

# Football and inclusion: It all comes down to the right motivational climate

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Playing football has the potential to promote the inclusion of young people who are not from the predominant culture of a country, i.e. young migrants. Crucially, the feeling of belonging and being accepted depends

on the trainer's approach to training—or more precisely, the motivational climate they create. Task-oriented training is significantly more suitable than training that is geared towards performance and competition. This is the conclusion of a recent study by an international team of researchers, including Anne-Marie Elbe, Professor of Sports Psychology at Leipzig University. The finding is of social importance because experiences in adolescence in particular have a formative influence on attitudes and behavior in later life.

In sport, football is considered a model of inclusion. "Remarkably, to the best of our knowledge, theory and research on feelings of inclusion in (youth) team sports is lacking," the authors write in their study. They add that filling this gap is important, because [team sports](#) are not necessarily inclusive by nature.

For their study, the Danish-Dutch-German team of researchers interviewed 245 boys aged 10 to 16 about their experiences. "We focused [on them] because particularly in these age groups, positive intercultural contact experiences tend to lead to more positive intergroup attitudes in adulthood," said the authors. The subjects belong to two Dutch football clubs that train very diverse teams. The majority of the study participants—61.6 percent—were classified as having "minority" social status. This means that the player himself or at least one of his parents was born outside the Netherlands.

For the research team, inclusion consists of two components, explains Anne-Marie Elbe from Leipzig University: "How strongly do I feel I belong to a team? And how strongly do I feel that I can be myself—so act authentically with regard to things like my other cultural background?" This understanding of inclusion is based on existing research by other scholars.

"Our assumption in the study was that there would be a relationship

between a person's feeling of inclusion and what kind of motivational climate exists in the team, so the climate created by the coach," said Elbe. A distinction is made between a performance-oriented motivational climate on the one hand, where the aim is to be better than other players in your own team, and a task-oriented motivational climate on the other. With task-based standards, the focus is on the individual player and improving his own skills. Motivating each player to learn is important: does he succeed in doing a task well, or at least not doing it worse than before?

Professor Anne-Marie Elbe and her team of researchers have now shown that the young players' sense of inclusion correlated positively with a task-oriented training climate, while it correlated negatively with a climate based on competition. When both types of training were used side by side, non-migrant players still managed to cope well—without this impacting too heavily on their sense of belonging. Among the "minority" players, however, it was observed that their sense of inclusion was only stable where there was a stronger focus on task-based standards, and the competitive approach within their own team was either not emphasized or emphasized only to a limited extent.

"So you can't say that being a member of a football team in itself has positive effects. In order to achieve positive effects through football training, the coach needs to behave in a certain way and create a specific [climate](#) during the training session. There is a lot of potential in this, and it is of enormous significance to society," said Anne-Marie Elbe. "Our study helps extend the quantitative research on inclusion and sport."

**More information:** Nico W. Van Yperen et al, Perceived inclusion in youth soccer teams: The role of societal status and perceived motivational goal climate, *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.psychsport.2020.101882](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2020.101882)

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