Early specialising aesthetic performers
An investigation of conceptualisation, motivation, and context

av

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Akademisk avhandling

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Opponent: Professor Joe Baker
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Abstract:

This doctoral research project is situated within the wider debate of talent development in so-called early sports, where early specialisation is often normalised. The overarching aim is to investigate early specialisation within the context of Swedish aesthetic activities. Two research questions guided this research: 1) what characterises early specialisation, and 2) in what ways are aspects of early specialisation related to motivation?

This doctoral research project includes four individual papers. The first paper is a systematic review that investigated the contextual underpinnings of recommendations regarding early specialisation and psychological aspects (e.g., motivation, burnout). The second paper outlines the development of a measurement tool for capturing degrees of early specialisation within the context of Swedish aesthetic activities. The third paper is a cross-sectional questionnaire-based study which used this measurement tool to explore the relationship between degrees of early specialisation and motivation (autonomous motivation, controlled motivation, and dropout intentions), and explored perceptions of parental influence as a moderator. The fourth paper is a qualitative interview-based study that investigated reflections on motivation throughout the training history of high-level gymnasts and figure skaters who specialised early. Additional data regarding perfectionism and parental participation in sport, collected in relation to this research but not included within the four papers, is also outlined and discussed in this thesis.

Results highlight the complexity of early specialisation in terms of how it is defined, measured, and conceptualised, as well as the possible relationship to psychological aspects (e.g., motivation, perfectionism). Overall, the results do not align with the notion that early specialisation leads to lower quality motivation and an increased risk of dropout.

While this research has made methodological, theoretical and empirical contributions to this research area, it is also clear that more research is needed to better understand and explain the possible outcomes often associated with early specialisation.

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