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Teacher-coaches' influence on the global development of student-athletes: An examination of perceived dual role benefits and challenges

Project Summary

Youth development research has examined the antecedents, processes, and outcomes that occur in sport contexts. One common finding that consistently emerges is that influential adults, such as teachers and coaches, play instrumental roles in facilitating the developmental process. Most of the past research on teachers and coaches has examined these two roles in isolation but in the high school context, teachers most often volunteer to coach sports teams, thereby assuming the dual role of teacher-coach. To date, very few studies have explored the benefits and challenges specifically associated with being a high school teacher-coach. To help fill this knowledge gap, the current research project was undertaken. Research objectives included conducting a qualitative exploratory study (phase one) and a national survey study (phase two) to better understand how teacher-coaches manage their dual role. In conclusion, it appears that (a) coaching provides additional opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with students and positively impacts job satisfaction, (b) coaching adds layers of responsibilities, on top of teaching duties, that create many challenges, and (c) teacher-coaches need further institutional support to help them maintain their extracurricular coaching involvement over time.

Research Methods

In phase one, a sample of 25 teacher-coaches from across Ontario were recruited to take part in in-person semi-structured interviews. In phase two, in collaboration with School Sport Canada, 3065 teacher-coaches completed an online survey, which was disseminated during the 2014-2015 academic year and took on average 35 minutes to complete. Representation was obtained from all 10 provinces and 3 territories.

Research Results

In phase one, the findings focused on relationship-building and challenges. First, being a teacher-coach influenced relationship-building with student-athletes as having a dual role was deemed to facilitate interactions, especially those that occur outside the classroom context. These out of classroom interactions were perceived to give teacher-coaches greater credibility as a result of their involvement in sport. The dual role facilitated relationship-building in part because both teacher-coaches and student-athletes participated in high school sport voluntarily, which fostered greater intrinsic motivation and created a positive motivational climate. Additionally, teacher-coaches discussed how sport presents a less formal and more emotionally invested setting than a classroom, allowing teacher-coaches to connect with student-athletes on a more personal level. The teacher-coaches reported how coaching provided them with numerous positive experiences that counter-balanced the challenges often encountered in the classroom (e.g., discipline issues).

These positive experiences were said to contribute to increased job satisfaction. The teacher-coaches also reported benefits for student-athletes as a result of building relationships. Many of these benefits involved helping student-athletes deal with issues in their personal lives, including parental separation, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts. Second, teacher-coaches reported challenges with time, administrative tasks, colleagues, and logistics. In regards to time, some teacher-coaches discussed how taking on coaching as an additional commitment had negative impacts on their personal lives because the long hours made it difficult to spend quality time with family members. Additionally, some teacher-coaches described getting fatigued and sick as a result of overworking. Administrative issues (e.g., large amounts of paperwork required to travel to tournaments) caused significant stress for teacher-coaches. Finally, teacher-coaches also reported issues with colleagues, particularly those not involved in extracurricular activities, who complained about having to supply teach when the teacher-coaches travelled for tournaments.

In phase two, many of the results mirrored what was found in phase one. In terms of benefits, the participants ranked the enhanced opportunities to interact with students as the greatest benefit of being a teacher-coach. Such results emphasize how the relational aspect of coaching is paramount and reinforce the notion that a healthy coach-athlete relationship is a fundamental component of effective coaching. The greatest challenges faced by teacher-coaches were (a) meeting family obligations, (b) managing time, and (c) managing administrative duties. These findings are in accordance with phase one, illustrating how teaching and coaching commitments, when combined, put much stress on teacher-coaches' allocation of time. Teacher-coaches in their 30s and 40s were more likely to report these as challenges than teacher-coaches in their 20s and 50+. Limitations should be noted. The samples of participants for phases one and two consisted predominantly of male teacher-coaches. Further, the two phases did not include student-athletes as only the perspectives of teacher-coaches were documented. Finally, it is important to note that the data were self-report and cross-sectional, which precludes causal inferences.

Policy Implications

The qualitative data provided many rich insights into the benefits and challenges experienced by Canadian high school teacher-coaches. Such insights were corroborated by the national survey data, which examined a wide range of demographic and role-related variables reported by over 3,000 participants. Despite the challenges they faced, there is strong evidence indicating that teacher-coaches firmly believed that their dual role allowed them to (a) develop meaningful relationships with their student-athletes and (b) help with a number of issues in their student-athletes' lives.

From a policy standpoint, our results point to several concerning trends. More than 60% of teacher-coaches in our national survey reported coaching two or more sports during the academic year, but only 3% reported benefiting from some sort of reduced teaching load. Furthermore, with the exception of Quebec, the vast majority of teacher-coaches reported not receiving any financial compensation for their coaching duties. Although we found evidence that many teacher-coaches do remain involved in coaching long-term (based on their years of coaching experience), it is worrying that most (~ 90%) find it challenging to manage their time, take care of their administrative tasks, and meet their family obligations. Taking into consideration that teacher-coaches generally do not have contractual obligations to coach, important questions must be asked as it relates to the very viability of the current volunteer system in place, given the high prevalence of challenges reported across teacher-coaches of all demographic backgrounds.

Next steps

First, given that the samples in phase one and two were composed mostly of males, further research is needed with female teacher-coaches. Second, considering that a diverse range of extracurricular activities are offered in high schools, additional research is needed to determine if similar processes and outcomes emerge when teachers volunteer to participate in activities such as the arts, music, or academic clubs. Third, to address the limitation related to the projects cross-sectional nature, prospective longitudinal studies are needed to more accurately determine changes in teacher-coaches' perceived benefits and challenges of coaching over multiple sport seasons.

Key Stakeholders and Benefits

Several organizations stand to benefit from the findings. The Coaching Association of Canada can benefit as many of the recommendations offered by our participants to reduce challenges were focused on making coach education more accessible, both logistically and financially. School Sport Canada, as well as its member associations (e.g., OFSAA, ASAA), can use the findings to ensure they provide their volunteer coaches the resources they need to meet the demands of both teaching and coaching and thus be in positions to offer students a quality educational experience through high school sport. The findings can also be used by the Canadian Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (CIAAA) to help them make informed decisions related to the recruitment and retention of coaches in high schools. Finally, the findings can be disseminated to ministries of education (e.g., Ontario Ministry of Education) and teacher federations (e.g., Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation).