HOW COACHES LEARN TO TEACH LIFE SKILLS TO ADOLESCENT ATHLETES

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How coaches learn to teach life skills to adolescent athletes

Les situations d’apprentissage d’entraîneurs concernant l’enseignement des habiletés de vie aux adolescents-athlètes

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Abstract: The objective of this study was to explore the learning situations in which coaches report having learned to teach life skills to adolescent athletes. In this qualitative study, 24 coaches from two different sport settings (12 basketball and 12 swimming) were questioned individually using semi-structured interviews. The results indicated that coaches reported learning how to teach life skills from various sources, which were classified into the three types of learning situations using the Trudel, Culver and Werthner model (2013). The most important learning situations identified by the coaches in this study were the moments taken to reflect on their past experiences as athletes and coaches (internal learning situations) and when they interacted with other coaches and specialists (unmediated learning situations). In light of these findings, practical recommendations for coaches and coaching programs are proposed.

Keywords: life skills, learning situations, coaches, adolescent athletes, sport settings.

Résumé : L’objectif de cette étude visait à explorer les situations d’apprentissage dans lesquelles des entraîneurs ont rapporté avoir appris à enseigner des habiletés de vie aux adolescents-athlètes. Dans cette étude qualitative, 24 entraîneurs provenant de deux contextes sportifs (12 en basket-ball et 12 en natation) ont été rencontrés lors d’entretiens individuels semi-structurés. Les résultats ont indiqué que les entraîneurs ont appris à enseigner des habiletés de vie à travers plusieurs sources d’apprentissage, pouvant être réparties dans chacun des trois types de situations d’apprentissage du modèle de Trudel, Culver et Werthner (2013). Il ressort, entre autres, que les moments pris pour réfléchir sur les expériences passées (situations d’apprentissage internes) et les interactions avec d’autres entraîneurs et spécialistes (situations d’apprentissage non assistées) sont les sources d’apprentissage les plus importantes pour les entraîneurs de l’étude. À la lumière de ces résultats, des recommandations sont formulées pour favoriser les apprentissages des entraîneurs concernant l’enseignement des habiletés de vie et pour améliorer les programmes de formation existants.

Mots clés : habiletés de vie, situations d’apprentissage, entraîneurs, adolescents-athlètes, contextes sportifs.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Trainer in Lernsituationen, die das Vermitteln von Lebenskompetenzen an Jugendliche betreffen


SCHLÜSSELRÄTEN: Lebenskompetenz, Lernsituationen, Trainer, jugendliche Athleten, Sportkontexte.

Resumen: Las situaciones de aprendizaje para los entrenadores que enseñan habilidades para la vida a los atletas-adolescentes

El objetivo de este estudio fue explorar las situaciones de aprendizaje en que los entrenadores informaron de que habían aprendido a enseñar habilidades para la vida a los jóvenes deportistas. Este estudio cualitativo, 24 entrenadores de dos contextos deportivos (12 en el baloncesto y 12 de natación) fueron entrevistados a nivel individual con una entrevista semi-estructurada. Los resultados indicaron que los entrenadores que han aprendido a enseñar habilidades para la vida a través de varias fuentes de aprendizaje pueden ser distribuidos en cada uno de los tres tipos de situaciones de aprendizaje Trudel modelo, Culver y Werthner (2013). Parece ser, entre otros, que el tiempo necesario para reflexionar sobre experiencias pasadas (situaciones de aprendizaje interna) y las interacciones con otros entrenadores y especialistas (situaciones de aprendizaje asistido) son las fuentes más importantes del aprendizaje para los entrenadores del estudio. A la luz de estos hallazgos, se hacen recomendaciones para favorecer que los entrenadores apliquen aprendizaje para la enseñanza de habilidades para la vida que permitan mejorar los programas de formación existentes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: habilidades para la vida, situaciones de aprendizaje, entrenadores, atletas juveniles, contextos deportivos.

Riassunto: Le situazioni d’apprendimento di allenatori riguardante l’insegnamento delle abilità di vita agli adolescenti-atleti.

L’obiettivo di questo studio mirava ad esplorare le situazioni d’apprendimento nelle quali degli allenatori hanno riportato di aver appreso ad insegnare delle abilità di vita a adolescenti-atleti. In questo studio qualitativo, 24 allenatori provenienti da due contesti sportivi (12 dal basket e 12 dal nuoto) sono stati incontrati durante interviste individuali semi-istrutturate. I risultati hanno indicato che gli allenatori hanno appreso ad insegnare delle abilità di vita attraverso parecchie fonti d’apprendimento, che possono essere suddivise in ciascuno dei tre tipi di situazioni d’apprendimento del modello di Trudel, Culver e Werthner (2013). Emerge, tra l’altro, che i momenti presi per riflettere sulle esperienze passate (situazioni d’apprendimento interne) e le interazioni con altri allenatori e specialisti (situazioni d’apprendimento non assistite) sono le fonti d’apprendimento per gli allenatori dello studio. Alla luce di questi risultati, sono formulate delle raccomandazioni per favorire gli
For many years, research on positive youth development in sports was guided by the assumption that young athletes have the strength, resources, and potential to achieve healthy development (Holt et al., 2017; Larson, 2000; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005). In addition, one of the most important factors that facilitate positive youth development is the development of life skills (Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005). Steven Danish is a pioneer in the field of life skills development in athletes. According to Danish and his colleagues, life skills refer to “those skills that enable individuals to succeed in the different environments in which they live, such as school, home and in their neighborhoods. Life skills can be behavioral (communicating effectively with peers and adults) or cognitive (making effective decisions); interpersonal (being assertive) or intrapersonal (setting goals)” (Danish, Forneris, Hodge, & Heke, 2004, p. 40). A more recent definition is that of Gould and Carson (2008). They defined life skills operationally as “those internal personal assets, characteristics and skills such as goal setting, emotional control, self-esteem, and hard work ethic that can be facilitated or developed in sport and are transferred for use in non-sport settings” (Gould & Carson, 2008, p. 60).

An important aspect of this definition is that for a skill to be considered a life skill, it must be transferred and used in another life context.

Many researchers support the idea of life skills transfer in sport (e.g., Papacharisis, Goudas, Danish, & Theodorakis, 2005). Two transfer approaches have been identified in the literature: implicit and explicit (Chinkov & Holt, 2015; Turnnidge, Côté, & Hancock, 2014). According to the implicit approach, when athletes acquire sport-specific skills, they implicitly learn life skills that will be useful in other life areas. In contrast, according to the explicit approach, life skills must be taught systematically in order to learn how to develop and transfer them to other settings.

Coaches play a central role in teaching life skills to athletes (Gould & Carson, 2008). This is understandable as they spend many hours training the athletes and thus have many opportunities to foster their overall development (Bergeron et al., 2015). Several studies described strategies that coaches use to teach and transfer specific life skills (Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012; Trottier & Robitaille, 2014). For example, a coach may explicitly teach an athlete how to deal with stress management through some breathing exercises, and then ask the athlete to use the techniques in the school setting before a stressful exam. Coaches may also teach life skills implicitly, for example, by displaying a good work ethic, which the athlete could then be inclined to replicate in another setting. It appears that coaches who intentionally teach life skills tend to use a holistic approach (Collins, Gould, Lauer, & Chung, 2009).

Despite the importance of the coach’s role in the overall development of athletes, to our knowledge, no study to date has focused specifically on how coaches learn to teach life skills to athletes. Camiré, Trudel, and Forneris (2014) addressed this topic, but from a broader perspective. They examined how model coaches learned to facilitate positive youth development and described some of their defining characteristics: openness to learning, proactivity, and willingness to participate in learning situations in which they acquire knowledge of positive youth development. Specifically, the authors identified three types of learning situations:
formal, non-formal, and informal, with perceptions of their importance varying across coaches. The present study builds on Camiré et al.’s concept of positive youth development by exploring more specifically the situations in which coaches report having learned to teach life skills.

Although no study to date has focused on how coaches learn to teach life skills, several studies have sought to understand how coaches learn to train athletes (e.g., Erickson, Bruner, MacDonald, & Côté, 2008). The results indicate that a variety of education programs are available, including the Canadian National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) (Christensen, 2014; Erickson et al., 2008; Wright, Trudel, & Culver, 2007), a large-scale coach education system. In addition, coaches acquire knowledge through university degree programs (Christensen, 2014; Trudel, Gilbert, & Werthner, 2010), seminars and conferences (Lemyre, Trudel, & Durand-Bush, 2007; Wright et al., 2007), personal observations (Christensen, 2014; Erickson et al., 2008), and discussions with other coaches (Erickson et al., 2008; Occhino, Mallett, & Rynne, 2013) and other sport stakeholders (Lemyre et al., 2007). They can also get information on the Internet and in books (Erickson et al., 2008; Lemyre et al., 2007), through mentoring (Christensen, 2014; MacDonald, Côté, & Deakin, 2010; Occhino et al., 2013), through professional and personal experience (Callary, Werthner, & Trudel, 2012; Duarte & Culver, 2014; Lemyre et al., 2007; Werthner & Trudel, 2009), and through reflection (Callary et al., 2012; Christensen, 2014; Gilbert & Trudel, 2001). Thus, as coaches learn their role as coach in different ways, it is possible that they may learn to teach life skills in similar ways.

In the coaching literature, several authors refer to the model by Trudel, Culver and Werthner (2013) when discussing coaches’ learning sources (e.g., Christensen, 2014; Rynne & Mallet, 2014; Stoszkowski & Collins, 2016). This model of how coaches learn to coach is a visual representation of Moon’s (2004) conceptual framework (learning situations and stages of learning). Using a constructivist paradigm, coaches adjust their cognitive structure by participating in three learning situations: (a) mediated, (b) unmediated, and (c) internal. According to Trudel and colleagues, mediated learning situations occur when someone other than the learner directs the learning by making choices about the content to be learned, how it is presented, and the evaluation procedure (e.g., training provided to coaches). Unmediated learning situations occur when no one has predetermined what the coach has to learn. Here, the coaches decide what information they need and which sources to consult (e.g., reading, Internet search, discussions with other coaches). Internal learning situations occur when coaches are not exposed to new material, but instead engage in personal reflection in order to question their knowledge content. This reflection can be scheduled (e.g., a specific time set aside to draw up a balance sheet) or unplanned (e.g., downtime). Thus, learning can take place in different ways and in concert with diverse individuals or groups. In this sense, learning is considered to be more than just accumulated knowledge. This model could be useful for designing or analyzing various aspects of how coaches learn in order to improve approaches to life skills teaching. However, to date, this model has not been used for this purpose.

Given the critical role of coaches in the teaching and transfer of life skills, it is relevant to examine in which situations they learn to teach these skills. Knowing this could lead to practical recommendations for improving coach education programs, and ultimately, to improve overall development of their athletes. Bergeron et al. (2015) recently argued that coaching should be context-specific and that it should consider the culture of specific sports. The present study therefore aimed to explore in which situations coaches report having learned to teach life skills to adolescent
athletes and whether these learning situations differ between two sport settings: school basketball and community swimming.

This study is pursuant to a recently published study (see Trottier & Robitaille, 2014) that examined the perceptions of 24 coaches’ (12 high school basketball, 12 community swimming) regarding their role in the development of life skills in adolescent athletes. Although some differences between the two sport settings were identified, the overall results indicated that all coaches used a variety of teaching and transfer strategies to foster the development of life skills. The majority of coaches reported teaching self-confidence and respect. In addition, the coaches had two main motivations for teaching life skills: (a) the needs of the adolescent athletes and (b) the coach’s own values. They also reported several strategies to teach life skills (i.e., general discussions, rules to follow, individual interventions, specific interventions, goal setting, feedback, maintaining high expectations, and modeling). In addition, two main transfer strategies were reported to help athletes apply the life skills they acquired in sport to other, non-sport settings: (a) using specific discussions, or explaining to the athletes the various non-sport settings where their life skills would be useful or important, and (b) asking the athletes to apply their life skills to other life areas.

As it will be described in the next section, the current study uses a similar methodology to that of the previous study (Trottier & Robitaille, 2014). Although both studies examined the same coaches, the results that will be presented in this article are drawn from a different section of the interview guide, and are related to a different study objective.

1. Method

1.1. Research Strategy and Settings

Based on a constructivist paradigm, a multiple-case study was conducted according to Yin’s (2009) criteria: “how” or “why” questions are asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control. In the present study, we used the multiple-case study method to gain a deeper understanding of the situations in which coaches report having learned to teach life skills to their athletes. Coaches from two different sport settings in Quebec, Canada were examined: (a) basketball coaches working in a school sport setting; and (b) swimming coaches working in a community sport setting associated with the provincial swimming federation. Previous studies have shown that coaches deal with their athletes’ behaviors differently according to the sport culture (Trudel, Lemyre, Werthner, & Camiré, 2007). Thus, sports may differ in terms of culture (e.g., basketball vs. swimming) and subculture (e.g., community vs. school basketball). Accordingly, in addition to comparing the perceptions of individual coaches within the same sport setting, we wanted to examine if these perceptions differed between different sport settings (individual swimming and team basketball). In Canada, school sport is regulated by School Sport Canada (SSC, www.schoolsport.ca), whose purpose is to “promote and advocate for positive sportsmanship, citizenship and the total development of student athletes through interscholastic sport.” The SSC has over 750,000 student athletes and 52,000 volunteer teacher coaches in the Provincial and Territorial Federations and Associations. In Canada, what distinguishes school sport from community sport is that school sport is promoted as an extension of the classroom (Holt, Tink, Mandigo, & Fox, 2008).

1.2. Participants

This study was approved by the university’s research ethics committee. The study participants included 24 coaches: 12 (2 women, 10 men) high school basketball coaches and 12 (4 women, 8 men) community swimming coaches. Participants met the following inclusion criteria: (a) coaching experience,
a background in coaching elite athletes aged 13 to 17 years; and (b) recognition in their sport community for a holistic approach to coaching, whereby they attributed equal importance to the athletes’ personal and athletic development. Studies have demonstrated the importance of adopting a coaching philosophy that emphasizes personal development through a life skills development process (e.g., Collins et al., 2009). All participants gave their written informed consent to participate.

The school basketball coaches were working in eight different schools in Quebec. They ranged in age from 23 to 39 years (M = 30.08, SD = 4.21), and their years of coaching experience ranged from two to 20 years (M = 11.41 years, SD = 5.51). They coached elite AAA League basketball with adolescent girls (n = 5) and boys (n = 7) aged 13 to 14 years (n = 3) and 15 to 17 years (n = 9). Five coaches worked full-time at a school: one was a teacher, one was a sports technician, and one was a sports director. Six coaches held full-time jobs outside the school setting, and one was a full-time undergraduate student. Five coaches held Level 1 certification from Canada’s NCCP, four held Level 2 certification, and three held Level 3 certification. Two coaches had participated in international basketball conferences, and six in provincial basketball conferences. No coaches had attended conferences on sport psychology, but one reported attending a conference that focused on coaching pedagogy. All basketball coaches had previous basketball playing experience at various levels. One had played at regional high school level, two at provincial high school level, three at regional college level, two at provincial college level, three at university level, and one had played professional basketball.

The community swimming coaches were working at 12 different swimming clubs in Quebec. They ranged in age from 23 to 49 years (M = 36.33, SD = 8.64), and their years of coaching experience ranged from eight to 31 years (M = 17.37, SD = 8.58). They worked with both male and female adolescent athletes. Seven coached athletes aged 13 to 17 years and five coached athletes aged 15 to 17 years. Eleven were full-time coaches and one was part-time. One held Level 1 NCCP certification, two held Level 2 certification, and four held Level 4 certification. One coach did not specify NCCP certification status. Demographic data on all participating coaches were reported previously (see Trottier & Robitaille, 2014).

The cases in this multiple-case study were treated in two ways. First, each coach was considered as a case (24 cases in all) to explore the individual learning situations the coaches reported having learned to teach life skills to adolescent athletes. Second, each sport setting (school basketball and community swimming) was considered as a case to explore the similarities and differences between the two settings.

1.3. Procedure

The coaches were recruited using a reputational sample procedure (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Key informants (i.e., individuals with good knowledge of the studied setting) suggested potential participants that met the selection criteria and provided their contact information. The key informants for school basketball were three coaches from the school sports league (two AA and one A level), one sports administrator from the Réseau du Sport Étudiant du Québec (RSEQ), which coordinates school sports in the province, and one sports director from a local high school. They proposed a list of 13 potential coaches to participate in the study. The two key informants for community swimming were the Coordinator of the high performance sports council for the Quebec City region (Conseil du sport de haut niveau de Québec, CSHNQ) and the Technical Director of the provincial swimming federation (Fédération de natation du Québec, FNQ). The key informants for community swimming suggested a list of 21 potential coaches to participate in the study. These coaches were then contacted individually and invited to participate in the study.
The participants underwent individual semi-structured interviews (60-120 minutes duration). One researcher conducted all interviews with the basketball coaches and another researcher conducted all interviews with the swimming coaches. An interview guide was used to ensure similar interviews while allowing the coaches to express themselves freely. The two interviewers received the same training and participated in mutual discussions during the data collection process. Prior to the interview, coaches were informed of the research objective and the voluntary nature of the study, and that interviews would be recorded. The coaches also completed a form to provide demographic information and coordinates for subsequent validation of the data analysis (i.e., a report of the interview analysis would be sent to them so they could confirm the content held within). Data saturation was reached after 24 interviews were conducted (12 basketball coaches, 12 swimming coaches). The data derived from the first 10 interviews for each sport setting provided support that the research objective was answered. Nonetheless, we held two additional interviews for each setting to ensure data saturation. Data saturation was achieved because the last two interviews did not bring about any new information relating to the research objective (Brod, Tesler, & Christensen, 2009). Pseudonyms were used throughout the study for confidentiality purposes.

1.4. Interview Guide

The interview guide was tested in six pilot interviews (three for each sport setting, which were not included in this study). The pilot interviews confirmed that the interview guide was appropriate to identify the learning situations in which coaches report having learned to teach life skills and that no differences in application were observed between the two interviewers in the two settings. First, the guide assessed the profiles of the coaches (i.e., individual and professional characteristics, athletic and coaching experience, coaching approach, relational skills, and work environment). The second section addressed the life skills that they reported having taught. Because there is no systematic teaching of life skills in the NCCP (only mental skills such as goal setting and confidence are taught explicitly), the coaches were given a definition and description of life skills based on Danish, Fazio, Nellen, and Owens (2002) to prevent various meanings and interpretations. The coaches were also required to fill out a life skills “reflection grid”. The grid contained an example of a life skill and associated practical teaching strategies. Based on their practices, the coaches were asked to write in one column the life skills they had fostered in their athletes in the past year and the practical teaching strategies they used in another column. After the coaches had spent time reflecting on their responses, the interview was resumed, this time regarding the grid responses. For example, we asked them, “In the last year, in what situations did you teach your athletes about life skills?; “Can you describe a situation in detail and tell us what strategies you used?”; and “How did you apply the actions or strategies?” Results of this section of the interview guide were published in Trottier and Robitaille (2014). The third section of the interview addressed learning situations in which coaches report having learned to teach life skills, with a focus on their individual experiences. For each life skill mentioned by the coach, the interviewer asked the following question: “How did you learn how to teach this life skill?” The open-ended nature of the question allowed for the coach to describe the learning situations in which they learned to teach life skills. First, the coaches responded freely with the interviewer guiding them when necessary to give real and concrete examples of their practices. Then, the interviewer summarized the key points and the coaches corrected any reporting errors and added further comments if desired.

1 In this article, the use of “how” refers to learning situations.
1.5. Data Analysis

The 24 interviews were transcribed verbatim and were verified by a second playback of the recordings, in addition to several careful readings of the transcripts to get immersed in the data. The data analysis was conducted in two steps: (a) content analysis and (b) cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2009). First, content analysis was performed deductively and the data were categorized according to the three types of learning situations proposed by the model of Trudel et al. (2013). Subcategories within the three categories emerged in subsequent inductive analyses. Second, cross-case analyses of the 24 interviews were performed using tables to compare each coach separately for similarities and differences and then a regrouping was done according to their coaching setting. The data analysis was validated in two ways. First, two independent researchers conducted the data analysis separately. During the process, they met and discussed the findings regularly until consensus was reached. A third researcher, the principal investigator of the study, supervised the process of the analysis. Second, once the content analysis for each interview was completed, an interview summary was written and sent to the respective coach for validation. Finally, excerpts from the transcripts were translated from French to English for purposes of citation in this article.

2. Results

The results are presented in four sections. The three learning situations proposed by Trudel et al. (2013): (a) mediated, (b) unmediated, and (c) internal are described using examples provided by the participants. In the fourth section, their responses are then compared across the two sports settings.

2.1. Mediated learning situations

Mediated learning occurs when a person other than the coach selects the material to be taught and directs the learning (Trudel et al., 2013). As shown in Table 1, coaches from both settings mentioned this type of learning situation the least often (six coaches: two basketball, four swimming). Specifically, they described three types of situations: (a) conference attendance, (b) Canada’s NCCP, and (c) university education.

| Conference attendance. Four coaches (two basketball, two swimming) said that they learned how to teach life skills at conferences. Julien (basketball) said that he learned the | Conference attendance. Four coaches (two basketball, two swimming) said that they learned how to teach life skills at conferences. Julien (basketball) said that he learned the |
importance of a healthy lifestyle from a lecture given by a sports psychologist: “I attended a conference given by a sports psychologist from the national short track speed skating team. I learned that there are three things to consider if the athlete isn’t doing well: nutrition, sleep, and positive thinking.” Christine (basketball) said that she learned different ways to manage stress and emotions at a conference:

I attended a conference related to my work not long ago. It was called “Bye Bye Anxiety.” The psychologist who delivered the talk gave us advice on how to reduce anxiety, which I use to help young athletes manage their stress.

Nicole (swimming) said that she learned to teach goal setting at a conference: “Every year I attend the Quebec swimming coaches’ conference. There are symposiums on various topics, and every year I learn some strategies for teaching goal setting.”

Canada’s NCCP. Four coaches (one basketball, three swimming) said that they learned to teach life skills by participating in the NCCP. For example, Christine (basketball) said: “I got some tips during my coaching certification, mainly on how to set goals. More specifically, I learned different ways to use them with the athletes. I now have a more individualized approach.” David (swimming) said that his certification course taught him how to teach self-confidence to adolescent athletes:

I learned how to promote self-confidence in my level 4 NCCP course. It really helped me. I found that what they had taught us, that is, how to properly question the athletes, it was a good way to do it. It’s difficult for young people. They’re used to being told, “Do this, do that, do this...” For example, at times when they doubt themselves, I say to them, “What are you going to do? How will you manage to do that? Give me solutions!”

Ryan (swimming) mentioned that the NCCP taught him how to teach diverse life skills such as life balance:

Everything concerning life balance, it’s really in my level 4 training that I learned the exercises that I apply in my everyday life with the athletes to ensure they maintain a good life balance. For example, to be able to understand them better and also to find out what state they’re in, I ask them questions about their level of satisfaction with school or with their friends. If it’s necessary, I can then give them advice if they’re open and ready to receive it. […] I’m good at reading the athletes every day because I’m close to them and what they’re going through.

University education. Three coaches (one basketball, two swimming) cited their university education as a mediated learning situation. For example, Julien (basketball) said that he learned about a healthy lifestyle:

When I did my BA in education, I learned the importance of a healthy lifestyle. If we just practiced twice a week, three hours a week, this wouldn’t be so crucial. But with the intensity they [the athletes] give in the gym, they have to eat and sleep well. Without that, they won’t have the energy they need. With what I’ve learned, I help them understand that.

Emi (swimming) said that she learned to teach how to surpass oneself through her university education:

I have a Bachelor of education degree in early childhood and primary education. How to surpass oneself is something that you learn a lot about in this program. Helping young people to push themselves, to reach higher goals, and to do better than what they think they are capable of.

2.2. Unmediated learning situations

Unmediated learning occurs when there is no instructor and whereby the coach takes the initiative and is responsible for deciding what to learn (Trudel et al., 2013). Those types of learning situations were reported frequently (Table 1), with 17 coaches (10 basketball, 7 swimming) mentioning them. Three types of unmediated learning situations were
described: (a) interaction, (b) reading, and (c) observation.

Interaction. In all, 13 coaches (eight basketball, five swimming) said they learned how to promote the development of life skills in adolescent athletes through interacting with others. Eight coaches (seven basketball, one swimming) said they interacted with other coaches. For example, Christian (basketball) said he learned from a discussion with another coach how to foster self-confidence by promoting self-awareness:

I teach self-confidence like this [by using self-awareness] because of another school coach. By chatting with him, I realized that I was very controlling towards the athletes, and when I talked, I used phrases such as, “You have to do this; you have to do that.” Oliver [the other school coach], he uses phrases more like, “Why do you do this? Explain to me why.” By talking with this coach, I understood that the “whys” are really good, because you ask the athlete to think about what they’re doing. For example, “Why did you do this? What do you need to do in this type of situation?” The majority of the time, they [the athletes] know the answer.

Charles (basketball) also said that he learned how to promote respect by interacting with another coach:

Before, I would start with a grand moralistic speech about respect, but it was no use. [...] So, this one time I was talking with another coach, and he made me realize that repeating a shorter message would be more effective. My speech is now a simple phrase that I repeat every time the opportunity arises on and off the court.

Nicolas (basketball) also said that he learned how to promote self-confidence by interacting with another coach:

There is a coach who is practically my mentor, with whom I have discussed a lot. We talked a lot about how each person has a thought process, a family environment, and different ambitions. After this discussion, I realized how I had to be careful about the way I speak with each person, depending on their personality and their personal characteristics, so as not to lose their trust.

Ryan (swimming) said that he learned how to foster team spirit during competition by interacting with other coaches:

Last winter we went to the Eastern Canadian Championship in Halifax, and it was very hard. Out of the nine athletes that came, some swam in five events. So out of 40 events, we only got one or two personal bests. It was rough on our team spirit. I tried to unite them [the athletes], because everyone was taking it pretty hard [...]. At that time, I spoke with a lot of other coaches to see what they thought. So I would share what we were going through [...] and they gave me some advice. That made me reflect on how to act with my athletes to prepare them for what was coming next and to boost their team spirit in order to help them understand how to react positively, even during rough times.

In addition, six coaches (two basketball, four swimming) mentioned they learned how to teach life skills through interactions with a specialist (e.g., social worker, sport psychologist). Charles (basketball) learned about stress and emotional management through interactions with social workers working at the school where he trained:

I also learned from interactions with social workers. I had an athlete who was considered aggressive, and who had to be monitored by social workers. Through discussions with them, I learned many ways to intervene to help him manage his emotions the same way as he does off the basketball court. These are also strategies that I can use with other athletes to help them manage their emotions.

James (swimming) said he learned how to promote goal setting by talking with a sports psychologist: “When I spoke with him, I learned to structure the way I presented the goals, by developing the methods, evaluating them, adjusting them, and so on.” Nicole (swimming) learned how to get her athletes to surpass themselves and to set goals by talking with a sport
psychologist “He came to see me during training. We met afterward and he gave me some advice. I mainly retained what he told me about how to help the athletes surpass themselves and set goals.”

One basketball coach, Christine, said she learned how to promote stress and emotional management by interacting with one of her parents:

I think that the way we [coaches] behave has an impact on the athletes. It was my father who made me realize that. I was telling him that my athletes were stressed, and he asked: “Could it be because you are also stressed and they can feel that?” So I realized from there on that my athletes might be more stressed because I’m stressed on the sidelines. Since that conversation, I try not to scream, and to stay calm, to model good behaviour and stress management.

Reading. Seven coaches (six basketball, one swimming) referred to reading as a form of unmediated learning. Daniel (basketball) learned about goal setting through reading:

The coach at Duke University wrote a book on the concept of a team and on his experiences. It recapitulates their entire year until the end, going from their goals, how he presented them, how the athletes reacted, and so on. It helped me with the way I present goals to my athletes.

Ryan (swimming) said he learned how to teach many life skills, such as adopting a positive attitude, by reading a book:

It’s an exceptional book, which was given to me by the author during a preparatory meeting for the Paralympic games [...]. When I read this book, I learned about many things that I can do with athletes, such as how to prepare them well for competitions, how to help athletes establish the ideal mindset, how to have a confident and positive attitude [...].

Observation. Four coaches (one basketball, three swimming) reported they learned how to teach life skills by observing another coach. For example, Tony (swimming) said: “I have high-level athletes, so I go to higher-level competitions. There, I observed other coaches and I learned things about stress and emotional management.”

2.3. Internal learning situations

The third type of learning situation, internal learning, occurs not when the coach acquires new information, but when the coach reconsiders previously acquired ideas (e.g., using personal reflection). Like unmediated learning, this type of learning situation was reported frequently (Table 1): 19 coaches (10 basketball, 9 swimming) said they learned how to teach life skills through internal learning situations. However, only one type of internal learning situation was identified: previous experience.

Previous experience. First, the coaches said they learned how to teach life skills by taking the time to reflect on their own experiences as athletes (10 basketball, 6 swimming). For example, Daniel (basketball) described how he learned how to promote stress and emotional management:

I learned this [teaching stress and emotional management] from my experiences as an athlete. I went from being the star player and captain for some teams to sitting on the bench for others. These situations made me understand the kids’ feelings – the kids who never play, the kids who think that they won’t play, or the kids who think they’re the best on the planet. I found my own way of doing it [teaching stress and emotional management], because I’ve had lots of experience with it, and had a good idea of how I wanted to teach it to the athletes.

Emi (swimming) said she had developed her own way to promote healthy eating habits after reflecting on her athletic career:

I would say that the examples that I had as an athlete were negative examples. I wasn’t vulnerable to that [unhealthy eating]. It never crossed my mind to eat only salad for a week to lose weight! But I saw some friends get involved in that and I know that it was from the constant pressure we had about our weight. I did a lot of thinking about that, so I could teach without
overemphasizing the point. I try not to put too much pressure on the athletes, without necessarily telling them to eat whatever they want. I try to find a balance between the two.

Andrew (swimming) said he learned how to teach life balance by reflecting on his athletic career:

I tell the athletes that there are other things to do [besides swimming]. I suggest that they go see a movie, read a book, go out with their girlfriend or boyfriend, go cycling with people, and so forth. To do other things to try and break free. I remember when I was an athlete, I performed better when I did that, when I completely emptied my head.

Twelve coaches (seven basketball, five swimming) also mentioned reflecting on their past coaching experiences. William (basketball) mentioned he learned to promote respect by reflecting on his coaching experience:

I learned a lot from those teens. They started the year being disrespectful. I gained a lot of experience from them. They made me understand lots of things. I made mistakes, but I corrected them. I, too, have had some ups and downs with them, and I learned how to manage these disrespectful behaviours and how to get respectful behaviour from them.

Marie (basketball) said she learned how to promote respect by reflecting on her coaching career: “Oh yes, I build on my mistakes from the past! You know, a team code of conduct, I didn’t do that during my first year as a coach. I built this tool from my overall experience.” Christine (basketball) said that in light of her coaching experience, she changed her method of promoting self-confidence in young athletes:

I found that the self-confidence [of the athletes] was not very high when I started my coaching career. It really surprised me. That was when I began trying to find ways to make them aware that they had something valuable to offer the team, that they had strengths as well.

Emi (swimming) said she learned how to teach respect and punctuality thanks to her experience as a coach:

It shocked me that they [the athletes] did not show up for practice or if they were late, because I so wanted them to feel good [as athletes] and for them to be perfect. I wanted [that] so much that I found it disrespectful. Slowly, over time, I have come to place a lot of emphasis on respect and punctuality. The athletes now have to call me or write me an email in advance to let me know if they’ll be absent, as they would have to do for a job.

Some coaches (two basketball, two swimming) recounted personal experiences that led them to think about how they promoted the development of life skills in adolescent athletes. For example, Emi (swimming) said her personal experience taught her the importance of teaching healthy eating habits:

I have a sister who is bulimic. So I really thought about this, because I had seen my little sister with serious problems. It made me think about the impact that coaches can have on that [healthy eating habits]. I don’t think it would have happened to my sister if she didn’t have this coach that put it in her head. I thought a lot about this, to be able to teach it [healthy eating habits] properly without putting too much emphasis on it.

2.4. Comparison between coaches across the two sports settings

The comparison of the coaches across the two sports settings revealed primarily similarities in the ways they reported having learned how to teach life skills. Both basketball and swimming coaches said they learned to teach life skills mainly through internal and unmediated learning situations. An equivalent number of basketball coaches said they learned through internal and unmediated learning situations. Among the swimming coaches, a slightly higher number reported internal compared to unmediated learning situations. Some coaches in both sports settings also said they learned from mediated learning situations, but this was reported much less frequently.

Despite the similarities in terms of learning situations, the coaches in both sport settings
also demonstrated their individuality. In other words, each coach, independent of the sport setting, possessed a personal and unique path of how they reported having learned to teach life skills. For example, Robert (swimming) was unable to pinpoint his sources of learning, saying he learned more generally, through his education (parental and academic) and his coaching experience. Therefore, his comments could not be categorized in only one of the three learning situations of the Trudel et al.’s (2013) model. In addition, some coaches (e.g., Julien and Christine: basketball; Emi, Ryan, Nicole, and David: swimming) found that all three learning situations were useful for learning how to teach life skills. Furthermore, many coaches talked about combinations of unmediated and internal learning situations, whereas others talked about only one learning situation. For example, Christian (basketball) mentioned only unmediated learning situations, whereas John (basketball) mentioned only internal learning situations. Similarly, James and Robyn (swimming) mentioned only unmediated learning situations, whereas Matthew, Dominic, and Andrew (swimming) mentioned only internal learning situations.

3. Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the situations where coaches reported having learned to teach life skills and to analyse if these situations differ between two sport settings. The key findings are assessed and interpreted in light of the scientific literature. This discussion is organized in two parts: (a) similarities in coaches’ learning situations between the two sports settings and (b) practical recommendations for coaches to learn how to teach life skills.

3.1. Similarities between coaches in the two sport settings

First, most of the coaches reported they learned how to teach life skills mainly through internal learning situations. More specifically, they learned by reflecting on their past experiences as athletes and coaches. Furthermore, they drew on both positive and negative experiences in order to foster the personal development of their athletes. Other researchers have reported personal athletic experience as an instrumental learning source for coaching (e.g., Gilbert, Lichtenwaldt, Gilbert, Zelezny, & Côté, 2009; Krasilshchikov, 2015; Werthner & Trudel, 2006). Krasilshchikov (2015) argued that most coaches accumulate several years of experience as athletes, and the time they invest in coach education programs is less than the time they invest in coaching. In the current study, coaches reflected on their past coaching experiences and subsequently questioned the ways they taught life skills. They also drew on meaningful interactions with their athletes as well as mistakes they made in their coaching practice. This indicates that meaningful events can be sources of learning, providing support for Callary et al.’s (2012) conclusion that meaningful episodic experiences influence the development of coaching experience. Note that the coaches in the current study did not schedule specific times for reflection (e.g., regular journal entries). Instead, they reflected frequently but not systematically, which corroborates Werthner and Trudel (2009), who found that Olympic coaches thought about their coaching all the time, even though few of them maintained a journal.

In addition, most of the coaches reported having learned to teach life skills through unmediated learning situations. In other words, they were proactive in how they had learned to foster the personal development of their athletes. Camiré et al. (2014) also showed that coaches intentionally found opportunities to learn how to facilitate positive youth development. However, the coaches in the present study also sought to learn by interacting with other coaches and specialists. Except for one coach (Nicolas), who said he had “almost a mentor,” none of the coaches in this study reported
having a mentor per se. Several studies found mentoring to be an important source of learning for coaches (Christensen, 2014; MacDonald et al., 2010; Nash & Sproule, 2009; Occhino et al., 2013). For example, Christensen (2014) found that a majority of soccer coaches had an older, more experienced coach as a model to help them reflect on their practice and improve self-perceptions. Moreover, the expert coaches interviewed by Nash and Sproule (2009) benefited from a mentor’s advice early in their career. However, none of them thought that a mentor would help them now that they had gained more experience. We did not ask the coaches if they had a mentor nor did any of them mention having had one. This could be explained by their many years of coaching experience, or possibly by the fact that basketball and swimming coaches rarely receive mentoring. Furthermore, the coaches may have simply neglected to mention previous mentoring. Mentoring is a potentially useful way to help coaches learn how to teach life skills at the beginning of their training as well as later on. Christensen contends that mentoring can promote reflection on coaching practices, regardless of career stage. Further studies are needed to assess the effectiveness of mentoring to improve how coaches teach life skills.

Only a few coaches in the two sports settings said that they learned to teach life skills through mediated learning situations. At this point, in large-scale coach education programs such as the NCCP, coaches learn about mental skills, but they do not systematically learn about how to teach life skills. Although some coaches in this study said that they learned how to teach life skills as part of the NCCP, none of them described how they learned how to transfer these skills. Nevertheless, in a previous study (Trottier & Robitaille, 2014), the majority of these same coaches described certain transfer strategies they used with their adolescent athletes. This apparent discrepancy may be explained by the coaches’ belief that teaching life skills and the transfer of these skills are integrated. In other words, life skills would be automatically transferred to other non-sport settings and the transfer would not need to be taught. Although a definition of life skills was provided to the coaches at the beginning of the interviews, their concept of life skills may have been similar to their concept of mental skills. Given that these different concepts somewhat overlap, and in view of the literature on the importance of life skills, large-scale coach education programs could teach these two concepts as separate notions while explaining their similarities and differences. Coaches could also be trained in life skills transfer to help athletes transfer life skills to other life areas (e.g., family, school). Some authors feel that formal coach education programs pay insufficient attention to how coaching skills are developed (Vella, Crowe, & Oades, 2013). Formal coach education primarily addresses technical, tactical, and physical aspects (Camiré et al., 2014; Christensen, 2014; Vella et al., 2013). For example, Christensen (2014) showed that mediated learning sources are considered particularly important for developing a contact network, but less important for the professional development of coaches. Camiré et al. (2014) demonstrated the value of formal coach education for learning about positive youth development, especially for beginner coaches. However, some coaches felt that the coach education courses focused more on technical and tactical aspects, to the detriment of youth development. Although the literature indicates that mediated learning situations are important for the development of coaches, coaches do not necessarily consider them the main source of learning (Collins, Barber, Moore, & Laws, 2011; Nash & Sproule, 2012).

In summary, no obvious distinctions were found between the two sports settings in the ways coaches reported having learned to teach life skills to their adolescent athletes. This raises the question as to whether a holistic athlete-centered approach motivates coaches to seek further learning through reflection and
interaction with others. Based on the results of this study, we may conclude that the coaches’ actions were consistent with their philosophies: they were committed to the positive development of their athletes, and they found their own ways to teach them life skills. Further studies are needed to confirm these results.

Despite the similar learning situations described by both basketball and swimming coaches, each coach had followed a unique learning path for teaching life skills. This finding is supported by other studies on coach development, which demonstrated that coaches learn about the coaching role in individual ways (Araya, Bennie, & O’Connor, 2015; Callary et al., 2012; Duarte & Culver, 2014; Nash & Sproule, 2011). This finding also supports the relevance of adopting a constructivist approach (Jarvis, 2006; Moon, 2004) to learn how to teach life skills, an approach that is advocated in the coach development research (e.g., Araya et al., 2012; Duarte & Culver, 2014; Nash & Sproule, 2011). This approach also supports the relevance of adopting a constructivist approach to learn how to teach life skills, an approach that is advocated in the coach development research (e.g., Araya et al., 2012; Duarte & Culver, 2014; Nash & Sproule, 2011).

3.2. Practical recommendations

Most of the coaches in this study said they learned how to teach life skills by reflecting on their previous experiences and through interaction with others. It could therefore be useful to encourage coaches to participate more regularly in mutual discussions and discussions with specialists. For instance, communities of practice (Culver, Trudel, & Werthner, 2009; Gilbert, Gallimore, & Trudel, 2009; Stoszkowski & Collins, 2014) could be created. Wenger, Trayner, and de Laat (2011) define a community of practice as a learning partnership among people who find it useful to learn from each other and from a group about a subject or particular area. Thus, practical experience becomes a source of learning, which coaches could use to learn how to teach life skills. This type of learning could also be incorporated by sport organizations (e.g., sport federations, sport clubs, high schools) and by large-scale coach education programs. On this subject, Stoszkowski and Collins (2015) recommend that, before formal coach training programs can incorporate the notion of practice communities, support structures should be provided to help coaches identify and deal with complex social influences. The goal would be to ensure that coaches develop a perspective that is appropriately reflective, open-minded, and critical.

In addition, the results of the present study suggest that a holistic, athlete-centered philosophy is an indicator that coaches will have a proactive attitude towards continuous learning in teaching life skills. Most of the coaches in the study by Collins et al. (2009) stressed that their philosophy evolved as they gained more experience and confidence. Knowing that beginner coaches tend to focus primarily on learning specific sport-related skills (Wright et al., 2007), it would be imperative for coach education programs to foster awareness about the importance of a philosophy that promotes positive youth development. Coaches in training should also be made aware of how their beliefs and values guide their actions. Thus, it would be useful to promote reflection on meaningful experiences in their coaching practice so they can assess whether their actions and values are consistent. Coaching effectiveness does not only refer to the ability to teach sport-specific skills; it also means the ability to learn from one’s own practice (Bergeron et al., 2015).

Finally, large-scale coach education programs could instruct how to teach life skills and their transfer to other settings. Although these programs are by definition mediated learning situations, the specialists who provide the training could consider providing coaches with opportunities to exchange experiences of teaching and transferring life skills as well as how they learned from others. In addition, reflection exercises (e.g., case studies, role
playing) concerning life skills teaching and transfer could be systematically included in training programs.

4. Conclusion

To our knowledge, this study was the first to examine the situations where coaches report having learned to teach life skills while using the model by Trudel et al. (2013). Despite the similarities in how the coaches from two settings learned to teach life skills, two aspects stood out. First, meaningful events—such as interactions with their athletes or certain coaching mistakes—inspired them to reflect on how they taught life skills and to question their methods. Second, the coaches report having learned to teach life skills by interacting with others, including other coaches and various specialists.

Some limitations of this study should be noted. First, the participants had two attributes in common: they were coaching elite athletes aged 13 to 17 years, and they had a holistic philosophy whereby they focused on the athlete’s personal and athletic development. This sample is therefore not representative of all basketball or swimming coaches, which limits the generalizability of the results. Second, data were collected based on self-reports of past events. Therefore, the participants may have neglected to mention certain learning situations because they did not recall them during the interview. Indeed, not mentioning a certain learning situation does not mean they did not learn from it. Other studies are needed to go beyond the coaches’ own perceptions of past events.

To gain deeper insight into the learning situations regarding teaching life skills to athletes, future studies could consider implementing an education and life skills transfer program that takes into account the coaches’ reality (i.e., meaningful events that coaches experience). This program could integrate different types of learning situations, according to Trudel et al.’s (2013) model. In addition, future studies could include longitudinal designs to investigate changes in coaches’ approaches to learning how to teach life skills and their transfer.

References


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