth sport (e.g., Diário da República law n.º 252/2008), influence access, the quality of sports experiences, and youth development. This would involve analyzing the effects of these policies on practice. Moreover, future studies could explore if/how policy across different socio-cultural contexts influences trends across youth sport research. Such line of inquiry may also facilitate an understanding about the impacts

youth sport research can have on athlete experiences, particularly in identifying indicators of quality competitive youth sport programs. Second, it may be relevant to explore existing barriers that limit youth’s access to quality sport experiences, identifying factors such as pressures to win, geographical inequalities, exclusion of certain social groups, among other relevant issues. Third, investigating the impact of gender, ethnic backgrounds, race, socioeconomic status, and other aspects in access, participation, and developmental opportunities provided to youth across competitive youth sport programs may help assess the state of affairs. Finally, future pathways could also include understanding how researchers interact with youth sports organizations, as well as how research can effectively facilitate meaningful changes across competitive youth programs. These research areas, if funded, can potentially help inform more effective policies, more inclusive intervention practices, and more comprehensive development strategies in the field of competitive youth sport.

Conclusions

The purpose of this critical commentary is to provide insights about the impact of funding structures on youth sport research and programming, with a particular focus on research priorities and access to quality youth sport experiences across competitive youth sport programs. The field of competitive youth sports constitutes a complex network influenced by cultural, social, and political factors, where multiple decision makers are driven by funding requirements, performance ideals, and societal norms. This context, although promising, faces challenges such as the prevalence of a lucrative market that prioritizes competitive outcomes, exacerbating inequalities and inherently neoliberal ideals. A strong emphasis placed by funding on winning and performance development may undermine other concerns to emerge across competitive youth sport programs. Specifically, fostering youth’s physical and mental well-being may become an unfeasible quest. Furthermore, research programs play a crucial role in understanding and providing novel pathways for competitive youth sport. However there are challenges in seeking funding and academic recognition for these endeavours, which can create a disconnect between knowledge creation and actual needs. Overcoming this gap requires collaboration to integrate research and practice within the context of competitive youth sport through meaningful funding requirements.

Higher education institutions, by limiting perspectives within specific disciplines, also hinder a comprehensive understanding of competitive youth sport (i.e., through the territorialization of research). Changing this reality requires transdisciplinary approaches that go beyond conventional academic boundaries.

It is also important to emphasize that Portugal faces challenges such as the absence of quality control mechanisms in youth sports. Aligning objectives and experiences for young people within competitive youth sport requires

strategic planning and a reassessment of the role and reach of academia. Investing in collaboratively developed transdisciplinary research can potentially deepen the understanding of systemic impacts and policy implications in competitive youth sport. This reflection seeks to stimulate an open and constructive dialogue, calling on all actors that are part of the competitive youth system to develop collaborative efforts to make competitive youth sport a holistic experience accessible to all. This is a crucial moment to embrace competitive youth sport as a collective effort through meaningful funding requirements. Therefore, the current status quo concerning funding allocation in Portugal may limit if/how competitive youth sport is used to foster positive athlete developmental outcomes, as well as meaningful research. Moving forward, process-oriented guidelines and factors may need to be considered to positively impact competitive youth sport programming and associated research.

As a final message, it is important to note that youth should be able to thrive in competitive contexts. Thriving through competition: (a) requires aligning the features of the competitive activity context with the needs and capacities of youth (i.e., person–context “fit”), and (b) is expressed through mutually-derived, ongoing benefit for the youth in their activity context (Kochanek et al., 2019, p. 63). This should be our objective as scholars - make sure there are sufficient conditions for quality youth sport opportunities to emerge across competitive youth sport programs. Otherwise, what are we supposed to do? And will the current knowledge base represent waste?

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