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Enhancing Volunteer Youth Sport Coaching Practices Through Intergenerational Dialogue

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Abstract

A major determinant of the quality of youth's experiences in community sports is their relationship with their coaches. It is highly desirable to investigate the practices employed by these coaches, many of whom are volunteers, as their values and coaching strategies can be encouraging for young athletes or can be demoralizing and ruin their sporting experience altogether. The unique perspectives of volunteer youth sport coaches are rarely considered, and by providing them with opportunities to openly reflect upon their practices, it may be possible to assist these coaches in improving their practices and ultimately improve the sporting experience for youth. This article describes an action research project whereby two volunteer youth sport coaches from British Columbia, Canada, engaged in a practical demonstration for using reflective dialogue in order to examine their own coaching practices. Both coaches, who are 50 years apart in age and whose coaching experience ranges from seven to over 50 years, coach different sports at different levels (elite to participation) for youth aged 11-18 years. The coach participants engaged in action research through journal writing, open discussions, and audio-recorded reflective dialogues over a period of six months. Qualitative analysis of the dialogues revealed six key themes that were significant to both coaches: motivation, confidence building, team spirit, relationship building, communication, and coaching values. The coaches comment on the effectiveness of reflective dialogue as a strategy that could help volunteer youth sport coaches better understand the importance of their roles as coaches, identify challenging aspects of their coaching, and serve as a means to further develop their coaching skills and knowledge. In addition, the coaches comment on their generational differences, and discuss the importance of having senior coaches with extensive experience mentor younger less-experienced coaches.

Key Words: action research; reflective practice; intergenerational dialogue; community sports;



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Introduction

Not only is organized sport one of the most popular forms of physical activity for children and youth (Donnelly & Kidd, 2002), it is also one that has a tremendous impact on their lives. Through participation in sport, young athletes have the opportunity to experience personal commitment and self-discipline, to compete and cooperate with others, to take risks, and to deal with success and failure (Smith & Smoll, 1997; Donnelly & Kidd, 2002). Sport activities have been linked to positive psychological and emotional development among youth, with increased self-esteem, decreased stress and greater life satisfaction (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). Youngsters learn the value of physical activity, which can contribute to improved cardiovascular fitness and their adopting an active lifestyle and engaging in other positive health behaviors (Donnelly & Kidd, 2002; Fraser-Thomas et al, 2005; Smith & Smoll, 1997).

Unfortunately, not all youth involved in sport, as Smith and Smoll (1997) explain, will experience these positive outcomes. In fact, the practices used by youth sport coaches and the attitudes that they convey often appear to determine the quality of young athletes' experiences in sport. Youth sport coaches play important roles as educators and mentors, and they can have a dramatic influence on young athletes' development and their enjoyment of sport (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004). If youth sport coaches are unable to relate to their players and are unable to foster a positive sporting experience, it is possible that they could risk ruining a young athlete's expectations and enjoyment of sport altogether. Youth sport dropouts, when compared to those who do not drop out, described their coaches as being unsupportive and less encouraging (Fraser-Thomas et al. 2005). According to Donnelly and Kidd (2002), "the values and practices employed by adults can be powerfully enabling and enriching, or can drive someone out of sport for a lifetime," (p. 34). Youth sport coaches have a tremendous responsibility as they can play a crucial role in the psychological and emotional development of children and youth who are involved in sport.

Coaches at the youth level are mostly volunteers (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001) and are oftentimes the parents of children who are on the teams they coach. The success of youth sports programs is dependent upon these volunteers who invest their time, money and transportation (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). These coaches assume a variety of roles including instructor, teacher, trainer, motivator, disciplinarian, surrogate parent, social worker, friend, scientist, student, manager, administrator, and fundraiser (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 2008; Smoll & Smith, 1996). Given the importance of youth sport coaches, it is highly desirable to investigate their practices and understand their motivations. There are a number of studies that have specifically examined the practices of sport coaches at the elite level (Knowles, Borrie, & Telfer, 2005), or that have provided an evaluation of formal education programs available to



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youth sport coaches (Wright, Trudel, & Culver, 2007). However, enquiry into the role of volunteer youth sport coaches at the community level receives less attention, and their unique perspectives are not usually taken into consideration.

The purpose of this article is to describe the use of reflective dialogue, a strategy of self-reflection through which volunteer youth sport coaches can attempt to better understand their practices and work towards developing positive community sporting experiences for youth. Participatory action research was selected as a way of investigating how the process of reflective dialogue could be used by volunteer youth sport coaches. This methodology is unique because the distinction between researcher and subject is dissolved (Boston et al. 1997), and in this project the authors, who are both volunteer youth sport coaches, assumed the roles of researcher and participant. Engaging in reflective dialogue enabled the authors to more closely examine their own roles as coaches, more fully understand the importance of their roles as coaches, and identify challenging aspects of their coaching experiences. Analysis of the content of the dialogues provided the authors with an authentic opportunity to comment on the effectiveness of reflection as a strategy to help youth sport coaches develop their coaching skills and expand their coaching knowledge. Further, the age and experience differences between both authors prompted them to explore intergenerational aspects of their reflective dialogues. They considered the importance of generational differences in developing coaching knowledge and discussed the benefits of having more experienced coaches mentor younger less-experienced coaches through the use of reflective dialogue.

Reflection

Reflection is a process with the capacity to influence one's thinking (Kemmis, 1985) and through which important opportunities for self-evaluation (Saylor, 1990) and opportunities to make sense of past experiences can arise (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985a). Schön (1983, 1987) explains that reflection and action are interconnected, and that practitioners should reflect during and after an action to help make sense of unexpected situations and solve problems in practice. Engaging in reflection should offer youth sport coaches the potential for the exploration of good practice, the identification of areas for improvement, and the formulation of ideas for change (Knowles, Gilbourne, Borrie, & Nevill, 2001). Further, through reflection, coaches should become more aware of and learn from their practices, be able to more effectively link theory to practice (Knowles, Borrie, & Telfer, 2005), and find ways to develop new strategies for managing or coping with difficult situations (Saylor, 1990).

Cassidy, Jones, and Potrac (2009) caution "that reflecting on one's actions is not a quick and easy exercise," (p. 21), and that coaches should work together carefully in groups to achieve a better understanding of the coaching process. This contrasts the notion that reflection is an individual method of introspection, where events are reviewed in one's mind (Boud et al. 1985a,



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1985b). Instead, by drawing upon the work of Gilbert and Trudel (2001, 2006), they suggest that to facilitate the reflective process among coaches it is essential to provide access to knowledgeable peers who are both respected and trusted. In this project, reflection was regarded as an action-oriented and social practice whereby peer coaches were encouraged to “look inwards” together at their thoughts and thought processes and “outwards” at the situation in which they found themselves (Kemmis, 1985, p. 141).

The reflective process employed in this project stemmed from the theoretical constructs of Paulo Freire (1970, 1973), a Brazilian educator who proposed a form of communal introspection called dialogue (Carlson, Engebretson, & Chamberlain, 2006). Freire (1973) discussed that in order to transform one’s manner of acting, it is necessary to engage in a cyclical process whereby one acts in the real world and then reflects on his or her actions carefully, and continues to act, reflect, act and reflect. It is through dialogue, a unique participatory strategy that involves a “horizontal relationship between persons” (Freire, 1973, p. 45), that an interactive critical conversation develops and understanding can be achieved (Forneris, 2004). This dialogue occurs between two individuals where each person can express his or her true feelings openly, without being judged, and in a relaxed manner.

By encouraging volunteer youth sport coaches to engage in dialogue, the goal is to allow them to participate in their own learning by reflecting upon their coaching practices. As they proceed through dialogue, the coaches adopt the roles of both teachers and educators. To achieve true dialogue, they must be prepared to think in-depth about their practices and actions, and should proceed with clearly outlined expectations (Freire, 1970). In dialogue, a critical attitude develops and “when the two ‘poles’ of the dialogue are thus linked by love, hope, and mutual trust, they can join in a critical search for something” (Freire, 1973, p. 45). This project was inspired by Freire’s (1973) statement that “only dialogue truly communicates,” (p. 45), because it is through reflective dialogues that volunteer youth sport coaches can become open with each other as they attempt to gain a better understanding of their roles as coaches and of their coaching practices.

Methods and Sample

Participatory action research was used in this study because it has been identified as an appropriate methodology for examining the use of reflection among youth sport coaches (Cassidy et al. 2009). It is a unique form of qualitative inquiry that pushes individuals to adopt more critical perspectives surrounding a particular subject (Cahill, Rios-Moore, & Threatts, 2008). The process also provides individuals who do not typically have a voice in research with the opportunity to express their views and considerations openly by assuming the roles of both participants and researchers (Boston, et al. 1997; Cahill et al. 2008; Gauld, Smith, & Kendall, 2011; & Ginwright, 2008). As Kemmis and McTaggart (1992) explain, action research facilitates



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a process of collective self-reflection where participants are able to develop an understanding of their practices. When participants are allowed to become researchers about an aspect of their daily lives that is important to them (such as coaching from the perspective of the authors in this project), these individuals are more likely to identify areas of their practice that need improvement and develop realistic solutions for dealing with problems that arise (Morrell, 2008).

Sample

As mentioned previously, in this participatory action research project both of the authors, John Naslund and Garfield Pennington, engaged in reflective dialogues. Naslund is a novice youth sport coach with six years of experience coaching minor ice hockey for players aged 12-24 years. Pennington has over 50 years of experience coaching a variety of youth sports including basketball, soccer, and baseball for players aged 12-18 years. Both coaches work primarily with young male athletes, however, given the community setting of their respective sports organizations, there are often a small number of young female athletes on each team. Pennington was mentored on “empowerment” in a graduate course in 1980 taught by Paulo Freire. This course had a major impact on his views concerning dialogue and reflection and inspired him to apply Freire’s ideas to his own coaching philosophy and to this project.

Action research and data collection

Cassidy et al. (2009) explain that action research can be carried out as a four-step procedure involving *planning, acting, observing and reflecting*. These steps can be repeated in a cyclical manner, which allows for the continuous evaluation and testing of new ideas or theories that can be applied to practice (Cassidy et al. 2009). During the steps of planning and then acting, it is possible to incorporate new theories and innovative ideas into one’s practice. Through the steps of observing and then reflecting, one can learn and refine his or her practices, and ultimately contribute to an evolution in practices. The participatory action research process employed in this project was modeled on these four steps. However, some alterations were made in order to develop a procedure appropriate for use among coaches. It was necessary to design a practical methodology that could effectively illustrate ways in which reflective techniques can be applied to the investigation of coaching practices. The two coach participants in this study engaged in a five-step reflective process over a six-month period that was carried out in the following order: (1) *note taking and journals*; (2) *seeking inspiration from others*; (3) *open discussions*; (4) *reflective dialogues*; and (5) *analysis*. These first three steps in the study combine the steps of *planning, acting, and observing* with emphasis on planning. Planning was considered to be of great importance because it was necessary to have reliable data on which to reflect upon in the subsequent steps (Cassidy et al. 2009). Steps 4 and 5 represent the *reflecting* step; however it was divided into two phases in order to distinguish between actively engaging in



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reflective dialogue compared to analysis and reflection on the content of the dialogues. A more detailed account of each of the five steps in this participatory action research process follows.

(1) Note taking and journals

In this planning step the coaches kept notes and rough journals outlining some of the aspects that they found important about youth sports and coaching. They wrote about what they liked about coaching, what they considered to be their personal beliefs, and included descriptions of their good feelings, down times, hopes, dreams and questions. This activity was carried out during the sport season for a period of four months (September to December) and ranged from the beginning of the season to the middle so that following games or practices each coach could capture in notes some of their ideas and thoughts. By simply taking short notes and thinking more profoundly about coaching in general, the coaches were already engaging in the beginnings of the reflective process. This step served as a crucial transition whereby the coaches noticed subtle changes in their mindset because they were now starting to think more openly and in greater depth about their own roles as coaches. There is no set length of time required to complete this step. These coaches decided that four months would be sufficient to begin to record their experiences and document important ideas and thoughts. The content within the notes and journals from this step provided valuable insights into what was most important to each of the coaches and offered starting points to initiate the open discussions.

(2) Seeking inspiration from others.

Concurrently with the first step, the coaches read widely and considered the ideas and thoughts of great coaches and educators. They read such books as *Beyond winning: The timeless wisdom of great philosopher coaches* by Gary Walton (1992), and *How to succeed in the game of life: 34 interviews with the world's greatest coaches* by Christian Klemash (2006). They looked to inspirational words and phrases written by others that captured what they personally felt about coaching and youth. This second step, which formed part of the planning process, served as an opportunity for the coaches to obtain background information before engaging in dialogue. It is important to note that this step could be accomplished in either a formal or informal manner. Coaches can refer to content on websites, community brochures, or even texts and academic journals containing information on physiology, sports medicine, pedagogy, biomechanics, and sports psychology. By consulting literature surrounding scientific foundations of coaching, this planning step could help to provide the necessary framework for developing a higher level of coaching expertise during the subsequent reflective dialogues. This step is similar to the preliminary research steps described by Cahill et al. (2008) and Sims-Gould et al. (2010), where participants were instructed to research specific topics in preparation for taking part in interviews.

(3) Open Discussions



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Open discussions between the two coach participants were held at two times during the project. The first occurred following two months of journal writing, and the second after four months. The first open discussion allowed the coaches to check-in with each other to make sure that they were regularly updating their journals and also to discuss what types of outside sources they may have consulted. The second open discussion served as a way for the coaches to begin to share their thoughts about what that they had recorded in their journal writings and some of the inspirational ideas that they had encountered in their reading. They had the opportunity to express some of their own feelings, hopes and dreams, and frustrations. The open discussions aided the coaches in planning and selecting what coaching content would be discussed in their reflective dialogues. Based on the notes from the coaches' reflective journal writings, each coach chose several important questions and points that they wanted to examine during the reflective dialogues. During the final open discussion, each coach presented a list of 15-20 points of interest that they had selected from their own journal writings. The coaches then read through their lists together and combined similar and overlapping points. Through this process, a total of 27 questions (see questions in Appendix 1) relating to topics of coaching interest were identified. These included teamwork, disciplinary action, communication, respect, practice planning, challenges of coaching, and skill development. These questions were then further examined and interrogated through reflective dialogues.

(4) Audio-recorded reflective dialogues

During this important step, the coaches engaged in audio-recorded reflective dialogues. These were semi-structured, in-depth audio-recorded conversations that occurred over a two-day period in January, approximately two weeks following the completion of the journal writing and final open discussion. The two-week separation between Steps 3 and 4 was due to scheduling and availability, though it seems to have provided to the coaches with an opportunity to ponder the questions individually prior to engaging in reflective dialogue.

During these audio-recorded conversations, the coaches commented upon and investigated those questions that they had identified during their second open discussion. Their conversations focused and enlarged upon the questions and offered further explication of details recorded in their reflective journal writings. A notable characteristic of these conversations was that the dialogues occurred between two individuals who were mutually respectful, and a mentor-mentee relationship developed with a junior coach (Naslund) interested in learning from a senior coach (Pennington). As well, the coaches were both committed to open reflection as a way of examining their coaching practices. During these discussions, each coach engaged in honest heart-to-heart reflection on their coaching strategies, techniques, challenges, and joys.



(5) Analysis

In this step, the audio-recorded reflective dialogues were transcribed verbatim and checked by a research assistant. The data was then analyzed following the model of grounded theory described by Corbin and Strauss (1990), where concepts must be grounded in “the reality of data” (p. 420). In other words, in order to be deemed relevant, a concept must emerge from the recorded dialogues on multiple occasions. Given that the focus of this study was on the process of reflection more than on the specific content of the dialogues, this was a suitable way to analyze the audio-recorded dialogues. The authors read and re-read the transcripts to identify recurring themes and similar characteristics. Together, the authors generated a list of 16 concepts that were present throughout the recorded dialogues. They then ranked these concepts in order based on the number of times each concept emerged in the conversations, which allowed them to further group these concepts into prominent themes. A concept was only included as a prominent theme if it stood up to the continued scrutiny of grounded theory analysis by emerging at repeated occasions within the recorded dialogues regardless of its personal significance or importance to the authors (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Because the questions that prompted the dialogues were self-selected, they represented questions, topics, and themes that were important to each coach in seeking to improve their coaching practices. After refining the identified concepts, both researchers agreed that six themes relevant to coaching development emerged. As an attempt to limit any researcher bias that may have occurred during the selection of the six themes, a research assistant compared these themes with the content of the transcripts and the list of concepts. The use of a third-party research assistant to review the analysis process has been discussed elsewhere as an important strategy for generating feedback and ensuring validity of the findings (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005).

Findings

It is important to point out that the six themes identified during the analysis step were meaningful to the coach participants in this project, and are representative only of what they considered to be important issues in youth sport coaching. These results are reported here in order to illustrate fully the practical benefits each coach participant obtained through engaging in the reflective process. These results are not applicable to other youth sport coaches, and in fact if other youth sport coaches were to participate in a similar reflective process they might find that entirely different themes would emerge as being important.

The themes identified by the coach participants in this project included: (1) *Motivation*; (2) *Confidence building*; (3) *Team spirit*; (4) *Communication*; (5) *Relationship building*; and (6)



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Values of coaching. The dialogues around these themes revealed salient points that could be considered in trying to enhance coaching practices.

(1) Motivation

Finding strategies to motivate youth was a common and overriding challenge experienced by both of the coaches. Pennington mentioned that some young athletes do not make sport a priority in their lives, which leads to motivational issues:

“I am really keen to play, and to play hard and to practice to get some skill, but for a lot of the kids that I have worked with, this is not in any way near their top list of priorities. So motivation with those kids, their sort of internal motivation is pretty lacking, and I think that’s one of my big challenges.”

Each coach elaborated upon the role of extrinsic and intrinsic motivators. They talked about and defined extrinsic motivators to be outside influences, such as encouragement from coaches and peers, or the involvement of friends in the same sport. Intrinsic motivators, on the other hand, they concluded were more profound and of greater lasting significance and encompassed a young athlete’s desire to play simply because of their love of the sport. Intrinsic motivators stem from having a positive attitude towards the game, and feeling good about oneself. Both coaches concurred that these intrinsic motivators were more difficult to foster, as some young athletes appear not to be intrinsically motivated in the community sport environment. This brought up the issue of those youngsters who “don’t care.” Through their experiences in very different sports, both coaches agreed that they had coached youth who were marginally interested, and were not motivated to play or practice.

The coaches described strategies that could be used to help motivate players, such as having these players set individual goals, mainly short term goals, and to help these players recognize achievement in many aspects of the game. Other motivational techniques included having players identify with good role models in their favorite position and even by watching their sports heroes on television. However, following their discussions, motivation remained for both coaches a critical challenge and one that had no easy answers with regard to interventions that could be employed to overcome lack of player motivation.

(2) Confidence Building

Both coaches identified building confidence among young athletes as an important aspect of youth sport coaching. Complimenting young athletes legitimately, recognizing the positive aspects of their performance each session, providing leadership opportunities, and looking for the strengths in every team member were identified as important ways to help build player confidence. It is also important to insist that other teammates play a part in this process of



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building confidence with their peers. Both coaches considered it very important to authentically acknowledge each player's strengths and unique abilities, and discussed how drills and practices could be structured in such a way to help kids feel safe and more confident about their play.

Pennington asserted that using stations, pairing teammates up, creating little competitions throughout practices and establishing individualized performance targets were, in his experience, effective strategies that could be used to develop confidence. These techniques were found to be particularly useful because they generated "little successes" for individual players and then ultimately for the team as a whole. The coaches stressed the importance of getting players in situations where they can succeed. Whether this strategy can help to develop a young athlete's self-efficacy, which results in improved confidence, or vice versa, was not discussed in detail by the coaches. However, they agreed that creating success is instrumental in fostering positive attitudes in sport.

Naslund provided the example of positions, and how it is necessary for coaches to select what positions certain players will play. For example, by placing a weaker player in a position on the playing field that requires fewer responsibilities, such as a winger in ice hockey, that player may have a greater chance of achieving success and will not feel as discouraged. Lastly, the coaches considered the need to build on the enthusiasm and eagerness of young athletes in order to reward them for their efforts and strengthen their confidence further:

"If you see that they are eager to learn and want to, and then you help encourage that and build on that, I think that is certainly part of coaching." (Naslund)

(3) Team Spirit

A common thread found throughout the reflective dialogues was their discussion of the term, "team spirit." At first the coaches struggled to define "team spirit," especially considering how frequently this term is used in such a wide variety of contexts. They decided that "team spirit" is very important. It is an essential characteristic that separates good teams from bad teams. They agreed that "team spirit" is what makes a team feel successful as it can pull teams together, and the teams that have it are capable of going a long way towards achieving success. However, they had difficulty quantifying this statement — what does team spirit look like? How can you measure it? And, what can a coach do to develop it?

They considered John Wooden's definition of team spirit as "an eagerness to sacrifice personal interests or glory for the welfare of all, the team comes first," (Walton, 1992, p. 48). Aspects of team spirit and ways of enhancing team spirit that they could identify based on their coaching experiences included creating a welcoming environment, organizing team gatherings on and off the playing field (e.g., team breakfasts or outings), encouraging interaction between team members, and setting goals as a team. Pennington also mentioned how firm, fair, and consistent leadership is necessary for developing team spirit. The coaches concluded that even



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when employing certain strategies or practices, it is challenging to develop and maintain team spirit.

“When considering team spirit in actual games and playing as a team, this is something that I have always struggled with through coaching hockey because there’s always kids that won’t pass the puck, won’t play as a team, they play as an individual and you can’t play as an individual, and it is very hard breaking those kind of habits.” (Naslund)

(4) Communication

The coaches considered communication as an essential element in effective youth sport coaching; whether it was communicating with players, communicating with officials, communicating with fellow coaches, or communicating with parents. Communication with fellow coaches was crucial, because this component encompassed important team-related tasks such as organizing or planning practices. Garfield found that the limited time coaches have together and often the differences in their coaching values and styles serves to inhibit authentic coach-to-coach communication.

Through positive communication, coaches relate to their players and build positive relationships. One technique that the coaches identified as being beneficial to communicating with youth was that of giving the players greater responsibility. By giving players more things to look after and by allowing them to be responsible for certain tasks, the result is more likely be that of building trusting relationships. In turn, the players may be more inclined to ask the coach questions, thereby keeping the lines of communication open.

“I think that one of the biggest mistakes that we make in coaching is not relating to the kid as an individual because we talk to the team... we talk to the team all the time.”
(Pennington)

Disciplining players was also regarded as a form of communication. There will always be instances where players need to be disciplined, however, it is the language used in this process that needs to be considered closely because it can impact the relationship between the coach and that player or the entire team. Through the reflective dialogues, the coaches discussed issues related to bullying. They decided that bullying belongs under the theme of communication because through various communication strategies, it is possible to resolve and eliminate bullying situations. Often, bullying occurs between more skilled players who become impatient with less skilled players. Youth sport coaches cannot ignore situations involving bullying, and they need to attend to situations privately with the players who are responsible for bullying. This requires the ability to communicate clearly and assertively.



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“I think challenging it, making it [bullying]-- trying to make it part of a team ethic, dealing with someone privately, you know giving them a second chance, not, not ignoring it I don't think.” (Pennington)

By means of effective communication, a no-tolerance policy for bullying can become part of a team's ethic. Bullying is difficult to avoid and it frequently emerges in different forms, either as subtle and behind the scenes, or as verbal and physical acts. The coaches in this project concurred that bullying must never be ignored. Youth sport coaches must emphasize to their teams that by supporting one another in a raft of different ways, they are going to become a better team.

(5) Relationship Building

Building positive relationships with players is an important part of youth sport coaching. While many strategies to build relationships require good communication, the coaches talked about a few techniques that could help them relate to their players as individuals. For example, creating player profiles by using a simple two-page sheet of questions that covers the basics such as their favorite music, movies, and foods, as well as sporting backgrounds, school and work commitments. These profiles enable coaches to get to know general details about the character of each player.

Talking to each player before and after games is also important. This can be as simple as a pat on the back after practice, asking how they are doing, or just saying hello. Acknowledgment of each player as an individual is essential in order to build good relationships and maintain a positive team environment. It is also important to take suggestions from players when planning practices or activities, as this makes them feel as though they are part of the decision-making process. Nicknames are also a useful strategy for developing positive relationships and making kids feel like they are part of a team. Regardless of the strategies used, a positive relationship with young athletes is essential in order to coach effectively.

“The better I know them the better I think I can work with them.” (Pennington)

Additionally, as Pennington explained, the main benefit is the lifelong regard that can develop among team members and between coaches and players especially if the experiences are positive. Building relationships cannot be conducted according to a set formula, but rather comes as a result of consistent attempts by all those involved to be open, honest and caring. This is not an easy task because of competing factors and differing expectations; however, the coaches in this project believe that it is possible.

(6) Values of Coaching Youth Sports



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Many of the things that these coaches valued most about coaching were expressed in their reflective dialogues. They strongly agreed that what they valued most is the “relationship with the individuals on the team above everything else” (Pennington), and that “mutual respect between coach and player is something that is not easy to achieve but when it develops it is a wonderful thing.” (Pennington). The coaches also valued the “friendships that develop with fellow coaches” (Naslund) and described rewarding aspects of teaching youth.

“When you can teach a kid something and then see it happen... I think as great as it might be for the actual kid having the success, I think it might even be a greater success for the coach, especially if they fostered that success.” (Naslund)

“Seeing a kid improve and succeed, that to me has been the best.” (Pennington)

They also described the sense of community that develops through youth sport coaching and agreed that many of the long-term benefits are often unforeseen. Lastly, Pennington emphasized how rewarding it can be to get to know a young athlete, which ties in closely with the previous theme surrounding relationship building.

“If I can have a relationship with them [my players] that’s long-lasting, like for a... former athlete to greet me warmly or to remember we did these good things, that’s what I value most.”

Discussion

Previous research on youth sport coaching has evaluated the effectiveness of formal coach education programs, and has examined the practices employed by elite coaches. This project adds to the growing body of coaching literature by providing a practical demonstration of the process of reflection and how reflective dialogue can be used among volunteer youth sport coaches within communities in British Columbia, Canada. The project provides a meaningful and authentic example to other youth sport coaches interested in investigating their practices by engaging in dialogue. The six themes – *motivation, confidence building, team spirit, communication, relationship building, and values of coaching* – identified by the coaches in this project were meaningful to them. Reflective dialogues provide valuable opportunities for experienced coaches to transfer coaching knowledge and authentic accounts of their coaching experiences to younger coaches in an open and respectful manner. Even though formal coaching education programs have developed significantly since emerging approximately 30 years ago (Gilbert & Trudel, 1999), they cannot provide the individualized and personalized context that emerges through reflective dialogue. In a study conducted by Wright et al. (2007), volunteer youth sport coaches indicated that they learn more through experience and communicating with fellow coaches when compared to formal coach education programs. For example, a coach



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education program may discuss the importance of motivation, team spirit and communicating with players, just as the coaches in this project did. However, a coaching education program cannot possibly provide the same personal insights surrounding these topics as was seen through the coaches' reflective dialogues. It is only through such open conversation that authentic emotions and feelings will arise, a critical attitude develops, and true communication takes place (Freire, 1973).

As the coaches' reflective dialogues progressed, they became more open and relaxed; and the content of their discussions developed in meaning and became more profound. By writing and talking about their coaching practices and strategies using reflective techniques and reflective dialogues, the coaches in this study began to understand some of their motivations for coaching. Through their reflective dialogues they considered motivators other than the often stated, "for the love of the game" or "for the love of my son." They agreed that an important motivator for youth sport coaches is the idea that you can help young people develop in terms of character and skill, and allow them to find enjoyment through participating in sport. Pennington described how he believes that sport helped him to develop confidence, self esteem, communicative abilities, cooperation, and other life skills, and that he wants to see the same thing happen to the youth he coaches.

The coaches considered their generational differences and whether these differences in age affected their coaching practices. Given that the two coaches are 50 years apart in age, and that each is involved in different sports, they found that they share very similar coaching values. They identified similarities in their fundamental views and practices in regards to equitable playing time, disciplinary action, working with other coaches, and relating to young athletes. Their generational differences may have resulted in their showing greater tolerance for each other and a greater desire to engage in the conversation. Their generational differences may also have contributed to a mentor-mentee relationship that was evident as part of the reflective dialogues. Naslund commented on the usefulness of discussing topics related to youth sport coaching with a more experienced coach, and how he plans to apply some of the techniques mentioned by Pennington to his own coaching practices.

The implications of older and younger coaches speaking openly to one another are potentially profound. If both parties really listen to each other and seriously consider the views of the other person, then the learning can be enormous. However, there are some serious caveats. Real listening and the exchange of ideas and experiences requires a shift in attitude for many individuals. It also involves hard work, a willingness to reconsider past practices, and a suspension of judgment until all things have been shared. Communication between two people is difficult in all walks of life and it is so in terms of dialogue between an older expert coach and a younger novice coach. The primary elements in achieving meaningful dialogue are a willingness to learn and mutual respect – easy to say, but much more difficult to achieve. Dialogue is



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difficult and messy, but ultimately it has the potential to be much better pedagogically than other alternatives.

Intergenerational dialogue could be particularly important for volunteer youth sport coaches given their transient nature and high turnover rates. After coaching for only two to three years, many volunteer youth sport coaches move on because their son or daughter also moves on, and these coaches take with them all of their coaching knowledge and experiences gained during that period. One way to attempt to deal with this is to encourage these coaches to document what they do so that their experiences can be transmitted over time and perhaps replicated in some ways. An open dialogue between an older coach and a younger coach is an effective method to transfer this coaching knowledge. Freire emphasizes the importance of generational knowledge transfer when he states that:

“All new knowledge is generated from knowledge which has become old, which in its turn had been generated from previous knowledge.” (Freire, 1973, p. 119).

For the men and women who have volunteered as coaches in the community at some point, there should be a type of "give-back" project where these individuals are encouraged to draw from their experiences to help younger coaches in their development and practices. The possibility of exposing young coaches to the experiences and wisdom of elders would contribute immensely to the welfare of the young athletes with whom they work.

In addition, as part of this project the coaches attempted to frame their coaching experiences, and relate their coaching values, to the ideals and thoughts expressed through the words of great philosopher coaches. One coach in particular who the writers were able to identify with in terms of their coaching practices was John Wooden, a former basketball coach at UCLA whose teams won more NCAA championships than any other university in the United States (Walton, 1992). John Wooden always ended practices with a light touch, a joke, or an affectionate pat on the back for players (Walton, 1992). He never used physical punishment such as running laps or doing push-ups, because he wanted to keep practice a desirable activity. He made it clear that everyone had a role on the team and it was essential that the players not only respected and trusted his judgments, but also knew that he was interested in them as individuals. Additionally, Wooden maintained consistency in his coaching practices, that way his players always knew where he stood on an issue. Walton (1992) attests to this in a chapter of his book, *Beyond winning: The timeless wisdom of great philosopher coaches*, when he describes the coaching success of John Wooden:



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“Great accomplishments and best efforts rest on a base of joyous hard work that sustains enthusiasm and integrates individual skills and efforts in an atmosphere of cooperation, personal regard, and commitment,” (Walton, 1992, p. 47).

It was fascinating for both of the coaches in this study to consider how the techniques employed by a respected and successful coach such as Wooden concurred with many of their own coaching techniques, values and beliefs.

It is important to make clear that what the coaches in this project found through their reflective dialogues was indeed meaningful to them. However, as mentioned previously, if other coaches were to engage in the same process it is possible that different themes would emerge. The value in this study lies not in the findings, but in the avenue through which these findings were generated. Such a methodology is effective in eliciting the important point-of-views of volunteer youth sport coaches. The content of reflective dialogue could vary substantially between coaches, as elements such as the environment, neighborhood, socioeconomic factors, culture, type of sport, age and experience of the coaches involved, and level of the athletes could all influence the direction and content of the dialogue. The potential for diversity through reflective dialogue is indicative of the benefits of engaging in such practices because it highlights the individuality between coaches and acknowledges the value of individual coaches' unique views and perspectives.

This participatory action research study demonstrates the process of reflection and the use of reflective dialogues among volunteer youth sport coaches. When coaches reflect and look inward they have possibly the best and most authentic chance to get nearer the truth of affairs. As volunteer youth sport coaches, it is necessary to try to find better ways of working with young athletes. It is especially important for coaches to have opportunities to easily and meaningfully share their successes, fears, and frustrations as they go about their coaching. By reflecting individually and then sharing with others in a respectful and open manner, coaches can begin to affirm what they love most about coaching and how they may want to improve and develop their coaching practices. The work of Freire (1976) has been a validating source in this regard, because, as he states, “dialogue awakens an awareness” (Freire, 1973, p. 127) and “to engage in dialogue is to be genuine” (Freire, 1973, p. 115). Coaches can begin to discover that there is tremendous value in talking from the heart with a fellow coach about their coaching efforts, and that dialogue, or similar practices, should be more widely encouraged among volunteer youth sport coaches.

Conclusion

Through reflective practices, two youth sport coaches 50 years apart in age and whose coaching experiences range from seven to over 50 years, were able to explore their thinking



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about their own coaching practices and ultimately consider ways to enhance their coaching development. Reflective techniques and dialogues shared between a junior and an experienced coach have implications for coaching education and development. The process applied in this study illustrates how reflective dialogue can be used to enable youth sport coaches to begin to explore and more fully understand their roles as coaches, and also to examine their practices in greater depth. Community-based sport associations should strive to create an environment that nurtures the reflective process (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001), and fosters access to knowledgeable and respected coaching peers critical to facilitating this reflective process. Coaching education programs should be redesigned to combine practices of reflection-in-action (Schön, 1987), and consider encouraging the use of reflective practices among volunteer youth sport coaches. Coaches should be asked to address important issues that they typically encounter in their coaching and discuss these in pairs or in small groups (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001). Minor sports association meetings should encourage volunteer coaches to begin to talk about their current coaching issues and ways to generate more collaboration between coaches. An environment where coaches can network with, learn from, and mentor each other is critical for coaching development (Bloom et al. 1998), and ultimately will be of benefit to children and youth who participate as part of amateur sport teams.



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Appendix one: List of questions pertaining to issues in coaching.

1. What are the big challenges facing coaches?
2. How do we build confidence while working on skill improvement?
3. What does “team spirit” mean and is it important?
4. How does one go about planning team drills and practices?
5. What do we do about players who are impatient with less skilled teammates?
6. How do we help create “the joy of effort” in sport? What about “FUN”?
7. How do we go about establishing a positive relationship with players?
8. What is our team’s community and how is it fostered? What about parents?
9. What do we value most in our coaching role and how do we try to manifest these values?
10. What are our basic motivations for coaching? Why do we do it? (There is more than just the frequently coined “love of the game”)
11. What have been our major successes and failures?
12. How do the coaching styles of a young coach and an elder coach contrast and coincide?
13. What have we learned, if anything, from “philosopher coaches” if not consciously emulating them or employing their advocacies, then how closely does our work conform to their approaches?
14. How do we get players to understand and appreciate our decisions?
15. What do we do about “players time” in our sports?
16. What is the coach’s role in sport? Friend, teacher, mentor...?
17. How do we discipline players?
18. What do we do when parents complain or have concerns?
19. What do we do about our mistakes?
20. What about bullying – subtle or graphic?
21. How do we include all players regardless of skill? Inclusion of isolate?
22. What about disagreement between coaches and differing coaching styles?
23. What do you let go? Where do you make a stand?
24. What attitude do we have towards officials? What is the relationship like with officials?
25. What are our actions or attitudes regarding winning and losing? How important is winning? (We would be lying to say that we do not care about winning)
26. Who have been our mentors? Our own past coaches, players, teammates, philosopher coaches?
27. How can it be that there are so many bad coaching practices when so many resources and literature are available?



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