Building Capacity of Community Sport Coaches - An Emotional Intelligence Approach to Practice and Delivery

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ABSTRACT

There are a number of challenges that face coach educators and professionals within the field of community, youth, and recreational sport. The generally held consensus and understanding of performance sport espouses a nature that prioritises competition, and so the goals, objectives, and subsequent skills of sports coaches in this domain contrast sharply with the aims and intentions commonly inherent in community type sport. Here, community, youth, and recreational sport coaches are often tasked with developing their participants to reflect wider social policy issues, for instance, through an increased understanding of citizenship and life skills. This commentary highlights some of the issues that surround this topic and, acknowledging the broad body of work that positions „people skills" and strong relationships as crucial within this field, argues that coaches delivering community type sport should integrate and practice the concept of emotional intelligence in their coaching.

Keywords: *Community Sport, Youth Sport, Expertise, Emotional Intelligence, Coach Development.*

COMMENTARY

Within sports coaching literature, there is a prevailing sense that much of the wider public, and indeed those in charge of policy decisions, still associate the idea of coaching as one that sits in a performance framework (1). This orthodox conceptualisation, in effect, is one that defines coaching through a combination of teaching, developing, and progressing within measurable physiological and psychological based areas. In other words, many see coaching as something that has 'improved performance' at its core (2). Given these assumptions and the further common indicators of what 'good coaching' may entail (such as there being a strong correlation in a number of sports between investment in coaching, talent, and success), much emphasis in sport coaching education is placed upon the accruement of knowledge that can help performance, and, to a lesser extent perhaps, theories of effective leadership in sport (3). Both of these ways of understanding theory and practice reflect for many then, what is considered 'expert' sport coaching.

And in simple terms this idea of the 'essence' of coaching might be right, but it is, nevertheless, one that quite naturally limits the scope of exactly 'what' coaches do. In a professional sense, yes, many coaches can be identified through distinctions of performance. However, the role and function of many others is clearly distinct from this narrow conceptualisation. In youth and participation coaching, for instance, the outcomes and aims of coaches (and projects they are working on) will oftentimes more explicitly seek to educate and engage with young people, through outreach type work, youth principles and projects, and after school clubs and events (2). Moreover, much community-oriented work falls under the umbrella of community sports coaches, who are placed outside of traditional youth and recreational sport. Here, oftentimes in austere environments that suffer from socio-economic deprivation, objectives that prioritise better sports performance are certainly secondary to outcomes that emphasise wider social policy objectives, such as developing life skills, community citizenship and cohesion, and health and physical activity outcomes (4).

Indeed, assuming that very few coaches have *never* worked with children or young people, and also acknowledging that by nature much sport coaching is focused on and experienced by young people (youth and recreation participant centred), then the extent to which sport coaching principles should promote the idea of

performance exclusively should be questioned. Certainly, many coaches within the youth and participation contexts will encourage coaching, practice, and ideas that centre on such notions as fun and enjoyment, and actually promote participation and leisure as the key reasons for their sessions. However, specific training for these areas, the development of necessary skills, and understanding of different contexts is considered to be lacking (5). Overall then, we can see that identifying sport coaching skills and principles as ones aligned to skill acquisition, execution of skill and game play, and success in the context of competition ignores the majority of participants (youth and community), and tells us that performance as the meaningful, purposeful, exclusive indicator of sport coaching may not easily fit into many areas within which coaching actually takes place.

Of course, we know that there are a number of skills that are considered to be essential for coaching, irrespective of context. For instance, communication, planning, organisation, and (in context) group control. However, whilst these skills might be considered universal to all coaching, any emphasis on technical knowledge, sport specific skills, and tactical nous (game management), should be prioritised less in non-performance environments. The argument that this paper puts forward is that community sport, youth, and participation coaches should emphasise the use and development of people skills in their practice. Indeed, if we recognize coaching as multi-contextual, not always performance based, and instead something that fundamentally looks to 'engage' people, then other ways of developing and understanding how best we might engage with others must be considered.

Here, a well-established body of literature already attributes the importance that relationships in coaching plays. Jowitt (6-7), for instance, outlines how the 'Coach-Athlete' relationship is oftentimes seen as the foundation of sports coaching, and her 3C + 1 model (Closeness, Commitment, Complementarity, and Co-orientation) helps us define what an effective relationship is and why it differs from an ineffective relationship in the context of performance coaching. Moreover, the work of Côté and Gilbert (8) determines coaching expertise through how coaches interact, engage, and instil belief in their participants through what they term the four C's: competence, confidence, connection, and character. In simple terms, these are athlete outcomes, and are linked – in the physical and social context of sport coaching practice – to the coaches' professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge (coaches' knowledge). These four C's are also complemented by Côté and Hancock (9) who further build upon them by impressing the importance of the 3Ps: Performance, participation and personal development, for youth sports.

Moreover, a wide range of work points to the necessity of developing relationships within the community and youth context. The work of Vierimaa, Turnnidge, Bruner, and Côté (10), for instance, focused on supportive adult relationships and inclusivity within recreational youth sport.Indeed, this kind of conceptualisation of best practice within young peoples' integration into community institutions through sport,draws heavily on a mix of conscious processes that place relationship-based work at the heart of any design. This leads to an emphasis on what are seen as the keydefining components to community sport coaching, the most important of which are illustrated by work such as Sandford, Armour, and Duncombe's (11), and Hardman, Jones and Jones' (12), who all emphasise positive relationships and the role of the coach in community-based sport programmes. Thus, it is the engagement and the features within relationships that can promote positive development, and it is the relationship between coaches and participants that must be orientated, consciously and unconsciously, towards the likelihood of achieving more positive outcomes.

There remains the question, however, of whether this understanding of the importance of relationships within community, youth, and participation sport coaching can fully inform notions of best practice and the roles and requisite skills that coaches need for this context. Indeed, we know that 'skills', or more to the point, 'people skills', such as patience, compassion, understanding, and motivation, are all examples of how coaches might aid their ability to enthuse, motivate, engage, and positively affect their participants.

So how might we explore what expertise in this context might look like in practice, or simply categorise these 'people skills' in order that they can best be cultivated in trainingand continuing professional development programmes?To begin with, what is common to all of the ones outlined above is the fact that in order to affect/use them with any real success, it would

be necessary to 'read' how the other person or people in front of you are feeling. As an example, displaying patience might sometimes be less a 'characteristic' then a way of intelligently reacting to very subtle messages from another. In fact, this could be further explained by seeing this as a sequence of reactions that could ultimately placate, calm, or manage another person – in essence 'reading' their emotions and feelings, recognising others' behavioural dispositions, and responding and acting accordingly.

Adopting this conceptualisation of 'people skills' (and thus furthering the idea of relationship building as integral to sport coaching), this commentary provides the concept of emotional intelligence (EI – and sometimes measured as 'emotional quota' – EQ), as a possible underpinning framework for training and practice in community, youth, and participation sport coaching. The fundamental premise here is that this idea of emotional intelligence might be particularly suitable and beneficial to coaching in many instances and contexts that place engagement as one of its core principles. In short, emotional intelligence can be seen as the ability to recognize both your own and other people's feelings and, perhaps more importantly, the term encapsulates (and can also allow someone to express the degree to which someone possesses it), the skill of managing emotions – both yours and others (13).

There is an existing body of work that outlines how emotional intelligence in the context of sport, or physical activity, has been identified as important in influencing well-being, performance, and relationships. The work of Schneider and Hite (14), for instance, illustrates the way in which sport managers should support others, be socially able, and foster emotionally intelligent leadership in order to maximise workplace efficiency. Similarly, in the field of high-performance coaching, Chan and Mallett (15) extol the benefits of focusing on emotional intelligence as an approach to conflict management and facilitating group processes, and Meyer and Fletcher (16) outline how, in the context of performance enhancement, athletes, coaches, and sport psychologists might proactively promote and use emotional intelligence. As a specific example of how emotional intelligence can be used within performance sport, Campo, Laborde, and Mosley (17) outlined how specific emotion regulation strategies and emotional intelligence training benefited players at a professional rugby club. All told, the systematic reviews of emotional intelligence within the context of sport by Laborde, Dosseville, and Allen (18) and Kopp and Jekauc (19) draw similar conclusions and support the wide acknowledgement that the role, recognition, and promotion of emotional intelligence in sport is in the best interest of organisations.

What is evident then, is that the role of emotional intelligence within sport has been quite extensively outlined across performance and psychology areas of sport and sport coaching, but crucially, not necessarily explicitly within community, youth, and participation sports coaching. Indeed, within the community sport coaching 'work'field, emotional intelligence, especially in its guise as a means bywhich emotions can be recognised and perhaps regulated, seems notable in its absence (although UK Coaching, a government funded key agency that oversees coaching policy in the UK, have published a variety of blog articles on emotional intelligence, with some erring to more generic coaching skills, 20-22). Perhaps this is because sport coaching is still often associated with performance values, despite the growing body of work that situates coaching through a wide variety of contexts.

Whilst there is some discussion as to whether recognising how other people are feeling seems to be an inherent trait/ability, a skill that can be developed, or indeed a combination of ability and skills, it is probably worth being somewhat positive (and holding true to the idea that coaches can improve others) in any idea that we might be able to develop it as a skill. And clearly, within the context of person specifications and the communicative, confidence and group management skills that are necessary for the role, function, and competencies of community, youth and participation sport coaching, the approach this paper extols (that coaches should look to develop their emotional intelligence skills) would be well placed to deliver many of these required objectives. Crucially then, and to reiterate, this connection (that of developing skills necessary for this context) fits in with the rationale and context this commentary presents. This is one that, in raising the question of how best to train and support community sport coaches in terms of best practice, recognises, and promotes, the idea that they need to develop their emotional intelligence and emotional expertise. This is in order to structure a more coherent sense of others' self/selves, and

understand how emotions might be recognised, expressed, understood, and regulated in a positive manner. As coaching is, fundamentally, a social activity, and cognisant of the impact and value that developing relationships has within the sport coaching literature, this commentary posits that being emotionally intelligent is certainly an area that coaches within the community sports coaching context should actively look to develop through informal training, and that coach educators should look to formalise within their qualification and training structures.

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