

A “Foot-school” for prevention and treatment of foot dysfunctions -

What do participants think about?

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Introduction

The feet constitute the part of the human musculoskeletal system that, after the spine, is affected by pain most often, with a prevalence of 17.4–30.4% (1, 2). Inadequate muscular support is a key factor in the development of postural foot disorders (3, 4). In order to use muscles as a natural resource for treatment, an active therapeutic approach is necessary. Currently, this therapeutic option is used much less often to treat functional disorders of the feet than those of the spine (5). As a framework for an effective implementation of such an active approach, we developed an educational program, called the "Mainzer Fußschule" (Mainz Foot-school, MFS) (6). It consisted of either classic (4 × 2 h) or compact courses (1 × 6 h). The content of the MFS is based on Spiraldynamik®: it contains the concept of "spiral movement," which is seen as a universal phenomenon, both functional and structural. This concept assumes that the longitudinal arch of the foot

is an evolutionary torsion (spiral) of the forefoot against the hindfoot, generated by verticalization of the talus while maintaining the metatarsal bones parallel to the ground. The torsional element of the midfoot has been verified by in vivo measurements (7-9). This movement and therapy concept is developed by cooperation between therapists and educators (10) and focuses on so called “physio-pedagogy” with an emphasis on empowerment. The MFS course objective is to empower the participants to recognize and optimize the use of their feet in all activities of daily life. The educational approach for addressing complaints related to the movement system has long been used for back-schools and is applied here for the treatment of dysfunctional foot problems (11, 12). In order to maximize the effect, three major techniques of empowerment: knowledge transfer, goal setting, and action planning (13-15) are combined (16). To that end, the program entails the following (17) (Additional file 1: Course concept; Additional file 2: Handout):

- Mutual introduction round about individual foot problems, expectations about the course, and goal-setting
- Transfer of knowledge about anatomy, natural function, and dysfunction of the feet and the consequences of these for the foot and overall mobility
- Transfer of general knowledge about suitable shoes and insoles, barefoot walking, and proper foot care
- Proprioceptive training (action planning)
- Mobilization of joints (action planning)
- Strengthening and coordination of foot muscles (action planning)

Since the concept of the MFS has only been developed in recent years, there are still no reports in the scientific literature. To obtain a first evaluation, we surveyed 522 former participants in this course to gain insight into their opinions about the course.

A preversion of this article has already been published as preprint on "Research Square" (DOI: 10.21203/rs.3.rs-57332/v2; Version 2; posted 16 Sep, 2020).

Methods

This is a retrospective, questionnaire-based survey of subjective assessments and patient reported outcomes. All participants of the Mainz Footschool from 2015-2017 were eligible to participate in the study.

Data were collected mid-2018 using a 23-item online questionnaire (Additional file 3) that was constructed with LimeSurvey (18), an online tool provided by the Center for Data Processing of Mainz University (ZDV). All attendees of the MFS from the years 2015–2017 who could be contacted via e-mail (522; 90.3%) were included. Participants were surveyed separately grouped by course year and course type. In this way, the blinded results could still be assigned to the related subgroups. Overall, 350 questionnaires (67%) were returned (Figure 1). We have decided to also include data from not completely filled-out questionnaires in order to take full account of the available information.

Case number planning was performed by the Institute for Medical Biometry at the University of Mainz. It was calculated for a power of 80%. Since a distribution between prevention and pain group of 50:50 and a stronger deviation from the null hypothesis was expected, it showed that 122 patients would be needed for an odds ratio of 3.026.

The project was approved at the meeting of the ethical review committee of the Rhineland-Palatinate state chamber of physicians on April 18, 2018 (reference number is 2018-13222). Informed consent was given as part of the completion of the questionnaire.

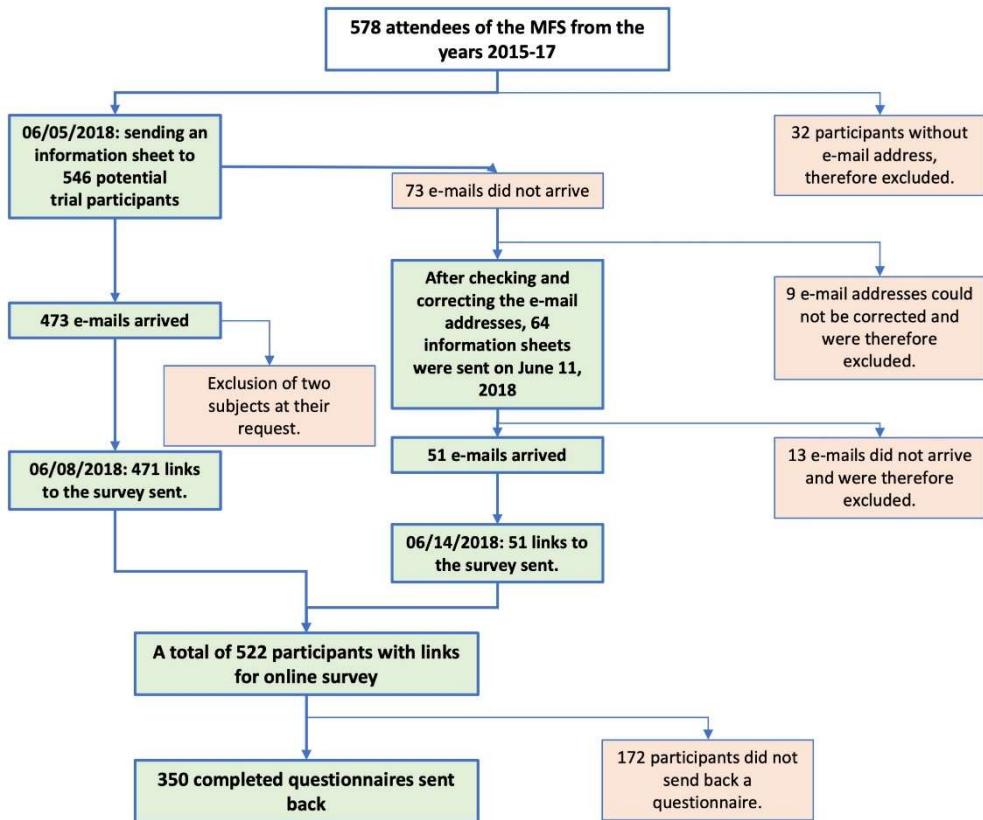


Figure 1: Overview of the trial process

Questions addressed to the participants were divided into three blocks (Additional file 3), concerning the description of the group of participants (block 1, question (Q)1-7), the evaluation of the course format (block 2, Q8a-f) and the subjective perception of the course effects (block 3, Q9-13).

Questionnaire block 1: To facilitate subsequent comparisons between different subgroups, the first block was used to collect demographic data. It included 7 items that enabled forming a differentiated picture of the attending participants. The questions covered standard demographic variables, such as sex (Q1) and age (Q2), as well as pathology-related variables, such as specialist visits (Q3), insoles (Q4) and surgery before

participation (Q5). The reason for participation (Q6) and the severity of the foot problem at the time of course participation (Q7) were also included.

Questionnaire block 2: The second block, comprising 6 items, was included to collect data concerning the course format. In addition to questions about the overall extent of the course (Q8a), information gain (Q8b), balance between theory and practice (Q8c), and stress caused by the course (Q8d), there were also two free-text fields that provided participants with the opportunity to commend (Q8e) or criticize (Q8f) the course.

Questionnaire block 3: The third block, comprising 10 items, was the most comprehensive and was used to collect subjective ratings regarding the course effects on participants. To achieve a differentiated picture, we queried subjective information gain (Q9a), improvement of perception (Q9b), regular performance of exercises learned in the course (Q9c), influence of the course on the feet's use and treatment in everyday life (Q9d), whether participation was considered subjectively worthwhile (Q9e) and how the effect was rated (Q9f). In addition, we asked about an effect of the course on the selection of footwear (Q10). To allow a pre- and post-participation comparison, some items of the first block were readopted (insoles (Q11), surgery (Q12), and complaints (Q13)).

Answers given by participants were sent anonymously to the ZDV (Mainz University Data Center (Zentrum für Datenverarbeitung)).

Data analysis

For the confirmatory analysis of the question whether there is a difference between the preventive and curative group, we allocated participants to 2 groups: those who had classified their foot problems before participation as < 3 on a scale of 0–10 (0 no pain - 10 maximum of pain) were labeled as primarily concerned with prevention, while those who classified the problem as > 2 were primarily concerned with curing an existing foot problem. To investigate whether there was a difference between preventive and curative

groups of participants in the rating of the effects, we statistically analyzed the answers to the question, “Attending the foot-school was worthwhile for me.” (Q9e). For statistical analysis, the responses, “I agree” and “I tend to agree,” to this question were rated as “participation was advantageous,” while responses of “tend to disagree” and “strongly disagree” were rated as “participation not worthwhile.” These results were compared using Fisher’s exact test.

Additionally, using a chi-square test and a z-test, an exploratory data analysis was conducted on the influence of age, gender and type of course attended on the assessment of whether participation was rated worthwhile. A Wilcoxon’s signed-rank test was used to check whether the pain changed significantly before and after participation in the course.

Results

Below we present the results following the structure of the three blocks used in the questionnaire: 1) group of participants; 2) course format; 3) course effects. In order to present the results concisely, the presentation focuses on the highlights. Supplementary results can be found in additional file 4.

The group of participants

The study population comprised participants from three different course years and type of course. Most completed questionnaires (60.6%) were returned by the participants of 2017 course and the majority took part in a compact course (88%) (Table 1).

Only 12.6% of valid answers came from men (Q1). The average age was 54.53 years (Q2). Refer to Table 1 for an overview of the demographic characteristics of the study population.

	Females (N)	Males (N)	Classical-course (N)	Compact-course (N)	Age (years)
Overall	221	32	42 (12.0 %)	308 (88.0 %)	M: 54.53 [SD: 9.395]
	(87.4 %)	(12.6 %)			
2015	15	2	2 (9.5 %)	19 (90.5 %)	M: 53.88 [SD: 7.262]
	(88.2 %)	(11.8 %)			
2016	87	9	26 (22.2 %)	91 (77.8 %)	M: 55.69 [SD: 9.499]
	(90.6 %)	(9.4 %)			
2017	119	21	14 (6.6 %)	198 (93.4 %)	M: 53.81 [SD: 9.527]
	(85.0 %)	(15.0 %)			

M, mean; SD, standard deviation

Table 1: Overview of participants (course year, sex, course type and age)

While 56.5% of the participants previously consulted a specialist because of an existing foot problem (Q3), 86.2% already had insoles (Q4). The results to the question about the orthopedic insoles (Q4) are shown differentiated in the figure 4.

Fifteen percent of all respondents had already undergone foot surgery before attending the course (Q5).

The answers to the question about the severity of foot problem before course participation were ranged across all available options (Figure 5) on Numeric Rating Scale, but most participants indicated scores in the middle of the range (median 5).

The course format

Overall, 94.9% of all respondents had a positive opinion ("I totally agree" or "I rather agree") regarding the extent of the course (Q8a), and 97.2% believed that they had received much helpful information in the course (Q8b, "I totally agree" or "I rather

agree"). Even among the respondents who had participated in the course 3 years earlier, the answers were very positive (94.1%).

In the free text field (Q8e), the most frequently mentioned suggestion was that additional course dates should be offered afterwards in order to revise what had been learned and to gain control over the execution of the exercises (7.7%). The most frequently posed criticism (Q8f) was that there was not enough time to discuss individual foot problems (2.4%).

The course effects

Participants stated a greater knowledge concerning the function and structure of the feet and knowledge about exercises that enhance statics and function (Q9a, 94.4% "I totally agree" or "I rather agree"). Additionally, 93.6% of respondents believed that their perception of their feet had improved (Q9b, "I totally agree" or "I rather agree").

While answering question on whether they continued practicing the exercises (Q9c) taught at the MFS, the participants of earlier courses responded that they practiced less (2015: 35,3%, "I totally agree" or "I rather agree") than those who had attended the program more recently (Figure 2).

Regarding the question whether the course had an impact on use and treat of feet in everyday life (Q9d), 84.3% of respondents said that it did, at least, in part ("I totally agree" or "I rather agree").

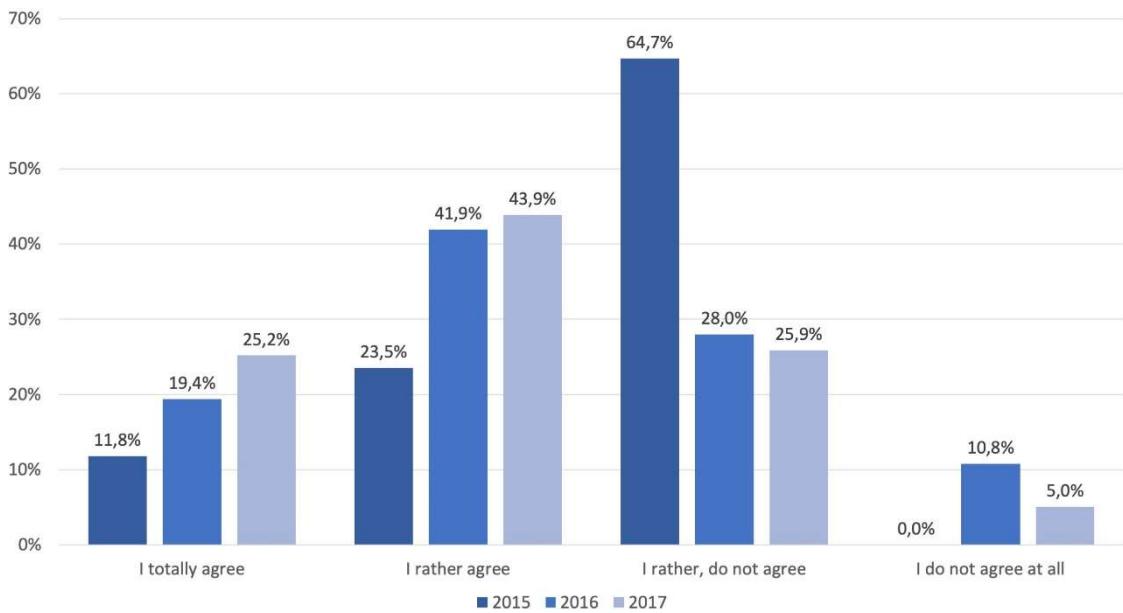


Figure 2: Responses to the statement: “I regularly perform exercises that I learned in the foot-school”, divided by year

“Attending the foot-school was worthwhile for me.” (Q9e) was rated positively by 89,5% (“I totally agree” or “I rather agree”). In terms of the potential difference between preventive and curative group of participants, we examined the answers in response to this statement. In the curative group, 88.9%, and in the preventive group, 92.7% of participants stated that they considered participation was advantageous. Fisher’s exact test showed that with a predefined alpha error of 5%, the rating was not significantly different between groups ($p = 0.587$).

At 67.9%, the majority of participants reported that the course had a positive effect on their existing foot complaints (Q9f) (no impact 30.5%, negative impact 1.6%). The proportion of participants, who noticed a positive effect, decreased slightly with increasing time distance from the course (Figure 3).

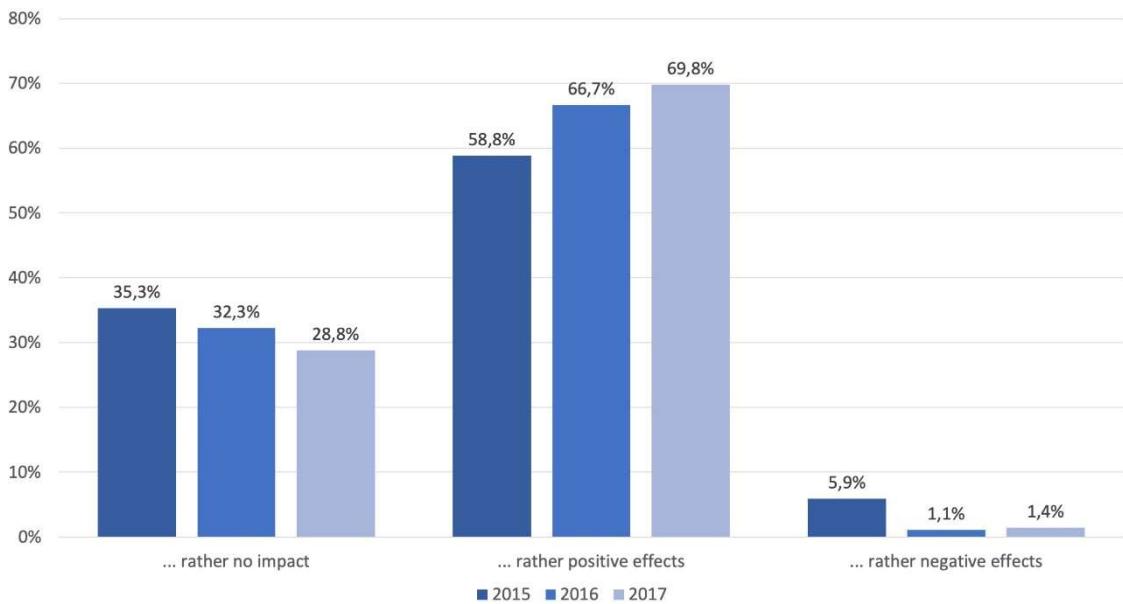


Figure 3: Impact of the course on existing foot problems, by year

Of the respondents, 24.1% stated that they paid more attention to the feet and shoe compatibility when buying new shoes (Q10), since 63,1% have already paid attention to the compatibility of the shoes and their feet before participating.

The last four items readopted questions from the first block and were meant to enable a before vs after comparison. The first comparison was about wearing of insoles before (Q4) and after (Q11) participation (Figure 4). Almost the same number of people wore insoles in all of their shoes, permanently. However, the proportion of respondents who indicated that they only wore insoles occasionally and in certain shoes had increased by 6.3 percentage points (from pre 39.5% to post 45.8%).

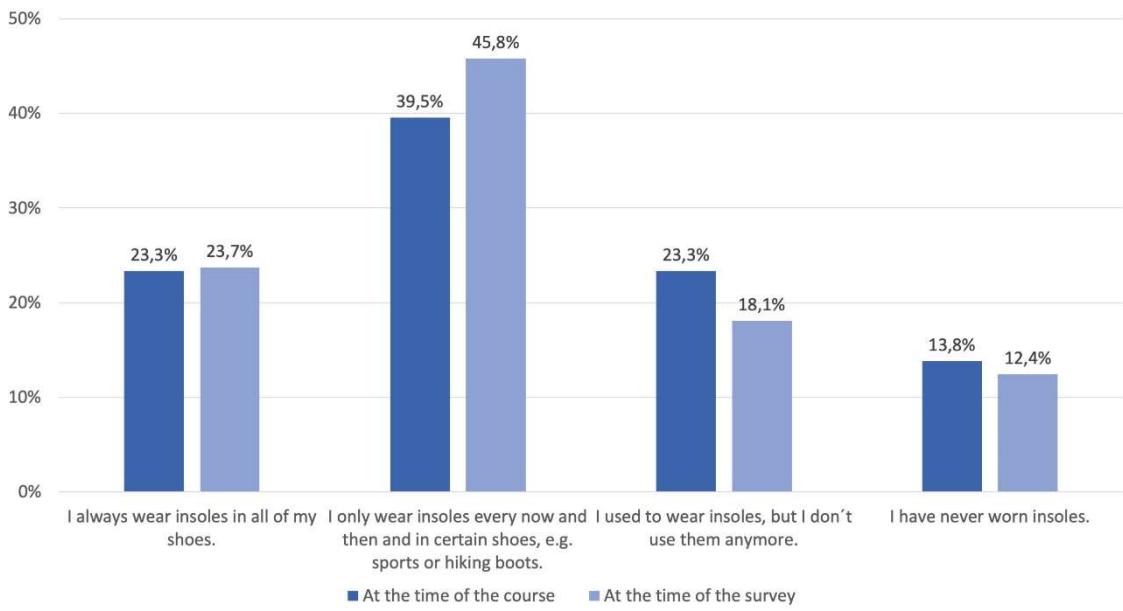


Figure 4: Comparison of insole-wearing behavior between before and after the course

After participating in the course, 2.8% of subjects underwent surgery (Q12).

The subjectively perceived burdens significantly ($Z = -8.92$, $p < 0.001$ Wilcoxon's signed-rank test) decreased from a median of 5 (Q7, before participation) to 3 (Q13, at the time of the survey), on a scale of 0–10 (Figure 5).

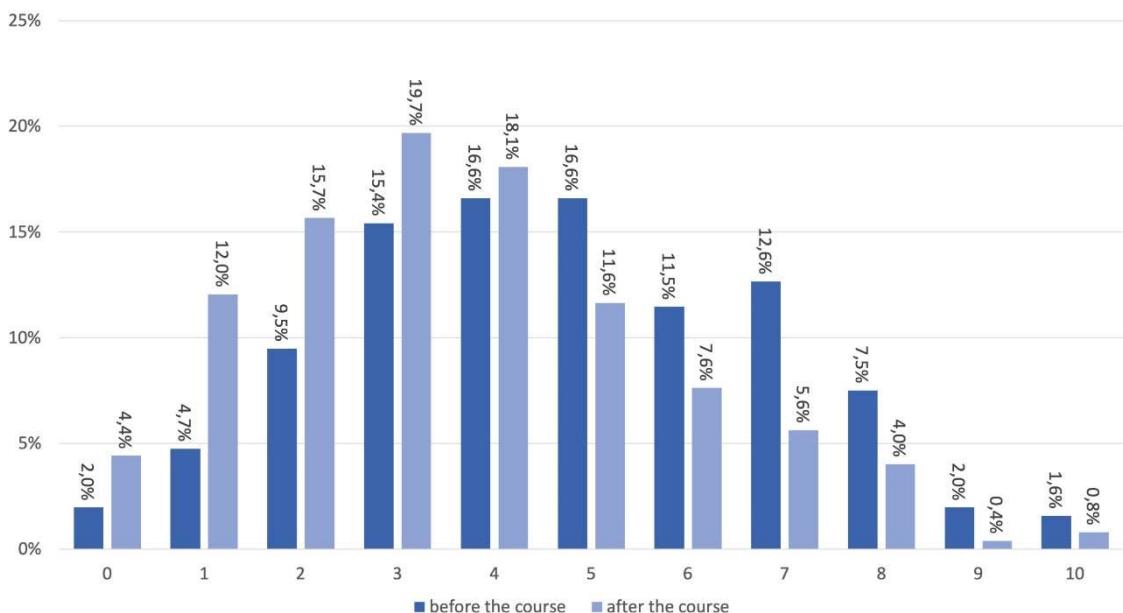


Figure 5: Comparison of complaints before and after the course

Discussion

The composition of the surveyed group was very inhomogeneous in terms of sex, age, and the type of course attended. This phenomenon has been addressed previously in the literature (11, 12, 19). According to results of the Robert Koch Institute (RKI)'s¹ "Adult health status study in Germany," women use these types of services almost twice as often as men (19).

The fact that the compact course (1 X 6 h) was more favored (88%) than the classical course (4 X 2 h) was surprising. Only the classical course was recognized as a preventive service, according to the German Social Security code (§ 20 Abs. 4 Nr. 1 SGB V), and its cost is covered by health insurance companies. Additionally, some respondents stated that the classical course made more sense from a pedagogical point of view. The popularity of the compact course may be caused by the fact that mainly working people participated in the course (median age: 55 years) and many participants had to travel far to attend the course.

In the above-mentioned study by the RKI, which addressed group composition in prevention courses, most participants were in the 65–79-year age group (19). In contrast, the average age of the MFS participants was lower, at around 55 years. One possible explanation is that many prevention groups are concerned with cardiovascular diseases, which often emerge at a later age than common foot problems. For example, hallux valgus usually first occurs between the ages of 30 and 60 years (20).

Only half of the participants (56.5%) consulted a specialist because of their foot problem. Hence, it would be interesting to know whether the remaining 38.8% of respondents who had at least slight problems or a foot malalignment had used the MFS as primary care or

¹ German institute with the aim to research and prevent infectious diseases, which also has the task of monitoring health nationwide

had previously seen a general practitioner. Unfortunately, the questionnaire did not address this issue; in future studies, the questionnaire should be amended to include questions addressing this item.

The insoles, used by one-third of the participants, were not specialist prescribed. Excessive care or improper selection of insoles can result in deconditioning of the active, muscular foot support, and in the worst case, can actually cause foot problems. To improve this situation, the MFS now aims to expand cooperation with general practitioners, so that potentially interested people can be assisted earlier. Additionally, the transfer of knowledge about insoles will be optimized.

The course format was rated very positively; only a small number was unsatisfied with the extent of the course (5.2%). This may be related to the choice offered. It is possible for everyone to choose the model that best suits personalized needs. Despite the much higher popularity of the compact course, it would make sense to continue offering the classic course in future, as it is pedagogically more valuable. In addition, the phases of self-exercise between the lessons, which are not available in the compact-course, are an integral part of the classic course. Future research may address this potential difference between the course types using a prospective, function-related quality of life assessment. Opinions regarding the informative content of the courses were predominantly positive. It is particularly noteworthy that even those who had participated in 2015 rated this aspect of the course positively. This speaks to the almost surprisingly good sustainability of the imparted knowledge, particularly in relation to the effort required.

The respondents' desire for further course dates (7.7%) should be considered critically, as most of the participants consciously opted for a compact course and thus for a single appointment. Therefore, it is uncertain how many would participate in future events.

Nevertheless, a refresher course should be offered. Another means of better preserving the MFS effects could be the introduction of an online or app-based intervention.

The most frequently posed criticism (2.4%) that there was not enough time to discuss individual problems, is understandable. Owing to the time constraint, a more personalized treatment could not be offered. Moreover, an extension of the course is contrary to its concept. Consequently, an extended concept of foot treatment with individual orthopedic examination and individual treatment options, besides the MFS course, would require incorporation.

The first question of the effects-block of the questionnaire related to whether, at the time of the survey, respondents still felt that they had knowledge about the function of the foot and were familiar with the exercises that support the statics and function of the foot. The result was almost unexpectedly positive, even though assessment of one's knowledge decreases with growing time distance. Nevertheless, the overwhelmingly positive answers to this question suggest that the type of theoretical content, type of exercises, etc., are well suited to achieving patients' satisfaction in perception of their empowerment within a short time frame of 6–8 h. However, the evaluation could not clarify whether the course had actually motivated participants to correct their foot position actively or changing their foot's function in everyday life. To this end, prospective objective studies are required.

Improvement in awareness and perception of the feet through the MFS course was also positively rated. Refined perception did not decline as much with increasing time-distance. This might suggest that the abstract ability of improved perception, once enhanced, fades less over time than specific knowledge, as addressed above.

As knowledge fades over time, the frequency of performance of the exercises learnt in the course decreased with increasing time-distance. Nevertheless, about one-third of

those who had attended a course in 2015 still performed exercises regularly. Based on the large number of people who performed exercises, even after a long time, it can be deduced that the course is motivating and the Spiraldynamik® exercises, which focus on empowerment, seemingly provide enough benefit to result in lasting application by the participants.

The feedback of the majority of participants that the course changed the daily use and treat of the feet can be understood as an everyday effectiveness beyond the exercises taught. However, we did not check the execution of the exercises and the changes in daily use and treat of at the time of the evaluation.

When contemplating the question how the course has impacted foot complaints, the phenomenon that the effects reduced slightly over time. Although the assessments of participants from the 2015 course were still surprisingly positive, they more often had the opinion that the course had a negative impact or no effect, compared to responses of participants from other years. With regard to this question, the comparison between preventive and curative intention group showed that the former was assessed more positively. This was surprising, because satisfaction, as examined by the statement, “Attending the foot-school was worthwhile for me,” was already very high and without significant differences between curative and preventive group. In addition to the pure alleviation of complaints, which is queried here, this could indicate that other factors also play a role in the evaluation. Some of those factors may include newly gained knowledge about the anatomy and function of the foot, greater understanding of one's problem or new insights into different treatment options.

When comparing the use of insoles before and after the course, a higher proportion of people were found using insoles after participating in the course than before joining. This finding is somewhat surprising, since the concept of the MFS, while not attempting to

replace insoles, focused on making some insole use obsolete by training the active support of the foot architecture.

Nevertheless, the selection of footwear was clearly improved after, but not necessarily through the course. Thus, almost a quarter of those surveyed stated that they now paid more attention to the feet-shoe compatibility factor. This is particularly substantial because according to their own statement 63.1% had already done that before participation.

With the exception of a few rare cases, such as those where surgery was unavoidable (2,8%), the reported complaints developed positively after course participation as compared to before (median before: 5, after: 3). Retrospectively recorded pain could be affected by bias, but it may be concluded that functional foot problems can be treated satisfactorily conservatively in the overwhelming number of cases and that MFS might be a useful element. However, pain is a multifactorial process, and without a randomized controlled study, the reduction in pain cannot be attributed solely to the MFS.

The limitations of the study were its retrospective, monocentric, internally evaluated attributes based on participants opinion. Recall and response bias, both of which are typical for retrospective surveys, may have potentially affected the results. The questionnaire, which was designed specifically for our study and was not validated, may have influenced the external validity of the results. Validation should be considered for future research. An extended evaluation, using a prospective, randomized, and controlled design with objective and function-related parameters should be used to explore the effects of the course further in future.

Conclusions

Participants across all groups and years graded the course positively, with respect to the areas of course format and subjective effects. As requested by many participants, the MFS should be extended by an optional refresher course. This would allow participants to master the execution of exercises and document the progress they have made. The criticism posed by some respondents that insufficient time is spent on individual counseling cannot be improved within the format of a group course. For this reason, the extended concept of foot treatment with individual orthopedic examination and treatment options, besides the existing MFS course, will need to be addressed. To generate data that are more reliable and take another step toward implementation as a therapeutic concept for dysfunctional foot problems, further studies are required to allow a more accurate differentiation between the effects of the course.

In summary, the concept of an educational program targeting dysfunctional foot problems, based on Spiraldynamik®, is a promising approach that should be pursued further through research.

List of abbreviations

ZDV:	Mainz University Data Center (Zentrum für Datenverarbeitung)
RKI:	Robert Koch Institute
M:	Arithmetic mean
SD:	Standard Deviation
MFS:	Mainz Footschool
IMBEI:	Institute for Medical Biostatistics, Epidemiology and Informatics
NRS:	Numeric rating scale

Acknowledgements

The employees of the ZDV accompanied the statistical analysis of the data and helped with the implementation of the online survey and adequate data protection.

The IMBEI supported us with the development of the questionnaire and the statistical analysis.

Funding

There were no study sponsors or funding of any kind

Conflict of Interest

Two of the co-authors are employed at the Institute of Physical Therapy, Prevention and Rehabilitation of the University Medical Center Mainz, which stages the courses of the Mainz Footschool. Ulrich Betz is the Director of the Institut and Jürgen Konradi a research associate.

For all other authors, there were no relevant board memberships, fees or royalties, paid. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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