Special Olympics coaches: Examining the strategies they use to encourage their athletes to develop life skills

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Abstract

Research has shown that sports are important for people with intellectual disabilities (ID; Mactavish & Dowds, 2003), assisting this population to develop and feel socially included (McConkey, Dowling, Hassan, & Menke, 2013). Coaches can play a role in helping their athletes to develop life skills and Special Olympics (SO) is an organisation with the goals and means to bring positive change to the lives of people with ID (Weiss et al., 2003). Merriam's (2002) basic interpretive qualitative approach was used to explore the strategies employed by Special Olympics (SO) coaches to promote life skill development. Non-participant observations and two semi-structured interviews were conducted with six coaches. Results revealed seven deductive themes framed by Camiré, Trudel, and Forneris's (2012) study with high school coaches: (a) having a philosophy aimed at helping athletes develop, (b) building strong coach-athlete relationships, (c) understanding athletes' pre-existing makeup, (d) providing athletes with opportunities to show their skills, (e) modelling, (f) taking teachable moments, and (g) volunteerism. While the coaches' adapted these strategies to their SO athletes, perhaps more interesting is the one inductive theme found: being stern and direct.

Keywords: developmental disabilities, coaching athletes with intellectual disabilities, athlete development, development through sport

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Introduction

Research has shown that sports are important for people with intellectual disabilities (ID; Mactavish & Dowds, 2003), assisting this population to develop and feel socially included (McConkey, Dowling, Hassan, & Menke, 2013). Herewith, intellectual disabilities entail three common characteristics: (a) considerably lower intellectual functioning, (b) impairment in adaptive skills, and (c) these first two traits revealed before the age of eighteen (Mactavish & Dowds, 2003; Special Olympics Canada [SOC], 2014b). People living with ID are often affected in varying ways, even when two people have the same disability (Mactavish & Dowds, 2003; Squair & Groeneveld, 2003). The areas affected might include learning abilities, social and communicative skill acquisition, mental and physical health, and motor skill development (Alexander, Dummer, Smeltzer, & Denton, 2011; Grandisson, Tetreault, & Freeman, 2012; Mactavish & Dowds, 2003).

Historically, people with disabilities were often isolated, mistreated, and harassed by society (Counsell & Agran, 2013). Because of society's low expectations and negative attitudes and behaviours towards people with disabilities, barriers were created to exclude people with disabilities from partaking in many activities in which mainstream society participated (DePauw & Gavron, 2005); sport was one such area. According to DePauw and Gavron (2005), it was assumed that people with ID could not comprehend or even appreciate competition and sport. This began to change in the 1960s when the Special Olympics (SO) movement began (Mactavish & Dowds, 2003). As stated by Harada, Siperstein, Parker, and Lenox (2011), the Special Olympics initiative was the brainchild of Eunice Kennedy Shriver and was meant to "...provide such individuals [with ID] the opportunities to demonstrate their abilities rather than their disabilities, and to be given the opportunity to participate in the normative life experience of sport as enjoyed by individuals without disabilities" (p. 1132).

Special Olympics has grown into an organisation where people with ID (over 8 years old), regardless of their skill level, can participate in sport competitions (Harada et al., 2011). Today, SO is in 170 countries with approximately 4.4 million athletes (Special Olympics, 2014). In Canada there are 36,000 athletes participating in 17 different sports which cycle between summer and winter seasons (SOC, 2014a). The overall mission of SOC states that it is "dedicated to enriching the lives of Canadians with an intellectual disability through sport," (SOC, 2014b, para. 2).

Involvement in SO can have a positive impact on athletes by, for example, increasing competence, social skills, and confidence (Farrell, Crocker, McDonough, & Sedwick, 2004; Goodwin, Fitzpatrick, Thurmeier, & Hall, 2006; Harada et al., 2011). Sport programs for people with ID should be encouraging the development of sports skills and skills that can help individuals with ID in their daily lives (Weiss, Diamond, Demark, & Lovald, 2003). Skills that are essential for functioning outside of sport (e.g. school, work) are called life skills (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993; Gould & Carson, 2008); life skills are critical for people with ID (Bouck, 2010). People with ID are especially vulnerable to mental and physical health

issues (Grandisson et al., 2012) and may also be lacking in social skills (Alexander et al., 2011) and/or communication skills (Walton & Ingersoll, 2013).

Although literature surrounding sport participation and life skill development is readily available (e.g., Gould & Carson, 2008), there are many notable gaps, in particular related to athletes with ID. Recent studies have often focussed on identifying the negative aspects of sport participation, such as the fact that individuals with special needs are often at a higher risk of sport related injuries due to pre-existing conditions (Ramirez, Yang, Bourque, Javien, Kashani, Limbos, & Peek-Asa, 2009). This research will focus on the developments of life skills in athletes with ID, rather than potential risks. As discussed by Jones (2006) in The Sports Coach as Educator, coaches are theorized as valuable sources of knowledge within the educational community, as they create exemplary learning environments. However, coaches are not always confident in their understanding of how to transfer this knowledge to other educators. This research aims to contribute to the knowledge base of coaching strategies which are most effective for learning and developing life skills in SO athletes, and to fill this gap and transfer knowledge to other coaches and educators in this field. Given the ubiquity of this population, there is a need for good quality descriptive research to be conducted concerning the successful practices of SO coaches to understand the strategies that coaches can use to effectively meet the needs of their athletes while fulfilling the mission of SO. Coaches are encouraged to meet the needs of their athletes, however, there are a number of circumstances where individuals are limited in their opportunities to participate in sports or they do not feel as though they fit in (Jones, 2006). This further justifies the needs for research related to the population of SO athletes. For this study descriptive research is an appropriate method. In line with the surrounding literature, this method is effective in creating transparency within research (Aanstoos, 1983).

Life Skill Development

Life skill development is the development of skills that allow people to function in different environments; they can be cognitive, physical, behavioural, intrapersonal, or interpersonal (Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012; Gould & Carson, 2008; Papacharisis, Goudas, Danish, & Theodorakis, 2005). Some examples include making smart decisions, taking initiative, communicating effectively with others, and goal setting (Forneris, Danish, & Scott, 2007; Holt, Tink, Mandigo, & Fox, 2008; Papacharisis et al., 2005). A key principle of life skill development is the transference of skills to other areas of life such as school, home, or in the community (Danish et al., 1993; Gould & Carson, 2008).

Sport has been seen as an attractive avenue for helping athletes to develop life skills (Camiré et al., 2012; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007), especially given its popularity in society (Trottier & Robitaille, 2014) and its potential for the transfer of skills to other domains (Alexander et al., 2011). Mere participation in sport, however, does not necessarily ensure life skill development (Brunelle, Danish, & Forneris, 2007). Indeed, it is an athlete's experiences through sport that could result in positive development (Holt, Tamminen, Tink, & Black, 2009; Papacharisis et al., 2005); and these experiences,

either positive or negative, are shaped by the social context provided by the sporting environment (Holt et al., 2009). Given that the coach has the utmost influence on an athlete's experiences in sport (Falcąo, Bloom, & Gilbert, 2012; Trottier & Robitaille, 2014), it is not surprising that the environment set by the coach impacts the developmental gains of athletes (Gould, Flett, & Lauer, 2012).

The coach provides leadership and is also the person with whom athletes interact most frequently (Camiré, Forneris, Trudel & Bernard, 2011). Thus, if a coach provides good leadership and fosters a positive environment, the sport setting will be more conducive to the development of life skills (Gould et al., 2007). For example, Camiré, Trudel, and Forneris (2009) examined high school coaches and found that high school sport can be used for youth development if athletes have support and are afforded opportunities to suggest coaching material, to communicate with coaches, and to help develop team goals. Not all coaches, however, promote a positive sporting environment. Indeed, in the same study, Camiré and his colleagues found some athletes had a negative experience in sport because of a lack of athlete/coach communication.

Life Skill Development Strategies

A leader (e.g. coach) who intentionally teaches life skills, either through modelling, demonstrating, or practicing, can help to increase the probability that athletes will develop life skills (Camiré et al., 2011; Gould & Carson, 2008). There are a multitude of strategies that coaches can implement to help athletes develop life skills (Holt et al., 2008).). In 2008, Gould and Carson reviewed the literature of positive youth development and life skill development through sport and constructed a model for coaching life skills. First, they stated that coaches need to assess an athlete's internal (e.g. personality) and external assets (e.g. socioeconomic status) in order to understand the athlete's pre-existing makeup. The second component of their model focusses on the sport experience and how coaches can emphasise teaching life skills. In this component, they listed the coaches' personal characteristics (e.g. the coach's relationship skills), direct teaching strategies (e.g. team building activities), and indirect teaching strategies (e.g. modelling life skills) as important factors. The third component outlines two possible mechanisms for how an athlete develops life skills and how these skills could affect the athlete's behaviour. The first such mechanism is how the social environment in sport influences athletes (e.g. the influence of positive social norms) and the second is the utility of life skills in everyday life (i.e. some life skills, like stress management, are easily applied to other areas of life). The fourth component of the model focusses on the outcomes of life skill development through sport, namely the positive outcomes. Finally the model explains how life skills developed through sport should be transferable to other areas of life. The model also recognises the potential negative outcomes if the sport experience is undesirable.

Camiré et al. (2012) used Gould and Carson's (2008) model as a framework to gain an understanding of the philosophies and strategies that model high school coaches used to coach life skills and life skill transference to their athletes. Camiré and his colleagues conducted 25 interviews (9 coaches, 16 athletes)

and found that coaches sought to understand their athletes' pre-existing makeup and had coaching philosophies dedicated to helping their athletes develop life skills. Coaches also used a variety of specific life skill development strategies: using keywords, peer evaluations, providing athletes with opportunities to display skills, modelling, taking advantage of teachable moments, and volunteerism. Despite some mixed results, coaches and athletes generally believed that athletes can transfer the skills gained through sport to other areas of life.

Given that coaches can play a role in helping their athletes to develop life skills and that SO is an organisation with the goals and means to bring positive change to the lives of people with ID (Weiss et al., 2003), research is needed to examine how SO coaches help their athletes develop life skills. As explained by DePauw and Gavron (2005), while disability sport, including SO programming, continues to grow, the coach's role becomes increasingly important. It is not surprising then that the role of SO coaches, according to Special Olympics Ontario (2014, para. 2) is to:

…serve as role models and character builders. They give athletes awareness of their worth, abilities and courage. Significantly, coaches provide the confidence for athletes to grow and improve. They help athletes acquire skills that influence the ability to obtain employment, succeed in school and achieve personal goals. To date, however, there is a lack of research exploring how Special Olympics coaches fulfill their role and help their athletes develop (DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Inoue, 2011). The two research questions guiding this study are: How do experienced SO coaches, deemed so by SO Canada, promote the development of life skills in their athletes? What strategies do they use to develop life skills in their athletes?

Methods

Participant Selection

Upon ethical approval from the researchers' university Research Ethics Board, participants were selected using purposeful sampling; allowing for the deliberate selection of participants who could provide rich, in-depth answers to the research question (Maxwell, 2013). Given that SO coaching is a relatively unexplored area of research and the goal was to examine strategies coaches use to aid their athletes development of life skills. Experienced coaches were chosen for the study because they often "have better thought-out strategies for influencing athletes'…personal development," (Gould et al., 2007, p. 19). The coach selection criteria were: minimum three years of experience coaching SO athletes, SO specific coach certification from an accredited coaching certification program, and selection by Special Olympics Canada to coach at a national or international level. Thus purposeful sampling was coupled with reputational sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Eleven community coordinators working within a four-hour radius from the researchers' university were contacted and provided with an information letter and the selection criteria. The coordinators then forwarded the information to all eligible coaches within their community and interested candidates were asked to contact

the lead researcher. Six coaches participated in this study from the following sports: floor hockey, swimming, golf, athletics, curling, softball, ten-pin bowling, and Nordic skiing.

Data Collection

Given our interest in each participant's experience, Merriam's (2002) basic interpretive qualitative approach, which complements the constructivist paradigm, was the selected methodology. Data were collected using multiple methods, as suggested by Creswell (2013) to help view the coaches' experiences using multiple lenses (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The data collection methods used were semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and follow-up semi-structured interviews. Data were collected over a seven-month period, with the minimum of two months between initial and follow-up interviews. The use of the semi-structured interview was an effective data collection tool as it provided the coaches with the opportunity to integrate their own beliefs into the interview while maintaining a fairly consistent structure between each participant (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Before data collection began, all coaches signed consent forms.

The first semi-structured interview, that is, an interview guided by a list of open-ended, non-directive questions to elicit rich descriptions of the phenomenon (Smith & Caddick, 2012), aimed at an initial understanding of the coaches' previous experiences, whether they believed that they had an impact on their athletes' lives outside of sport (including life skill development), and what skills they thought were necessary for their athletes to develop. Questions such as: "What is your coaching philosophy?" and "What are some challenges that you have encountered in coaching and helping your athletes to develop?" were asked. The interviews were voice recorded and ranged from 30 min to 80 min, averaging 57 min.

When observing as a non-participant, the researcher does not participate, he/she merely observes what and how things are happening (Smith & Caddick, 2012). The aim of the observations was to allow the lead researcher to better nuance the subsequent interviews. Eraut (2007) suggests using observation in addition to interviews to get at the tacit dimension of much workplace learning because it (a) allows the interviewer to become familiar with the context, (b) enables the interviewer to use events to begin conversations about learning, (c) provides clues that can be used in tracking down implicit learning, and (d) allows for the observer to appreciate the complexity of the work context. Given that developing life skills might be a tacit part of an SO coach's job, observations afforded the researchers the chance to use certain coaching situations to probe the coaches on matters related to the purpose of the study. During the observations, the lead researcher recorded field notes; no observation tool was used. To prepare for observations, the theoretical framework was re-read and all of the initial interviews were listened to (and transcribed, if there was time to do so before the observation occurred) and notes were taken about various things that might be observed according to what the coaches had said during their interviews. For example, if a coach said that he/she uses humour to help develop relationships with athletes, then a note would be made to pay attention to the coach's use of humour during practice. Thus the researcher was not looking

for specific behaviours, although, being guided by the study framework she made notes about certain coach-athlete interactions such as a coach joking with her athlete. Coaches were observed at least twice (four coaches were observed three times). Based on the way that SO seasons are structured, some coaches were observed only at practices or only at games because they did not have any upcoming practices or competitions within the time frame of the study. Sixteen observation sessions were conducted amounting to 22.5 hr spent observing the coaches.

After the observations were completed a follow-up semi-structured interview was conducted with each coach. The goals of this interview were to clarify matters found during the initial interviews and observations and to ask more specific questions related to the coach's life skill development strategies. Additionally, it has been suggested that leaving some time between interviews gives interviewees a chance to reflect about the topic of interest, in this case their learning experiences [Polkinghorne, 2005]. This interview guide was largely founded on the results of Camiré and colleagues (2012) with questions such as: "How do you model the values that you try to instil in your athletes?" The data already collected were helpful when constructing questions. For example, one probe based on observations was: "Do you think teasing your athletes helps you to bond with them?" after the lead researcher noticed how often coaches tease their athletes. The second interviews averaged 52 min long; ranging from 30 min to just over 60 min.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was on going with the analyses of the first interviews guiding the observations and both of these influencing the final interview questions. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of thematic analysis, applying both deductive and inductive strategies. This combination of approaches has "…one [go] to the data with certain preconceived categories derived from theories, yet one also remains open to new concepts that emerge" (Joffe, 2012, p. 210). Camiré et al.'s (2012) study guided the deductive portion because (a) it has a strong theoretical background framed by Gould and Carson's (2008) work, (b) it applies Gould and Carson's model, (c) it includes the perspectives of student-athletes to create a more holistic picture of how life skill development strategies can be used effectively, and (d) it is a current list of life skill development strategies. In vivo codes were assigned to meaning units that did not fit the deductive (theoretical) framework.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, resulting in approximately 200 pages of single spaced text (approximately 100 pages for each set of interviews) and all field notes were typed, resulting in 20 single-spaced pages. The data was examined and preliminary thoughts developed as per the first stage of Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were then sent to the coaches for member checking; two coaches made minor adjustments (e.g. name spelling). The transcripts were then subjected to analysis using NVivo10 software. Following the second stage of Braun and Clarke (2006), the data were coded line-by-line using both codes that were deduced from the framework categories (e.g. "coaching philosophy") and inductive codes (e.g. "being direct with athletes"). Once all of the data were coded, potential themes were built, with codes being checked to determine whether they related to each other (e.g., "using humour" related to "building strong coach-athlete relationships") and to the pre-existing categories from Camiré et al.'s framework. The

identification of initial themes further aligned with stage three of Braun and Clarke (2006). Themes were then reviewed to determine whether they made a clear pattern and were representative of the entire data set, completing stage four of Braun and Clarke (2006). Some of the original themes were then collapsed. For example, "being strict" was a potential theme, but after reviewing its codes and extracts as suggested by stage five of Braun and Clarke (2006), it was determined that combining "being strict" with the theme "being direct" was more appropriate. Finally the themes were named and extracts from each were chosen to help create a vivid picture of the data achieving the final and sixth stage of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006).

Judging the Quality of this Research

Following Zitomer and Goodwin's (2014) suggestion for qualitative researchers in adapted physical activity, we declared our paradigm above and this section describes some of the criteria we deem important for judging the quality of our research. The use of a variety of data collection techniques as suggested by (Guba and Lincolin 1985) to validate trustworthiness has been heavily critiqued in relation to sports coaching research. Sport coaching research has since began to focus on a more relativist approach which considers time and place characteristics to further support the judgement of research (Sparkes 1998, 2002). Rather than focussing on a collective truth as the interpretation of the data, Smith and Deemer (2000) introduced the concept of developing a continuously changing list of character traits for judging the research. While carefully considering the list of criteria as discussed by Smith and colleagues (2014), the following criteria are most effective in judging quality of this research:

• Substantive contribution: We have endeavoured to uncover some of the strategies used by coaches of athletes having ID to impact the lives of these athletes.

• Width: Our interpretations along with the words of our participants provide preliminary rich descriptions as evidence for readers to use in their judgement of quality and help them determine the transferability of findings.

• Worthy topic: The worthiness of this study is supported by the lack of research about coaching SO and the extent of the SO movement across 170 countries.

• Rich rigour: Grounded in the literature related to life skills and sport, using two interviews per participant separated by several observations, and a clear process for data analysis, rich rigour was sought.

- Sincerity: Prior to data collection and in the service of reflexivity, the lead researcher completed a bracketing interview to raise her awareness of her biases, assumptions, and personal interests in this study (Ahern, 1999).

• Credibility: Member checking is seen here as an opportunity for dialogue and further data collection (Maxwell, 2013; Smith, Sparkes, & Caddick, 2014). The iterative nature of the data analysis allowed for dialogue and reflexive elaboration with the participants during the subsequent data collection phases.

• Transparency: Furthermore, an audit trail, which is a thorough explanation of the methods, procedures, and decisions used throughout the study (Merriam, 2002), was created for readers and evaluators so that they might be made aware of the entire research process. Additionally the second author served as a critical friend throughout the research process.

As mentioned by Smith and Deemer (2000), the criteria selected for research is entirely relative to the research being conducted. It is the above list that is felt to be most effective in enabling further unpacking and judgement of the quality of this research.

Results

Eight life skill development strategies emerged from the thematic analysis. Seven strategies were based on Camiré et al.'s (2011, 2012) work: (a) having coaching philosophy directed at using sport as a tool for life skill development, (b) building meaningful relationships with athletes (c) understanding athletes' pre-existing make-up, (d) providing athlete with opportunities to showcase skills, (e) modelling, (f) taking teachable moments, and (g) volunteerism. The first three of these are general while the remaining four are specific strategies used by coaches to develop life skills and help in their transference to life outside sport .The remaining strategy was found inductively: being stern and direct.

Having Coaching Philosophy Directed at Developing Life Skills through Sport

All of the coaches, when asked about their coaching philosophy, stated that SO is not meant to be about winning at all costs. Each expressed that they were there to provide their athletes with a fun, encouraging, and inclusive experience, while teaching them things such as fair play, sportsmanship, and healthy living. Coach 5's coaching philosophy provides a portrait of how the coaches felt: "My philosophy about sports is basically to have fun, not to win at all costs, but if you can get to the top fine. If you can't, just play fair, be a good sport."

Three of the coaches also expressed that they needed to be advocates for people with intellectual disabilities. Coach 1 provided the following reflection:

I believe that everybody [should have] the opportunity. Myself growing up, I had challenges. I have a physical disability that I was born with and I was never [unable] to participate because of my disability, so I think that for anybody else. No matter what the challenges somebody may have, we need to make [participation] possible. And if that means changing some of...the ways we do things, then we change some of the ways we do things.

Altogether, the coaches believed that SO was not just a sport program, but also a place for their athletes to come together and feel included and that it was their duty as a coach to be a good role model. Coach 3 said that people with ID tend to feel isolated and often depressed, so part of his role in SO was to offer his athletes an inclusive space for development by "providing them [with] a venue to come together, meet their peers, in a safe environment."

Building Meaningful Coach-Athlete Relationships

Most of the coaches mentioned that they built relationships with their athletes, which helped them to develop trust and create a bond between coach and athlete. Coach 1 shared that, "Coming to the games, being respectful myself, learning about the people's lives and asking questions, like we would do with anybody. You know...you start friendships, you ask questions, you share about yourself, you're consistent,

you're fair, you have fun," were helpful in building relationships with her athletes, which in turn helped her athletes to trust her and come to her for advice.

Humour was one strategy the coaches said helped them to build meaningful connections with their athletes. Often it was observed that the coaches would make jokes with their athletes to get them laughing, which they explained helped them to create a positive environment and to make light of mistakes. This also allowed them to show athletes that they could have fun with their coaches. As Coach 3 explained, "The kibitzing with them in a positive way, they all respond—well, the [vast] majority of them—respond. If you're kibitzing with them, they think, 'You're cool and I'm cool' sort of thing."

Some of the coaches explained that once trust was gained, athletes were more open to share things about their personal lives. Coach 1 explained that as she developed a stronger relationship with her athletes, she became a "...role model... somebody that they trust—that they can come and talk to—if they need help or assistance." She further explained that her female athletes, in particular, opened up to her and looked for advice about relationships, especially if they needed validation about the way they were being treated by their significant others.

Understanding Athletes' Pre-existing Make-up

The coaches all explained that they had to have an understanding of their athletes' make-up, especially understanding the athletes' (dis)abilities, challenges, and individual characteristics. This way coaches were able to individually tailor their coaching strategies to meet each athlete's needs and build better coach-athlete relationships. As Coach 5 said, "You get to know their ways, understand their character. Little bit of empathy for their problems, their frustrations."

This understanding of their athletes supported the coaches when the athletes had outbursts or were frustrated; helping them to better create coping mechanisms and plans of action for the athletes. Coach 4 explained that things like a "change of the weather, change of the moon, last day before Christmas" could impact her athletes, so she always had a plan for those days and was better able to help her athletes calm down and manage stressful situations. Similarly, Coach 3 explained that he would allow an athlete who would become aggressive when he was feeling stressed to go for a walk and then, "at the next practice, try to have a quiet conversation with him…don't get heavy with him because he'll just get embarrassed and stop talking. Try to keep the communication, show him you trust him, show him you understand him." This strategy was not the same for all of Coach 3's athletes; he explained that each athlete was different in the way that he/she dealt with problems. Moreover, four of the coaches (Coaches 2, 3, 4, 6) explained that on their teams, they had different levels of functioning, and how they went about coaching and problem solving with their athletes was also dependent on that.

Providing Athletes with Opportunities to Showcase Skills

The coaches in the current study tried to provide their athletes with opportunities to show some of their skills. For example, coaches thought that providing athletes with the opportunity to use their leadership

skills, even by leading the warm-up as observed during some of the coaches' practice, benefitted the athletes and helped them to feel confident. Coach 3 explained that he would choose different athletes to lead a relay-type race and that even small gestures like that helped to build an athlete's self-esteem and leadership skills. Coach 5 said:

I think we do [provide them chances to be leaders] when we give somebody the captaincy of the team. You see it more, as I said, when you go away to provincials, it's a whole different environment. That is when leadership skills show: in the accommodation areas, meal times, and at after-hours activities.

Such leadership roles provided athletes with a sense of pride and could boost confidence.

Coach 6, however, warned that although athletes enjoy taking on a leadership role, coaches should be careful about how much responsibility is given to the athletes. Sometimes the athletes would take their position too far, wielding their position of power over their teammates' heads:

As long as I've been in [city name], [city name]'s had athlete [representatives], more for other athletes to go to if they have issues, to then take them to the council to discuss.... I have found that any athlete who has stepped into that role has taken it way above what they should be, and it's, "I'm the athlete rep; you can't tell me this", or "You can't do that!..." And they're telling this to other athletes, "You can't do that because I'm the athlete rep!"

Coach 6 did offer the suggestion that if an athlete is chosen for a leadership position, such as the athlete representative, the athlete should be taught what their role is, which he further stated is not something that is often done well.

Modelling

The coaches stated that they tried to instil their values and help their athletes learn different life skills through modelling the correct behaviour. As Coach 6 explained, "It's sort of like, if I'm telling you that you can't do something, I can't do it. If I say that this is what you have to do, then I have to be willing to do the same thing." Coach 2 expressed, "I try to be a role model, I try to set a good example...A leader of sorts too, I'm sure they look up to me."

Coach 4 talked about modelling the drinking of water:

Yeah…. then we also do role model it, because we'll bring water bottles, and if we have it in our lesson plan, "Okay, it's time to go and have that sip of water, not the whole thing or whatever" so we will actually speak about it, but then we'll model it too…

Coach 1 provided a unique example of how she tries to model the values that she wants to pass to her athletes. She stated that because she has a physical disability, she is able to use that to understand what the athletes face in their lives and to show her athletes that having a disability does not mean that someone is incapable of accomplishing their goals:

I think I have that better understanding and I can bring that to say, "Hey, we're all athletes here, we all have challenges in different ways, we all need to be treated the same way. We all have limitations

and what are we going to do to overcome those? But it doesn't mean I can't. It doesn't mean you can't." So I think that's been helpful.

Coach 2 shared that he tries to be a role model for his athletes and that he tries to teach his athletes sportsmanship and fair play through his own behaviour.

The first thing I'll do, I'll play as hard as I can to beat you but if you beat me I'm the first one to come off the bench to shake your hand and say great game, thanks for honouring me with your best game. And I hope I have instilled it in our athletes, I'd like to think that our team is known as we play hard but we are good sports.

This behaviour was also observed during a softball game by this coach's team. Coach 2 and his entire team began clapping and cheering for an opposing player who hit a homerun against them. It was evident that winning was not the most important thing for this team, it was more about being good sports and supporting their fellow athletes, even if they were their competition.

Taking Teachable Moments

Coaches sometimes took teachable moments to impart something life skill related to their athletes. As observed at a softball tournament, for example, Coach 2 was missing two of his strongest players. He discovered that they had been partying the night before and as a result, missed the bus to the tournament. The coach then turned to his athletes and explained how disappointing it was that those athletes chose to act irresponsibly, and that their behaviour showed a lack of dedication and was an example of poor teamwork.

Also as observed, Coach 6 took time out of a practice to explain that because the weather had been getting colder, he expected his athletes to dress appropriately for practice. This was the result of seeing one athlete waiting outside in the cold for approximately 15 min wearing only a short-sleeved shirt and shorts.

Coach 1 explained that sometimes she would have to address inappropriate behaviours and take a teachable moment to explain to the whole group how their actions might influence others. She sometimes needed to say, "This is totally inappropriate and we don't talk to people this way. People may react and… they may not take it the way we are right now or they may get angry."

Volunteerism

Most of the coaches had their athletes participate in some form of volunteering, from helping to keep score when they were not playing to joining the coaches in their other volunteer opportunities. Coach 5 had his athletes help at swim meets if they were not competing, believing it helped them to "set a good example" for others. Coach 2 explained he would bring his athletes out to help him with his other volunteer work to build character and positive feelings: "It takes the dreariness of the world away…. We do a bingo at one of the seniors' residence… once a month… and I encourage my guys to come with me."

Five of the coaches said they encouraged their athletes to help with SO fundraisers such as golf

tournaments, torch runs, or canvassing at local businesses. Coach 3 explained that at his district's charity golf tournament, the SO athletes would help the golfers by being their caddy for the day. He also said he and the other coaches from his district would help the athletes introduce themselves to the golfers and tell them a bit about themselves in order to establish rapport, something he said the athletes "get a lot of pride" out of, helping to build their confidence.

Being Stern And Direct With Athletes

Coaches were both straightforward in the way that they taught and coached their athletes and firm with their athletes in order to maintain discipline and structure. The coaches said that they needed to explain things to their athletes in a forthright fashion in order for the athletes to comprehend the message. As Coach 2 explained, "Sometimes you don't always tell people what they want to hear, but you have to tell them what they need to hear." Through being stern and direct, coaches were able to deal with issues immediately and were also better able to maintain order during practices. This helped to teach their athletes how to be better listeners and to be more responsible for their actions. Coach 6 said, "Some people may see me at practice and say, 'You're quite forward with them,' …but I believe…if you just sort of let them run, the programs aren't run properly and they need the instruction." This behaviour was also observed at Coach 6's practices. On one occasion, an athlete did not bring money to pay for bowling for the second week in a row. Coach 6 told her that she could not play the following week if she did not pay her fees. As the athlete walked away angrily, Coach 6 told her she could not walk away every time someone says something that displeases her because she has to take responsibility for her actions. This provides evidence that Coach 6 believes that the best way to help athletes is to maintain discipline, be clear about expectations, and hold athletes accountable for their behaviour. Coach 4's words also support this, "Just being direct [with athletes], 'You're in my space, you know you're not allowed to hug, let's try this handshake', and it seems to be okay".

This strategy was often used when athletes were not acting in a socially acceptable manner. For example, Coach 3 told the story of one athlete who was acting inappropriately at a tournament:

I had to point out to one fellow this weekend that, "You know, if you're going to go on to provincials or nationals in any sport, part of the process is that the coach community has to…say that this person is a mature enough individual to go traveling with the team." I pointed out to him that when we went to the [city name] tournament last spring he did a wonderful job—really impressed with him—but with his attitude that he was demonstrating there…, "If you carry on like this, nobody's going to sign your sponsorship and you just won't get to go because nobody can take you."

Coach 4 said,

They know that I mean business; like I'm probably the toughest on them: "You know if you broke up with your girlfriend or boyfriend or whatever at the deck it stops. I will talk to you half an hour after. I will talk to you a bit before but you know from 4:30 to 5:30 you are a swimmer"…

Coach 2 also explained that he has to be direct with his athletes, especially when he sees

members of the opposite sex acting inappropriately to the other.

    I'm a pretty easy-going guy, pretty liberal minded, but sometimes I have to tell the guys about respect towards members of the opposite sex. I mean, some of the guys, they don't have the same things in place that you or I do, so sometimes they can be bordering on inappropriate and I have to be on top of that all the time….

    For the coaches in this study, being direct was important in order to make sure athletes understood the messages that the coaches were trying to send. Coaches often had to be direct when teaching their athletes socially acceptable behaviour, such as maintaining respect for personal space, being hygienic, being responsible, and using appropriate language.

Discussion

    The purpose of this study was to explore how experienced SO coaches attempt to integrate the development of life skills into their coaching practice. The six participants believed that their role as a coach was to be a role model and positive influence on their athletes. As discussed by Jones (2007), coaching science is no longer a static procedure. The educational relationship between coaches and their athletes has become a mainstream pedagogy, as one of the key focusses of coaching should be based on teaching and learning. Seven of the strategies were directly from Camiré et al.'s framework while one was found inductively. The life-skill development strategies used by coaches in this study included having a coaching philosophy directed at using sport as a tool for life skill development, building meaningful coach-athlete relationships, understanding athletes' pre-existing make-up, providing athletes with opportunities to showcase skills, modelling, taking teachable moments, volunteerism, and being direct and blunt with athletes. This discussion will focus on building meaningful coach-athlete relationships and understanding athletes' pre-existing make-up, as well as the inductively found strategy of being direct and blunt, as they may be of special importance in the SO context.

    In addition to Camiré et al. (2011) mentioning the importance of coaches developing meaningful relationships with their athletes, past research (e.g. Collins, Gould, Lauer, & Chung, 2009; Gould & Carson, 2008; Gould et al., 2007) has indicated that the coach-athlete relationship underlies a coach's ability to help athletes develop life skills. In their study of 455 adolescent athletes, Vella, Oades, and Crowe (2013) found that "the perceived quality of the coach-athlete relationship was positively correlated with positive development experiences," (p. 557). Vella and his colleagues also suggested that a coach needs to devote time to building positive coach-athlete relationships because of how important these relationships can be for promoting positive developmental gains.

    Indeed, there have been a variety of studies in generic sport coaching that have shown developing a positive coach-athlete relationship impacts development. Flett, Gould, Griffes, and Lauer (2013) recently compared more and less effective coaches in terms of how those coaches fostered youth development in an underserved sport setting (i.e. youth living in less than favourable conditions). The researchers found that

more effective coaches help teach life skills by developing positive coach-athlete relationships and fostering a supportive team environment. These coaches explained that they needed to show athletes that they cared for them, needed to be a credible authority figured, needed to show mutual trust and respect, and needed to lead by example in order to help their athletes to develop positively. Via the concept of handover, Bruner (1977) highlighted the importance of cultivating a teacher-student (here coach-athlete) relationship that encourages the students' (athletes') independence to increase development. He identified the handover as a process of learning which moves between the student (athlete) and the teacher (coach), on the way to developing self-monitoring students (athletes). The coaches in the current study voiced similar opinions, especially concerning the need to develop trust with athletes. The use of humour to establish good relationships has previously been noted in interactions between people with IDs and others (van Alphen, Dijker, van den Borne, & Curfs, 2010).

Another important aspect of coaching athletes with ID, as explained by the coaches in this study, is that they need to understand each athlete's pre-existing make-up in order to help the athlete learn skills and cope with issues. With the shift in social-pedagogical theories in coaching to be more educationally, rather than training focussed, there has been more emphasis placed on teaching athletes as a whole individual (Bergmann Drewe, 2000). The coaches noted that their athletes could have a wide range of abilities and that athletes with the same disability often did not share the same characteristics, requiring the coaches to tailor their coaching strategies for each athlete. Research conducted with coaches of athletes with a physical disability has these coaches emphasising the critical importance of understanding each individual athlete's characteristics and working with them to discover what works and what does not work (McMaster et al., 2012; Taylor, Werthner, Culver, & Callary, 2015). The coaches in this study illustrate the refocusing of coaching practice, by taking the time to learn the needs of their athletes to ensure the coaching strategies being utilised are most effective for each individual. It appears, therefore, that coaching sport for athletes with a disability requires another area of knowledge that is important for teaching life skills and/or sports skills: the knowledge of disability/ability.

An interesting finding in this particular study is the "Being stern and direct with athletes" strategy. In order for athletes to understand the messages and/or follow directions, the coaches explained that they needed to be direct with their athletes, explaining exactly what they meant. The coaches frequently used this strategy to maintain structure in their practices, something that has been shown to be important for keeping athletes more secure, calm, and less distracted (Cone & Cone, 2011). To our knowledge, this has not been a strategy stated in the literature on life skill development for typically developing athletes; thus, this could be a strategy unique to coaching athletes with ID. The literature on teaching physical education and sport to people with disabilities contains evidence that instruction needs to be clear and concise in order for understanding to be achieved (Squair & Groeneveld, 2003). Furthermore, Mactavish and Dowds (2003) explained that when structuring the sport environment for athletes with ID, the coach or teacher's expectations and the consequences for disobeying expectations need to be made clear to the athletes. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to expect that in order for the sporting environment to be favourable for learning, SO coaches need to be stern and direct with athletes.

While the SO coaches' strategies shared many similarities with coaching typically developing athletes there are a few unique aspects associated with building good coach-athlete relationships in SO, and using a

stern and direct approach. Otherwise, the strategies found in this study mirrored the strategies in Camiré et al.'s (2012) framework for the most part, with one obvious exception: the SO coaches did not feel that peer evaluations would be a fruitful way to teach life skills. Thus, coaches of SO athletes wishing to help develop their athletes' sport and life skills could transfer many strategies and resources used in other sport contexts; a fact that should be used to recruit SO coaches.

Limitations

Given the relatively small sample size in this study, we cannot generalise our findings to all SO coaches; thus, we do not assume that all SO coaches are using the strategies found in this study, nor do we assume that all coaches integrate life skill development into their coaching. Also, this study reports on the coaches' perceptions of their use of strategies to develop life skills in their athletes. No examination of changes in athlete behaviours took place. The coaches in this study had to match certain criteria in order to be considered for participation and, therefore, may not be representative of the majority of SO coaches. Another limitation of this study is the underdeveloped knowledge that the coaches had about what life skills are according to the literature. Investigators wishing to explore this topic further may need to provide more information and examples of life skills to future participants. Finally, the framework used for this study was developed using high school coaches and athletes; clearly, this is a different context from SO. Notwithstanding these limitations, this study contributes to this relatively unexplored topic and the findings are at least transferable across similar circumstances (Golafshani, 2003).

Conclusion

We suggest that more literature is needed in order to explore the best practices for helping athletes with ID learn life skills. Future research might examine how coaches can develop the coach-athlete relationship. The SO coaches in this study explained that they could coach more effectively if their athletes trusted them, so studying how coaches can build these relationships is important. Another viable area of research could be to implement a life skill training program for SO coaches and then examine the impact of the program on the coaches' practices and whether athletes were learning new life skills. Alexander et al. (2011) found that after SO coaches were trained in teaching social skills to their athletes, the coaches were more apt to model the appropriate social skills in their coaching, which resulted in the athletes then developing the skills. It is feasible to think that training coaches in teaching life skills (which include behavioural, social, cognitive, and psychological skills) would yield similar results. Finally, the list of strategies from this particular study is not exhaustive and the small sample size and relatively homogenous group of coaches could mean that there are multiple other strategies used by SO coaches to develop life skills. It is therefore suggested that researchers continue to investigate strategies that SO coaches can use, perhaps through studying a more diverse group of coaches or through using a more inductive methodology, such as grounded theory.

To conclude, this study was one of the first studies to explore the strategies that SO coaches use to

help their athletes develop life skills. Given that athletes with disabilities, as mentioned, may have difficulties in a variety of areas (e.g. communicating effectively), we view the development of life skills in this particular population as an important endeavour. This study provides an array of strategies that coaches of athletes with intellectual disabilities could use in their coaching practice. These strategies could also be integrated into the coach education programs of SO organisations, such as Special Olympics Canada.

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