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Development and Evaluation of the Coaching for Life Skills Training Program for High School Coaches

Project Summary

The research project occurred in two sequential phases. In the phase one study, the purpose was to develop the Coaching for Life Skills training program and evaluate its pilot implementation. This first study was qualitative in nature and explored what coaches believed they experienced during their participation in the training program. Findings demonstrated how the coaches believed they learned important elements related to the teaching of life skills, particularly in terms of increasing their awareness of life skills, improving coach-athlete relationships, and employing coaching strategies that deliberately target life skills development and transfer. From phase one to phase two, the Coaching for Life Skills training program was converted from an in-person format to an online format. In the phase two study, the purpose was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Coaching for Life Skills online training program. This second study was quantitative in nature, with three variables assessed: coach-athlete relationship, coach interpersonal behaviors, and life skills teaching. Results indicated positive directional changes, with increases in mean scores occurring for program participants across the three variables.

Research Methods

In phase one, ten coaches, from the 68 who completed the in-person pilot implementation of the training program, volunteered to participate in individual semi-structured interviews. The coaches were on average 37 years of age and had an average of 9 years of high school coaching experience. The interviews were audio recorded and lasted on average 60 minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and submitted to thematic analysis. In phase two, a 3 x 3 double blind randomised controlled trial was conducted using a concurrent multiple baseline across groups design. This means that the intervention was introduced in a staggered fashion across groups with the goal of testing the hypothesis that change was observed only after the intervention was introduced. A total of 1,238 participants were randomly assigned to either an experimental, waitlist, or control group. Participants completed at three time points an online survey package, which included the Coach-Athlete Relationship Questionnaire, the Interpersonal Behaviors Questionnaire-Self, and the Life Skills Scale for Sport. Analysis occurred in two steps. First, 3 x 3 repeated measures factorial analyses were run to test the main effect of group (i.e., experimental, waitlist, control) and time (i.e., Time 1, Time 2, Time 3), as well as

the interaction between group and time on the dependent variables of interest. Second, a visual analysis was performed to compare baseline and intervention trends as complementary evidence to the statistical analyses.

Research Results

In phase one, as a result of having taken part in the training program, the coaches discussed how they were much more mindful of using high school sport as a vehicle for development. Moreover, many coaches stated how they applied in their coaching the relational strategies they were exposed to in the training program. Many coaches reported how the training program exposed them to material they believe has helped them coach life skills in a deliberate manner. In terms of limitations, it is important to acknowledge that the study included only ten participants who self-selected to be interviewed. Thus, potential response bias should be noted in terms of participants' openness to sharing critiques of the program. In conclusion, the Coaching for Life Skills training program was designed to respond to identified coach learning needs by being offered as a practical, interactive, and free of cost coach education initiative for Canadian high school coaches, available in both French and English. In phase two, for coach-athlete relationship, there was no significant within-subject main effect for time or group. An interaction effect bordered significance for time and group. For coach interpersonal behaviors, there was no significant within-subject main effect for time, group, or for the interaction between time and group. For life skills teaching, there was no significant within-subject main effect for time, group, or the interaction between time and group. Visual analysis revealed how although not statistically significant, the results indicated a positive directional change for all three dependent variables. Specifically, increases in mean scores occurred for both experimental and waitlist group participants following their completion of the online training program. In terms of limitations, it is important to consider that the trial included self-report measures and that the trial was of short duration. In conclusion, the trial represents the first study to evaluate an online coach education program using a randomised controlled trial, suggesting that self-administered online education can serve as a featured option in coaches' life skills learning repertoire.

Policy and Program Implications

High school sports are practiced in all Canadian provinces and territories, affording youth opportunities to learn valuable life skills. Coaches have been identified as important influencers playing crucial roles in regulating the life skills students learn through sport. Every year in Canada, over 52 000 individuals volunteer to coach high school sports. Although these volunteers are an integral part of the Canadian high school sport system, most are not trained to teach life skills as this material is rarely discussed in mainstream large-scale coach education courses. The findings thus have important implications for coaches, indicating how life skills-specific coach training can help coaches become more proficient at teaching not only technical/tactical skills but also life skills through sport. Given the educational mandate of high school sport, we must provide coaches with training options that focus on helping youth

become productive members of society. Beyond the findings of the two studies, the project's main strength lies in the training program being available, in French and English, on www.schoolcoach.ca (School Sport Canada's online coach e-learning platform) free of charge to high school coaches across Canada. Thus, long after the research is complete, a tangible knowledge product will continue to be offered, playing a targeted role in enhancing the quality of high school sport participation across the country.

Next Steps

The project raised some important questions that could be examined in future research. In phase two, there was a high turnover rate, meaning many coaches started the trial but, especially in the experimental and waitlist groups, less than 20% completed the online training program and the survey package at the three time points. Future research in this area should consider means to further incentivise coaches and thereby increase their completion rate in evaluation studies. This could include providing coaches who complete coach education requirements to receive continuing education credits that help coaches maintain their coaching certification. Further, given that the project focused solely on coaches' perceptions, future research efforts should consider gaining other lenses into intervention effectiveness. For example, this could be achieved by designing studies that integrate athletes' perceptions of (a) the coach-athlete relationship, (b) coach interpersonal behaviours, and (c) life skills teaching before/after their coaches complete training programs.

Knowledge Translation

Throughout the duration of the project, ongoing results were shared with School Sport Canada as Dr. Camiré made an annual presentation during the organization's annual general assembly. Further, all articles published in peer-reviewed journals emanating from the project have been shared with School Sport Canada. The sport organizations that would benefit from this report are the Coaching Association of Canada as well as provincial high school athletic associations (e.g., Alberta Schools' Athletic Association, Manitoba High School Athletic Association, Ontario Federation of School Athletic Associations).
