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Fostering life skills development in student-athletes: The experiences of high school sport psychology consultants

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Abstract

School sport provides a structured setting for teaching life skills. Although the research has focused mainly on coaches, sport psychology consultants (SPCs) can also foster positive development in student-athletes. The objective of this study was to examine the experiences of SPCs in teaching life skills development and transfer to student-athletes in sport-study programs specific to high school settings. A basic qualitative study consistent with a constructivist paradigm was used. Semi-structured interviews were held with seven SPCs employed in a sport-study program. First, results revealed that all SPCs held a holistic philosophy and aimed for student-athletes' positive development. Second, SPCs incorporated some life skills development and transfer strategies into their interventions (e.g., workshops, group discussions). Third, SPCs encountered certain challenges in teaching life skills development and transfer, and particularly in following up on life skills transfer and working with other stakeholders (e.g., psychoeducators, social workers). Despite the SPCs' efforts to teach life skills development and transfer, the results highlight the need for better training in effective

interventions.

Keywords: positive youth development, school sport, teaching strategies, transfer strategies

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Introduction

Studies indicate that by participating in sport, youth can develop sport-specific skills along with life skills that are transferable to other life settings such as school, family, and community (e.g., Jacobs & Wright, 2018; Pierce et al., 2017). In the positive youth development approach, life skills are considered internal assets, based on the principle that youth have the potential and resources necessary to develop their skills in both sport and life in general (Lerner et al., 2005; Weiss & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2009). Life skills are defined 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 in non-sport settings" (Gould & Carson, 2008, p. 60). Life skills can be behavioral (e.g., effective communication), cognitive (e.g., decision-making), interpersonal (e.g., assertion), or intrapersonal (e.g., goal setting) (Danish et al., 2005). Recently, Pierce et al. (2017) proposed a definition and a model of life skills transfer that places the athlete at the center of the process. Specifically, they describe "transfer" as:

> The ongoing process by which an individual further develops or learns and internalizes a personal asset (i.e., psychosocial skill, knowledge, disposition, identity construction, or transformation) in sport and then experiences personal change through the application of the asset in one or more life domains beyond the context where it was originally learned. (p. 194)

To explain the life skills transfer process that occurs through sport, Turnnidge et al. (2014) suggest two approaches. First, coaches use an explicit approach: they deliberately teach life skills transfer. They make youth aware of the life skills they develop through sport so that they can transfer them to other settings such as home or school. Second, in the implicit approach, it is not necessary for coaches to directly teach life skills transfer strategies because youth are considered to be active

agents of their own development. They develop and transfer life skills tacitly. Recent findings indicate that life skills development and transfer can be optimized when coaches use explicit strategies and when the sport setting is structured to facilitate a positive climate (e.g., Bean et al., 2018; Jacobs & Wright, 2018; Pierce et al., 2018).

School sport is an ideal setting to foster the development of life skills because it bridges two contexts: school and sport (Allen et al., 2015; Bradley & Conway, 2016). Indeed, school sport is considered an extension of the classroom (Holt et al., 2008), mainly because its mission, with the help of stakeholders, includes promoting the positive development of student-athletes (Camiré et al., 2009). Accordingly, student-athletes should be provided with a healthy environment that ensures optimal alignment between academic and athletic goals (School Sport Canada, 2023).

In the student-athlete's environment, and more specifically, in the school sport setting, the coach is a key figure in the positive development of student-athletes (e.g., Bergeron et al., 2015; Gould & Carson, 2008). Camiré et al. (2011) conducted a series of studies in various school sport settings with model coaches who prioritized athletic success as well as life skills development in their student-athletes. The results revealed that in order to facilitate positive development, coaches should: (a) develop their own philosophy, (b) develop meaningful relationships with athletes, (c) plan developmental strategies to teach life skills systematically, (d) have athletes practice life skills, and (e) teach athletes how to transfer life skills to other settings. Similarly, other studies found that school sport coaches use strategies to help student-athletes develop life skills in sport and transfer them to other settings (e.g., Camiré et al., 2012; Gould et al., 2007; Trottier & Robitaille, 2014). For example, Gould et al. (2007) showed that high school football coaches empowered players, recognized their academic progress, and promoted discipline. They also used strategies to promote life skills transfer such as emphasizing the link between football and life. Trottier and Robitaille (2014), in a study conducted in part with high school basketball coaches, found that they used a holistic approach to

promote the positive development of athletes. They used life skills teaching strategies such as holding group discussions with athletes, establishing rules, and intervening on an individual level. They also held discussions on the benefits of transferring life skills outside the sport setting, and they asked athletes to practice life skills in other life spheres. Taken together, these studies indicate that coaches are key stakeholders in fostering positive youth development.

Researchers have also examined how other key stakeholders such as administrators (Camiré et al., 2013; Santos et al., 2019), peers (Allen & Rhind, 2018; Mossman et al., 2021), and parents (Harwood et al., 2019; Hodge et al., 2017; Santos et al., 2019) can facilitate life skills development and transfer. However, another important stakeholder – the sport psychology consultant (SPC) – has been overlooked in the literature to date on life skills development and transfer. In the past 30 years, SPCs have gradually assumed greater prominence in the sport domain, and particularly in school sport. Studies investigating SPC practices with athletes indicate that they try to optimize not only performance, but also positive and holistic development (e.g., Bond, 2002; Friesen & Orlick, 2010; Poczwardowski et al., 2004). Given their specialized practices combining both sports science and positive psychology, and their unique position in the school sport setting, SPCs could make a meaningful contribution to the positive development of student-athletes. Therefore, it would be relevant to more closely examine the practices of SPCs.

Practitioners (e.g., Halliwell, 1990; Orlick, 1989; Ravizza, 1990) have long recognized that a professional philosophy is fundamental for effective sport psychology practice. The professional philosophy corresponds to all the personal core beliefs and values with respect to human nature (e.g., belief in personal growth and positive development, holistic development) that guide the professional practice of SPCs (Poczwardowski et al., 2004). Some researchers view the holistic approach as integral to this professional philosophy. The holistic approach is based on personal core beliefs that SPCs incorporate into interventions to guide the overall development of athletes (e.g., Bond, 2002;

Ravizza, 2002). Hence, SPCs aim to improve not only athletic performance but also the quality of life and well-being of athletes in all aspects of their life (e.g., Miller & Kerr, 2002). In this respect, Poczwardowski et al. (2004) developed a hierarchical structure formulating a philosophy of sport psychology service delivery. It comprises five main components related to the professional philosophy of SPCs: (a) personal core beliefs and values, (b) a theoretical paradigm concerning behavior change, (c) models of practice and the consultant's role (i.e., SPC-client relationship, SPC variables), (d) intervention goals, and (e) intervention techniques and methods. This framework provides a useful structure for examining how the professional philosophy of SPCs guides their practice.

Drawing on Poczwardowski et al.'s (2004) models of practice, Friesen and Orlick (2010) attempted to clarify the holistic approach to sport psychology with a description of three central perspectives in holistic sport psychology. Thus, to help athletes develop meaningful and purposeful lives, the SPCs that followed a holistic approach aimed to: (a) manage the influence of other life settings on sport performance, (b) consider the whole individual beyond just the athletic persona, and (c) recognize relationships between the athlete's thoughts, feelings, physiology, and behavior (Friesen & Orlick, 2010). Because these three perspectives support the integration of life skills development into their practice, SPCs can promote the well-being of athletes across multiple life settings in addition to improving athletic performance.

Given the important role of SPCs in the development of athletes in terms of both performance enhancement and well-being, it would be relevant to examine their practice in the school sport setting, where the mission is to promote positive development in student-athletes. More specifically, the goal of the present study was to examine the experiences of SPCs in teaching life skills development and transfer to student-athletes in sport-study programs specific to high school settings. We addressed four research questions (a) What personal values and beliefs guide the practice of SPCs? (b) Do SPCs

perceive life skills development as an integral part of their practice? (c) If so, what strategies do they use to develop and transfer life skills? (d) What are the main challenges that SPCs encounter in their practice?

Method

Paradigm

A basic qualitative study with a constructivist paradigm was conducted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The constructivist paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed by individuals in an ongoing fashion. Thus, there are many realities, depending on individual experiences, how these are interpreted, and how individuals interact with society. In this study, SPCs were asked to discuss their practice in a sport-study program that included life skills development and transfer.

Study Setting

In Canada, school sport refers to programs where student-athletes practice one or more sports that are organized and integrated within the school structure (School Sport Canada, 2023). More specifically, in the province of Québec, the *Réseau du sport étudiant du Québec (RSEQ)* [Québec Student Sport Network] is responsible for the development of sports at the elementary and high school levels (i.e., school sport) and at the college and university levels. The RSEQ's mission is "to ensure the development and promotion of sports and physical activity" in schools, from initiation to high-level sport, "and to promote the usage of sport as a tool towards education and healthy lifestyles for students" (RSEQ, 2023). At the high school level, school sport includes sport-study programs that are recognized by the *ministère de l'éducation du Québec* [Québec's Ministry of Education] (MEQ, 2023). Student-athletes are referred to these programs by sport federations based on athletic ability. The 500 sport-study programs that spread over 50 high schools in Québec offer 37 sport disciplines

(e.g., swimming, football, hockey, baseball, basketball, soccer) to student-athletes aged from 13 to 17 years (MEQ, 2023). The programs offer a condensed schedule that is specifically tailored for student-athletes, with part of the school day reserved for the practice of their competitive sport. This study focuses on sport-study programs in relation to their overall mission, which is to promote the development of educational values and life skills through sport participation (RSEQ, 2023).

Participants

The participants were seven SPCs (one male, six females) enrolled in sport-study programs in Québec (see Table 1). On average, full-time SPCs worked 32.5 hours per week and part-time SPCs worked 8.4 hours per week. The SPCs were 39 years old (R = 28-60) on average and had an average of five years of experience (R = 1-10) in a sport-study program. All SPCs had a university degree, including six with a master's degree. More specifically, their university training was geared towards a degree in Psychology or Physical Activity (or other affiliated fields), both with a specialization in Sport Psychology. Over half the SPCs were members of the Canadian Sport Psychology Association. Pseudonyms were used for all participants to ensure confidentiality.

Procedure

Once approval was obtained from the research ethics committee of the authors' institutions, the SPCs were selected using a reputational sampling procedure (Miles et al., 2019). Thus, they were selected on the recommendation of key informants, in this case, sport-study program administrators. The administrators were contacted by phone using a contact list for the 45 high schools with a recognized sport-study program in Québec at the time of recruitment, resulting in the recruitment of five SPCs. Using snowball sampling (Patton, 2015), two additional participants were then recruited on the recommendation of the SPCs who had agreed to participate.

Table 1. ***Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants***

SPCs	Gender	Age (yrs)	Highest educational level	Professional affiliation	Average experience as a SPC	Average experience in sport-study	Average working hours/week
Audrey	F	28	BA, Psychology	CSPA	5 years	2 years	25 h
Paule	F	37	MSc, Physical Activity	CSPA AASP	5 years	5 years	5 h
Manon	F	50	MA, Sport psychology	CSPA OPQ AQPS	10 years	10 years	40 h
Sonia	F	29	MSc, Physical Activity	N.A.	5 years	5 years	13 h
Sarah	F	34	MSc, Physical Activity	CSPA	5 years	5 years	6 h
Vincent	M	60	MA, Arts	N.A.	2 years	1 year	15 h
Isabelle	F	37	MSc, Physical Activity	N.A.	5 years	5 years	3 h

Note. Pseudonyms were used for participants; CSPA = Canadian Sport Psychology Association; AASP = Association for Applied Sport Psychology; OPQ = *Ordre des Psychologues du Québec*; AQPS = *Association Québécoise de Prévention du Suicide*.

Data Collection

Data were collected from semi-structured individual interviews. One week before the interview, participants were asked to read a two-page document describing life skills development and transfer in layman's terms. The aim was to inform SPCs of recent knowledge on the topics to be addressed and to clarify the difference between life skills and mental skills in sport psychology interventions. Because life skills development is not explicitly taught in SPC training programs, it was important to ensure that all participants had the same understanding of the term "life skills."

In the face-to-face meetings with SPCs, the second author of the present study first established trust with the participants and asked them to sign a consent form. Semi-structured interviews based on a guide were then conducted. Participants were encouraged to talk openly and freely (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) about their practice in sport-study programs. The guide was developed based on Poczwardowski et al.'s (2004) model and Friesen and Orlick's (2010) holistic approach. The guide was previously tested in a pilot study with two SPCs practicing with student-athletes (they did not participate in the present study). The interview themes included the SPCs' mandate under their school's sport-study program, their underlying philosophy for their professional practice, and their own experiences with teaching life skills development and transfer. The guide included questions such as: "Based on the life skills document you were invited to read prior to the interview, can you share your experiences of teaching life skills development and transfer in your practice?" The interviews were conducted in person at a convenient location for the SPCs. The interviews were audio-recorded and lasted 60 minutes on average. A second interview was conducted with six of the seven SPCs to obtain final clarifications and in order to reach data saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The second interview lasted 45 minutes on average and was conducted via video conference.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed qualitatively following Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) guidelines. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by a research assistant. The transcriptions were read carefully and repeatedly to familiarize the researchers with the content and then compared with the audio recordings to ensure accuracy. A content analysis was performed using deductive and inductive approaches. For the deductive analysis, a coding grid was developed based on the research questions, Poczwardowski et al.'s (2004) model, Friesen and Orlick's (2010) holistic approach, and the literature on life skills and SPC practice (e.g., intervention techniques, SPC–client relationship). The inductive analysis was performed on the verbatim transcript to allow new data to emerge in the coding grid (e.g., challenges encountered). The data coding process led to the creation of categories and subcategories until data saturation was reached. To ensure rigorous analysis as suggested by Smith and McGannon (2017), the first author, having expertise in the field of life skills and mental performance consultation, acted as a critical friend throughout the process. Furthermore, the research team held regular meetings to discuss the interpretations and to encourage reflection on multiple and/or alternative explanations.

Results

The results are presented in four categories: (a) professional philosophy of practice, (b) model of practice and perceived role in sport psychology service delivery, (c) intervention techniques and strategies, and (d) challenges in teaching life skills development and transfer.

Professional philosophy of practice

The majority of the SPCs reported that they felt it important not only to promote optimal athletic performance but, first and foremost, to foster psychological well-being. This value aligns with the overall mission of sport-study programs, which is to promote positive youth development. For

example, one SPC mentioned:

> In terms of my philosophy as a mental performance consultant, I try to keep youth in sport as long as possible, and not necessarily at the competitive level [...] I want youth to be healthy, active, and proactive in life. So for me, it's not the result, it's not the athletic career that counts the most, it's just developing the individual so that they live a happy, healthy, and good-quality life. (Sarah)

Besides aiming for positive development, the majority of SPCs adhered to a holistic philosophy: they considered student-athletes not only as athletes but also as individuals. They were concerned with all life situations beyond the sport setting that were likely to influence them (e.g., school, family). The following quote illustrates this:

> It is so important to take into consideration not only the sport they practice, but also their life setting, their family setting, their social setting, the anxiety they may feel about their future and about school, which is super important. So, I think it's really part of my philosophy to keep that in mind: the individual beyond the student-athlete, in all their entirety. (Audrey)

Thus, positive and holistic development appears to be a key concern for SPCs. Some felt that, to achieve this, it was important to believe in the student-athletes' potential to succeed in their sport and in all aspects of life. As one SPC mentioned:

> When I agree to work with an athlete, it's because I can see their potential. I can feel that the athlete wants to develop. I know that they can grow, and I think we can work together to reach their goals […] So, I believe in my student-athletes. (Paule)

In addition to their professional philosophy, all the SPCs mentioned that their interventions evolved in light of their hands-on experience in sport psychology. More specifically, some SPCs reported, among other things, that they had tried new intervention approaches, such as applying a

holistic philosophy:

> In the beginning, I would say my intervention techniques revolved more around what I had studied, really on mental skills […] specifically in line with athletic performance. But, with practice and experience, I realized that I needed to go beyond that, and I absolutely needed to take into account the student-athlete as an individual, not just in the sport setting but also what they were going through. (Audrey)

Consistent with a holistic philosophy, the SPCs progressively considered both the sport setting and other life settings in which youth tend to have more problems. Moreover, given that individual student-athletes would experience these problems differently, several SPCs said that they adapted their interventions to meet specific needs.

> In my consultations, I now tend more to integrate coaching […] and I adapted myself to the needs of the student-athletes and to what sport psychology is as well. So, I have individualized my interventions based on the needs of my student-athletes. (Sonia)

Thus, the interventions largely reflected their professional philosophy, which tended to evolve with time and experience.

Model of practice and perceived role in sport psychology service delivery

All SPCs reported using an educational approach. In other words, they taught mental skills to optimize athletic performance and well-being. As one SPC described it:

> My role is to help them reach the goals they set for themselves and work on skills they want to improve in terms of sport psychology […] I am first and foremost an educator who helps the athlete to grow not only in sport but also in all aspects of their life. (Isabelle)

Two SPCs reported incorporating a clinical approach in order to reduce psychological problems.

> I have two roles to fill during my mandate as a psychology intern. The first is a more clinical role as a school psychologist that involves assessments and follow-ups for athletes who have problems of a more personal nature. The second is my role in sport psychology, which involves seeing athletes, either individually or in groups, for problems related to sport psychology or mental preparation. (Audrey)

> I am primarily the school psychologist, so I have a broader mandate in psychology in the school setting. So, I have two roles: to work on mental skills related to sport practice and to work on things that are more personal, as well as to do psychological follow-ups […] So for me, my work is not only to optimize athletic performance, but more importantly, to optimize well-being. (Manon)

The SPCs also reported that they had to work in collaboration with other key stakeholders in the sport-study program (e.g., coaches, parents, teachers), who were also responsible for the positive development of student-athletes. Consequently, their approaches had to align with the other stakeholders, as illustrated by the following quote:

> I like working systematically. I like working in collaboration with the coach, with the parents, so that we're always on the same page and we have the same goals. The idea is to work in the same direction […] it should be in the youth's best interests. (Paule)

Intervention techniques and strategies

The SPCs used two main intervention strategies: (a) life skills teaching strategies and (b) life skills transfer strategies.

Life skills teaching strategies

The SPCs reported that they prepared workshops to teach life skills. The aim was generally

to teach skills that can be applied to many life settings (i.e., life skills) instead of focusing solely on skills for optimal sport performance. For example, one SPC explained:

> When I intervene in stress management, for example, I don't necessarily focus on competition […] I address it more generally: it can be in competition, it can be during an oral presentation, it can be when meeting a new person. So, for them, it's not just the stress of competition, it's really more general than that […] They know from the start that they'll be able to use these strategies in different areas. (Paule)

In addition, some SPCs gave student-athletes practical exercises to help them integrate life skills into their sport, and if possible, into their daily lives. For example, one SPC (Vincent) used key words and sentences as a strategy for working on confidence: "I ask the student-athletes to role-play situations where they feel more or less confident by writing down key words and sentences on their sheet. This sheet should serve them in practice, in competition, and even in the classroom."

Similarly, some SPCs used group discussions to allow the students to talk things over amongst themselves and make their own connections with the life skills they could use in non-sport settings. To facilitate this, the SPCs asked them specific questions to elicit certain topics that can be very sensitive:

> I also do a lot of group discussions […] We broach a topic, then I bring questionnaires to encourage them to interact more deeply and come up with new ideas together […] I ask specific questions, then they follow that thread […] They discuss very personal things and they talk to each other: "Yes but, don't you remember, this is how we did it in mathematics. You had used this, so we could use it in sport too." So it's fun, because transfer happens between them sometimes. (Sonia)

In their clinical approach, the SPCs used individual interventions to teach life skills. For

example, they often used reflecting and paraphrasing to understand the student-athletes' needs, or else they used problem-solving strategies:

> For me, the best strategy is always to be listening, to be sensitive to the person's specific needs. Once I understand that need, I check it with them and then I try to find solutions together with the student-athlete […] I work a lot by reflecting and paraphrasing. (Manon)

> We were able to draw a parallel between what we had worked on in soccer and exams. Then, we were able to work on, for example, problem-solving, all while overall contextualizing anxiety management, so that the student-athletes can learn it in life if they want to progress on a personal level. (Audrey)

Life skills transfer strategies

The SPCs recounted several interesting strategies for teaching life skills transfer. All of them reported holding specific discussions with student-athletes about life skills transfer. These discussions took three different forms. First, they were used to explain the importance and usefulness of transfer, as described in the following quote:

> The skill of goal setting is often transferable. I tell them, "You can use it when you have an exam coming up. You probably have expectations about this exam. Take the time to write down your expectations so that they can become goals. Take the time to specify them. Take the time to find strategies." (Paule)

Second, they gave examples so student-athletes could make connections between sport and other life settings:

> Given that school is really present in their daily life, we use it […] For example, his interpersonal communications, how he communicates with his teammates, his parents […] I try using examples

from their daily life. (Sarah)

The third and the most frequent strategy was questioning. If the student-athletes were frequently questioned, they were inclined to reflect on their own on winning strategies they could use and the possibility of transferring and adapting their strategies to other settings. As one SPC described it:

> Sometimes, I'll use the school setting to explain the sport setting […] If they manage to control their stress in exams or in their social life, I'll ask them, "How do you do it? Is it possible to do it in sport?" So, in fact, it's by asking questions and getting them to reflect […] It's really questions that I ask them so they can adapt to each setting. (Isabelle)

Besides specific discussions about life skills transfer, most SPCs said that they asked student-athletes to apply the life skills they learned in sport to other settings. Sport can be a good starting point for life skills transfer, because athletes are generally more intrinsically motivated to practice sport than to do their schoolwork. The SPCs believed it was important to use sport as a window of opportunity to work on life skills, which, once mastered, could be applied to other settings:

> When I explore the symptoms of stress in their sport, I ask them, "In what contexts or situations have you experienced these symptoms?" […] After that we can contextualize, based on the situations the athlete has told me about. I tell them, "If you have stressful situations coming up in the next few days, it's a good time to try out and practice your strategies." So yes, I encourage them to use those strategies at school and at home as well. (Paule)

Finally, some SPCs used other settings besides sport (e.g., school) to help student-athletes develop and master life skills before applying them to sport. This way, they could learn the life skills in a meaningful life setting and then transfer them to sport. As one SPC described it:

> I have a tendency in my interventions to use other life domains to do little tests or to test my interventions in domains that are less intimidating at the beginning. I then recommend that they practice before using it in the sport setting, which is really the most intense. It's the way I work. (Audrey)

Challenges in teaching life skills development and transfer

The SPCs reported two main challenges in terms of teaching life skills development and transfer: following up on transfer and working systematically with other stakeholders in the sport-study program.

Transfer follow-up

The majority of SPCs were concerned about following up on the transfer process, which was complex and at times nonexistent:

> One challenge with life skills was that the transfer follow-up was nonexistent […] I encourage them to do it [transfer], but I will not necessarily ask again about their daily lives. I find out how my student-athletes and my coaches are doing, but I won't really explore other life settings in depth. I really try to stick to the sport setting. (Sonia)

Four potential reasons can explain these follow-up problems: (a) beliefs about transfer, (b) insufficient knowledge and tools acquired through training, (c) distribution of professional roles, and (d) limited time and budget for mental preparation in sport-study programs. Concerning beliefs about transfer, the interviews revealed two different perceptions that could influence whether or not they followed up on life skills transfer. The majority of SPCs did not feel the need to directly teach life skills transfer strategies (from sport to other settings) because the skills did not seem to differ from those required in daily life. Furthermore, they felt that student-athletes had an innate ability to make

the transfer themselves:

> In the sport-study program, I notice that, often, the student-athletes who perform well in sports are also performers in plenty of other settings. They're people that if they're anxious in sport, they're also anxious during exams […] They tell me, "I tried using it [the strategy] before an oral presentation, my breathing was really good," and so on. So the transfer is very natural. (Paule)

This belief in implicit life skills transfer could explain why some SPCs were not greatly concerned with intentionally ensuring transfer outside the sport setting. They considered it an automatic process for student-athletes. Only one SPC suggested that transfer does not happen implicitly, and not always immediately. According to this SPC, student-athletes would benefit from using explicit strategies to help them apply the life skills they acquired in sport to other settings:

> Transfer does not happen automatically if we don't help student-athletes make the connection between what they use in sport and what they can use in daily life […] It takes time before they can apply a life skill to other settings on their own. (Isabelle)

For explicit life skills transfer, strategies could be taught and used intentionally and systematically to ensure that transfer takes place. However, most of the SPCs did not share this belief, which could explain why they almost never followed up on skills transfer.

The second reason that could explain the lack of follow-up is that their training had not provided them with the knowledge or tools they needed to effectively integrate life skills into their interventions. Thus, some SPCs said they felt limited in their ability to follow up on transfer due to insufficient training. For example, Sonia mentioned that her training program did not provide her with adequate tools to teach student-athletes to apply the life skills they learned in sport to their daily lives. Her

knowledge of mental skills was therefore limited to the sport setting:

> With respect to our training as SPCs, we hadn't been given the tools to teach life skills […] We don't really know what life skills are. We specialize in integrating skills in sport, but not in daily life […] We do the best we can, but often, for me, it's an obstacle in the sense that there are plenty of other things that I could do to equip them more specifically and better [...] However, since it's not my field of expertise, I feel limited in what I can do. (Sonia)

A third potential barrier to teaching and transferring life skills is the distribution of professional roles. Because life skills constitute a grey area in domain of expertise, some SPCs said they were afraid to stray from their mandate. Given that their expertise was related to sport, they felt that they risked crossing an invisible line if they intervened in other settings of the athlete's life (e.g., school) that should be handled by other professionals (e.g., psychoeducators, social workers).

The fourth reason that could explain the lack of transfer follow-up concerns the limited budget and time granted to SPCs in sport-study programs. Over half the SPCs said they lacked money and time to ensure life skills transfer for all their student-athletes. Sonia faced this challenge on a daily basis:

> Part of the reality when you're hired to work in a school is that you have a budget and time to respect […] I don't know how we could introduce life skills in our practice in the sport-study program […] To be honest, will I take the time to follow up on transfer like that? Because we have one hour to see each student-athlete, so we will of course prioritize what they want to work on in sport. (Sonia)

Transfer follow-up appeared to be a major concern for the SPCs: they understood the relevance

of doing so and of integrating it into their practice, but they also felt limited by all the above-mentioned reasons.

Systematic work with other key stakeholders in the sport-study program

The second major challenge for some SPCs pertains to the systematic work they were required to do with other stakeholders in the sport-study program and the social environment of student-athletes. Although they recognized the importance of collaboration among key stakeholders surrounding student-athletes, some SPCs said it was sometimes difficult to align everyone's efforts toward the same goal. As Isabelle and Manon explained:

> The obstacle can be the coach or even the parent. It's difficult to work with a student-athlete who returns home and sees the exact opposite of what we worked on […] Also, I think it's an obstacle for life skills development, because if we're working on confidence and I tell them, "You can do that at school and at home too," and then the parent tells them that it's not good. That's when it gets complicated, because we're working at cross purposes. (Isabelle)

> In terms of life skills transfer, even if the student-athlete sets a realistic goal for his school grades, when the parent demands that he be above average and that's the pressure he's under every day at home […] We see that the parents have a tremendous influence. So, there's always a very systemic side to life skills […] and with life skills transfer, there are limits to what the SPC can do. (Manon)

Discussion

The objective of this study was to examine the experiences of SPCs in teaching life skills development and transfer to student-athletes in sport-study programs specific to high school settings. This section presents the interpretations of the findings, the study limitations, and directions for future research.

Taken together, the results reveal that the SPCs valued life skills development. This can be explained by their professional philosophy: most SPCs said that they used a holistic approach to their interventions and were concerned about the multiple life settings of student-athletes. Similar results were found in studies of SPC practice with youth athletes (e.g., Henriksen et al., 2014; Visek et al., 2013). For example, in Poczwardowski and Sherman (2011), SPCs reported that promoting global development helped athletes improve their athletic performance and psychological well-being. In Friesen and Orlick (2010), SPCs also believed in the importance of developing a professional philosophy that targets holistic development, and they considered the whole individual in their interventions, not just the athletic persona. Our results suggest that, based on their philosophy, the SPCs were generally inclined to aim for positive development in their interventions. At the same time, they reported that their philosophy evolved with their professional experience. Thus, as they became more concerned about holistic development, they progressively adopted an individual-centered approach that accounted for the individual needs of student-athletes. These results are consistent with those obtained by Tod et al. (2009; 2011) in neophyte SPCs: their philosophy tended to evolve with practical experience, from a cognitive-behavioral approach to an approach centered on the needs of student-athletes. As they gained confidence in their abilities and refined their philosophy, the SPCs placed more emphasis on holistic development, an individuation process in which service delivery styles become more reflective of the SPC's worldviews and philosophy (McEwan et al., 2019). Our results suggest that SPC training should include tools for developing and nurturing a holistic philosophy, and early in the training program. For example, a holistic approach could be implemented

in university sports psychology programs to enable future SPCs to develop a broader professional philosophy. This could help them foster the positive development of student-athletes early on in their professional practice. Bean et al. (2018) recommended that coaches take the time, through reflective practice, to establish a philosophy that integrates life skills development. This could also help SPCs formalize their philosophy and develop more explicit strategies to optimize life skills development and transfer. Reflective practice can help SPCs clarify the key principles that underlie their philosophy of practice (e.g., core beliefs, values, preferred model of practice) and that underlie their consultation techniques. By adopting a reflective consulting approach early on in their career, SPCs could set clear goals for interventions and strategies to promote life skills development and transfer.

The SPCs in our study said that they developed life skills to the best of their abilities. They reported using four life skills teaching strategies: (a) workshops, (b) individual interventions, (c) group discussions, and (d) practical exercises. Of these, the three most effective strategies were workshops, individual interventions, and group discussions. According to some SPCs, this was because they enabled holding both group and individual discussions with student-athletes and building positive relationships with them. These interventions align with the strategies used by other coaches working in school sport (e.g., Gould et al., 2007; Trottier & Robitaille, 2014). For example, all the basketball coaches who participated in the study by Trottier and Robitaille (2014) reported that they held group discussions with their student-athletes about life skills that are useful on the field and in daily life, such as perseverance. The SPCs in the present study mentioned using individual interventions such as using key words and sentences to build student-athletes' self-confidence. Thus, in addition to group interventions (e.g., workshops, group discussions), they recognize the importance to individualize life skills interventions, thereby placing the student-athlete at the core of the process. Holding individual meetings with student-athletes provide suitable opportunities for SPCs to apply an individualized approach to life skills development. SPCs can also use individual meetings with

student-athletes to complement the interventions of other stakeholders (e.g., teachers, coaches) in the sport-study program, and thereby ensure congruity between life skills learned in school and in sport. This would also facilitate life skills transfer between settings.

With respect to transfer, the SPCs in the present study reported using two main strategies: (a) specific discussions about transfer and (b) asking student-athletes to practice life skills in other settings. First, most SPCs held specific discussions with student-athletes to explain the importance and utility of transferring life skills to other settings. This result concurs with those of previous studies (Allen et al., 2015; Jacobs & Wright, 2018; Walsh et al., 2010; Weiss et al., 2013) that examined coaches' strategies to facilitate life skills transfer. For example, Allen et al. (2015) showed that specific discussions during focus groups, identifying similarities between life skills that are relevant in sport and in school, and fostering reflection on transfer appeared to help student-athletes gain confidence in their ability to apply life skills in diverse settings. Second, some SPCs in the present study said that they asked student-athletes to practice life skills in sport (e.g., during practice) and then to use the same life skills in other settings, such as school. Bean et al. (2018) include this strategy in their continuum of life skills development and transfer, and they encourage the use of practical strategies to promote transfer beyond sport. For example, these authors suggest that coaches should motivate athletes to get involved in their community by taking on leadership roles (e.g., coaching) and doing community service (e.g., volunteering). These activities can provide opportunities to apply life skills, such as taking responsibility, in daily life situations. Although life skills transfer can occur without systematic teaching (e.g., Chinkov & Holt, 2016; Holt et al., 2017), researchers have found that explicit teaching strategies are more conducive to life skills development and transfer (e.g., Bean et al., 2018; Jacobs & Wright, 2018; Petitpas et al., 2005). Thus, with a view to optimizing and diversifying transfer strategies, it would be relevant in future studies to get SPCs to work in collaboration and in a multidisciplinary manner with other key school stakeholders (e.g., teachers,

social workers, psychoeducators). For instance, workshops and discussion forums could be provided to school staff who work closely with student-athletes so they could share their experiences with different strategies. This would also reinforce the messages of stakeholders across different settings (e.g., classroom, sport) and help student-athletes transfer their life skills to other settings.

A notable finding of this study is that some SPCs tended to use the school setting as the initial learning context for life skills and then encourage transfer to the sport setting. Contrary to several studies where sport was considered the main context for life skills development (e.g., Papacharisis et al., 2005; Petitpas et al., 2004), these results suggest that transfer is a bidirectional process. Hence, as mentioned by Pierce et al. (2017), life skills learned in one setting can contribute to the development of the same skills in another setting, regardless of the initial learning context. Bidirectional transfer is likely to occur in the school sport setting because it is an environment where two meaningful settings (i.e., school and sport) interact and exert a reciprocal influence (Trudel & Trottier, 2019). An interesting parallel can be made with Bronfenbrenner's (1995) ecological systems theory, which views youth development as a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment, from the immediate settings of family and school to broader cultural values, laws, and customs. Thus, SPCs working in a school sport setting such as a sport-study program have the opportunity to use both the school and sport settings to explicitly make connections between life skills acquired in the two settings. This creates multiple opportunities for life skills transfer and the holistic development of student-athletes.

Although the SPCs in our study said that they helped student-athletes develop and transfer life skills, they also brought up some challenges. One of the major challenges for most of the SPCs was the difficulty in following up on the life skills transfer process. This was explained mainly by lack of information (i.e., knowledge, skills, tools) about life skills development and transfer, as well as confusion about the limits of their practice and role within the school mission.

First, the SPCs reported that their university program had not provided specific training to teach life skills development and transfer. More specifically, SPCs who used an educational approach felt that teaching life skills fell outside their field of expertise, even though they considered them important. Consequently, these SPCs tended to intervene solely in matters of sport, and they avoided exploring the potential of other settings. This feeling was also shared by some coaches in a study by McCallister et al. (2000) and a more recent one by Knudsen et al. (2020): they found it difficult to teach life skills because they lacked the knowledge and practical experience required to teach them. It would therefore be beneficial to include content on life skills and positive youth development in university training programs for SPCs to facilitate their practice with student-athletes. Moreover, in recent years, researchers have implemented a number of programs to train school stakeholders to teach life skills development and transfer in school-sport programs (e.g., Camiré et al., 2020; Carrière et al., 2021; Knudsen et al., 2020). However, these programs have largely targeted coaches, physical education teachers, and academic teachers, while neglecting SPCs. We recommend that future programs include SPCs as key stakeholders in view of their meaningful role in teaching life skills development and transfer in sport-study programs. For example, a training program targeting all stakeholders in the school sport context could be set up to provide the tools required to ensure life skills development and transfer in student-athletes across multiple life settings (e.g., school, home). This would also enrich the ongoing professional development of SPCs.

Second, the SPCs who used an educational approach expressed fears of distancing themselves from the sport setting in their interventions, and therefore tended to prioritize the optimization of athletic performance. This concern was out of respect for the professional roles of other key stakeholders working with student-athletes. This concern underscores the need to build better collaboration among all professionals in sport-study programs. The importance of interprofessional collaboration has gained greater recognition, and it is increasingly required in the

sport context to ensure the health and well-being of athletes (McHenry et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2019). Similarly, collaboration between school stakeholders (e.g., SPCs, coaches, parents, school administrators) would promote holistic development in student-athletes. Through meaningful partnerships, these stakeholders could join efforts to foster positive development in youth and to empower student-athletes to achieve their full potential in all spheres of life. Future studies could investigate facilitators and barriers for stakeholder collaboration to inform the development of effective collaborative approaches.

Third, most SPC stated that they lacked the time to ensure life skills transfer in student-athletes in sport-study programs. This raises the question as to whether part-time SPCs in sport-study programs are sufficiently versed in the program mission. An inadequate understanding of the mission could reduce the impact of their strategies for life skills development and transfer. School administrators are well placed to understand the mission, and, as demonstrated by Sturges et al. (2020), they play an important role in supporting school professionals to develop life skills in sport-study programs. Accordingly, administrators of sport-study programs could plan meetings with key school stakeholders, including SPCs, at the start of each school year to impart the school mission in terms of the positive development of student-athletes. Such initiatives could align the efforts of all stakeholders to foster the development and transfer of life skills in student-athletes.

Conclusion

This study advances the knowledge on life skills development and transfer by highlighting the practice of an important yet understudied stakeholder, the SPC, in the school sport setting. However, some limitations of this study must be considered. First, the data were collected from retrospective interviews with SPCs. Therefore, the reported information should be interpreted with

caution, as it may not necessarily correspond to what actually took place in the interventions. Future studies could investigate the experiences of student-athletes in the school sport setting to assess the scope and impact of life skills interventions delivered by SPCs. This additional perspective would enable a better understanding of SPC practices in terms of life skills development and transfer. Second, only one male participant participated in this study. Further studies are needed to determine gender differences in SPC approaches to life skills development and transfer. Third, the results may not be generalized to other countries or cultures, as high school sport-study programs are offered mainly in Canada.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the literature by highlighting the fact that although SPCs teach life skills to student-athletes in sport-study programs, they also feel the need for better training to make their interventions more effective. Future studies could more deeply explore the needs of SPCs in terms of training and support. The results could inform the design and implementation of adapted training programs in life skills development and transfer to assist high school SPCs in their practice.

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