

Sports Coaching and Young People in the 21st Century

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Introduction

Sports Coaching is a valued vocational activity which, in recent years, has enjoyed a significantly heightened policy profile within the UK (Taylor and Garratt, 2010). Indeed, the past decade has witnessed the publication of several key policy documents which have brought considerable challenges both to the coaching workforce and to sports governing bodies. By 2016 it is the intention of Sports Coach UK (SCUK - the strategic agency for sports coaching in Britain), to have professionalized the industry and established a world-leading coaching system (National Coaching Foundation (NCF), 2008). The process of professionalization requires a step change in the investment of coaches in relation to their own development and is especially challenging considering the traditionally reproductive and intuitively-informed working conventions of most practitioners (Jones, 2006). Recent policy development in this area began with the publication of The Coaching Task Force – Final Report (Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS), 2002) which called for an integrated and unified system for developing coaching in the UK. In turn, SCUK's 3-7-11 Action Plan for Coaching (NCF, 2008) was designed to provide a framework by which professionalization could be achieved. The term '3-7-11' refers to the number of years each stage of the Action Plan comprises i.e. 'Building the Foundations (2006-2008)', 'Delivering the Goals (2006-2012)' and 'Transforming the System (2006-2016)'. Falling at the midpoint of the 3-7-11 Action Plan, this chapter discusses the challenges currently facing those involved in the professionalization of coaching, focussing specifically on the impact of the requisite developments in coaching practice on young peoples' experience of sport. The scope of this issue is considerable given that around 1.68 million hours of sport are delivered

each week to over five million participants in the UK, two thirds of whom are children (North, 2009). Furthermore, the widely espoused potential of appropriate sporting experience to cultivate many aspects of young people's development reinforces the coach's role as a powerful and serious endeavour (Morgan, 2006). This chapter challenges coaches to consider the experience of young people by exploring the implications of current policy, contemporary learning theory and by providing a philosophical critique of 21st century sports coaching. The chapter concludes by suggesting that by embracing contemporary pedagogic theory, coaches can balance the demands of competitively-based UK sport policy with more holistically-focussed coaching strategies.

How does sports policy impact the young performer?

Amongst the foremost attributes of SCUK's coaching vision, outlined in policy such as the Coaching Task Force – Final Report (DCMS, 2002) and the UK Action Plan for Coaching (NCF, 2008), lies a commitment to an ethical, participant-centred system of coach and athlete development. This challenges coaches to deliver much more than fun, safe and inclusive sessions; a trilogy of expectations which are commonly considered to be the extent of 'good practice' in youth sport. Current policy demands that coaches re-evaluate the experiences of young people by considering the individual developmental pathway of participants regardless of their perceived performance potential. Furthermore, The UK Action Plan for Coaching (NCF, 2008: 1) heightens the responsibility on sports coaches in terms of their broader developmental role:

Sports coaching is central to developing, sustaining and increasing participation in sport. It drives better performances and increased success as well as supporting key social and economic objectives

throughout the UK. At all levels of society, coaches guide improvement in technical, tactical, physical, mental and lifestyle skills, contributing to personal and social development.

The National Occupational Standards for Coaching (Skills Active, 2010) are the benchmark against which UK National Governing Bodies (NGBs) map content for coaching qualifications. These reinforce that the participant must be at the centre of the coaching process, stipulating that all NGBs adhere to this ethos in order to receive SCUUK accreditation. The UK Coaching Framework (NCF, 2008), the reference point for NGBs, further encourages coaching programmes to consider and prioritise the ‘5Cs’ of participant development: competence, confidence, connection, character and creativity (Bailey and Ross, 2009). Inherent within these aims is a sense that current policy still recognises the potential of competitive sports to develop positive character traits.

The 5Cs illustrate the holistic perspective of contemporary coaching policy which raises challenging questions and demands in relation to the extent to which coaches engage in a regular, broad and deep review of their own practice. Cassidy, Jones and Potrac (2009) suggest that the majority of coaches are predominantly focused on psychomotor development, with little attention paid to cognitive or affective elements. Understanding the holistic needs of performers requires the coach to go beyond the physical and mental components of sport performance, to address the social and perhaps even the spiritual aspects of personal development (Watson and Nesti, 2005). As with many aspects of coaching policy in the 21st century, such a focus is undoubtedly aspirational (North, 2009). Below we examine three of the most challenging issues concerning holistic perspectives: (i) early

specialization, (ii) professionalization and ‘master’ youth coaches and (iii) coaching for cognitive and affective development in competitive environments.

Coaching young people from a holistic perspective: Early specialization

A holistic appreciation of coaching necessitates challenging the commonly held belief that early specialization in sport is a pre-requisite of elite performance. Engaging young people in suitable development pathways that are designed to enable progression to elite performance and also minimize the likelihood of burn-out or drop-out, should feature high on coaches’ agendas, especially considering that long-term predictors of talented athletes are unreliable (Côté, Lidor and Hackfort, 2009). Contrary to popular practitioner opinion, early skill development research (*e.g.* Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Römer, 1993) and current practice (Côté, Lidor and Hackfort, 2009), contemporary literature opposes the notion that late starters are almost guaranteed to be unable to overcome the advantage of those performers who have amassed many hundreds of hours of deliberate practice by specializing in their chosen activity at a young age.

Encouraging early specialization pathways is based upon a series of assumptions surrounding the relationship between deliberate practice and elite performance. Many sports in the UK draw on the Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) framework (Balyi and Hamilton, 2004), which features four (for early specialization sports) or six (for late specialization sports) stages designed to aid the athletic development of participants. These stages are concerned with young people’s initial involvement with their chosen sport, the process of learning to train, and their relationship with competition through to retirement. Despite the widespread adoption of this model by UK NGBs, there are very few studies supporting LTAD’s assertion that ‘10,000 hours’ of specialized training is required to develop expert

performance. In fact, Côté, Baker and Abernethy (2007) highlight that expert performance can be achieved with just 3,000 to 4,000 hours of sport-specific training. Drawing on a wide range of literature, Côté et al., (2009) propose seven postulates concerning youth sport activities that lead to both elite performance and continued participation. These postulates rest upon the premise that early diversification in sports where peak performance is reached after maturation does not hinder elite sport participation but links to longer sports careers and positively affects youth development.

Côté et al.'s (2009) notion of diversification encompasses the abandonment of pyramidal models¹ of talent identification, i.e. those characterized by drop-out, high-performance burn-out and in which upward progression is the only valued outcome. Instead they recommend the adoption of a 'participant needs-led' approach to coaching featuring varied pathways to excellence and a focus on individual, personal goals via a broad range of activities. Baker, Côté and Abernethy (2003) suggest that the early specialization of expert performers is not a prerequisite of expert performance as a consequence of the potential early transfer of cognitive and kinesthetic appreciation and because some of the many thousands of hours required to attain expert status can be transferred by understandings elicited in other activities. On this basis, young people, it seems, should be encouraged to sample a wide range of activities in their formative years before choosing whether to specialize in a particular activity or continuing to be an 'all-rounder' or simply to be a recreational sportsperson. In sum, the need to see beyond the 'production-line' style approach to talent identification and development is essential if coaching policy is to have a meaningful impact on practice.

¹ Pyramidal models of talent development are based on the notion that simply broadening the base (i.e. increasing the number of players/participants at grass-roots level) necessarily leads to the production of a greater number of elite performers and are usually institutionally focussed, i.e. concerned with specific sports.

Coaching young people from a holistic perspective: professionalization and ‘master’ youth coaches

The impact of current coaching policy on young peoples’ experiences of sport is further challenged when considering Sports Coach UK’s (NCF, 2009) Coach Development Model (CDM - see Figure 1) which calls for specialist, ‘master’, youth coaches. The CDM challenges the traditional notion of expert coach practice being almost universally associated with elite, adult, performance. Currently, the United Kingdom Coach Certificate (UKCC) recognises four levels of practice: (i) Assistant Coach (Level 1), (ii) Session Deliverer (Level 2), (iii) Annual Planner (Level 3), and (iv) Long term, specialist and innovative coach (Level 4). However, following the logic of the CDM, coaches will be able to choose their intended area of expertise from any one of the four strands (i.e. children’s/participant/performance development/high performance) and specialise in working with that particular athlete population. SCUK recognise that the CDM is aspirational (North, 2009) and that considerable work has to be done in order to define the criteria for each stage. Unquestionably coaching practice will not look the same at each of the ‘master’ stages, requiring consideration of appropriate pedagogy for each population group.

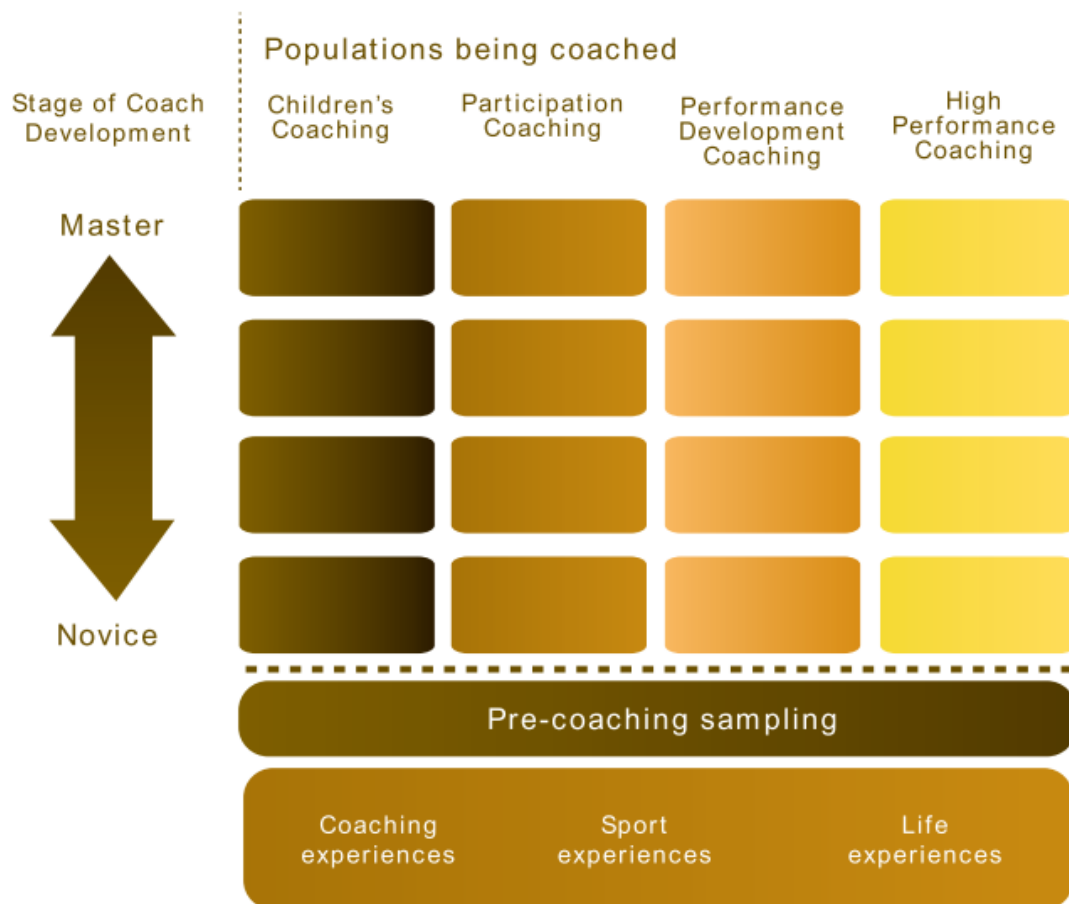


Figure 1: Coach Development Model

Source: NCF (2009: 8)

The CDM reinforces Cushion's (2007) assertion that seeking a common model for coaching practice is probably neither possible nor desirable. Coaching is a highly complex social practice and the industry should be ready to accept that each and every coaching context is different to every other (Jones, 2006). If we acknowledge that coaching is a highly contextualised process, then this necessitates an in-depth and critical consideration of how coaches guide participant development. While disagreeing with Cushion (2007) and Jones (2006), Lyle (2007) reinforces the contextual nature of the coaching process, arguing that non-linearity prevents practitioners from considering their work to be without planning or

reason. Acknowledging the complexity of human interaction, Lyle (2007) believes that coaches should focus attention on a critical examination of their practices, rather than the factors that affect their intentions. Irrespective, both schools of thought require a connoisseurial appreciation of the impact of contemporary learning theory on coaching pedagogy.

Professionalization represents one of the most fundamental concerns of contemporary coaching policy (DCMS, 2002; Taylor and Garratt 2008). Jones (2006) also asserts that coaching has been stifled by an over-reliance on bio-scientific underpinnings (*e.g.* physiology, psychology, biomechanics) and that through the deepening of understanding relating to pedagogy, coaching will, in time, emerge as a legitimate stand-alone profession. Cushion (2007) suggests that without an engagement with pedagogic theory and an appreciation that the process must equate to more than simply applying theories from other disciplines, coaching may never achieve broad acceptance as a profession. In turn, Taylor and Garratt (2008: 7) also highlight the importance of a creating a “distinct and specialised body of knowledge” as a basis for coaching practice. Jones (2006) believes that the re-conceptualising of sports coaching as a predominantly educational process lies at the heart of professionalization. If coaching is to embrace an educational perspective as part of its drive towards professionalization, then the implications for specialist children’s coaches are substantial. Kirk’s (2006) consideration of critical pedagogy suggests such an approach would necessitate embracing notions of empowerment and cultural critique. Empowerment is a crucial aspect of rebalancing the coach-athlete relationship which Jones (2006: 9) suggests has most frequently developed high degrees of participant dependency where performers are heavily reliant on the decision making of their coach and whose performances suffer through the inability to adapt to “dynamic live environment[s]”. Such discussion

highlights the need for all sports coaches (particularly specialist children's coaches who deal with performers at their most important formative stages), to engage with contemporary pedagogic theory.

Coaching young people from a holistic perspective: Coaching for cognitive and affective development in competitive environments

Numerous writers have noted that coaches may be ideally placed to engage with young people in a holistic developmental process due to favourable coach-to-athlete ratios and the extensive time that they spend together (see, for example, Bergmann Drewe, 1999; Jones, 2006). However, coaches are challenged in this respect due to the relationship between coaching and competition and the consequent preoccupation with physical skill development. The place of competition seems particularly explicit in the coaching environment and represents the predominant focus of the process, reinforcing the necessity to consider its nature and how this affects coaches' pedagogy. Furthermore, recent sports policy documentation from the Coalition government, *Creating a sporting habit for life – A new youth sport strategy* (DCMS, 2012) places competitive sporting environments at the heart of youth athlete development. DCMS (2012: 3) establishes a national competition structure to build a “lasting legacy of competitive sport in schools”. This structure is built around an ‘Olympics-style’ school games which enhances young peoples’ opportunities to participate in intra and inter-school competition. Of course, such ideas are founded upon the premise that competitive sporting environments provide an opportunity for self discovery, the experiencing of excellence and the building of social relationships (Torres and Hager, 2007). Viewed from an educational perspective, competitive sports are often championed in order to engage individuals in a process of emancipation (including inclusion and equality), empowerment and critique (Kirk, 2006). However, it is also acknowledged that competitive

sport has the power to develop a number of undesirable moral qualities (Bergmann Drewe, 1999).

For some, sporting competition represents the converse of morality, offering instead a training ground for a series of less desirable characteristics. As Spencer (2000: 143) notes:

There is growing belief that sport, rather than encouraging moral value and spiritual values, promotes just the antithesis: man's inevitable fall from grace through egotism, cynicism, nihilism, an obsessive focus on money, and win at all costs mentality that fosters disrespect for competitors and society.

With the increased focus upon competition as the vehicle for youth involvement in sport, and the recognition in research and policy of the need for a shift in the culture of coaching to a holistic, participant-centred process, one might expect the subsequent emergence of such matters in coach education. However, coaching practice is poorly informed by critical pedagogic scholarship (Jones, 2006). Taylor and Garratt (2010: 124) acknowledge that there are “concerns regarding the lack of standards for coaching and strategies for training and employment, including guidance on the moral and ethical responsibilities, which have tended to evolve informally in concert with the many diverse traditions of sports coaching”. Current coaching policy advocates that the coach should be responsible for inculcating moral character in respect of young athletes’ ability to demonstrate respect for social and cultural rules, possession of standards for correct behaviours, a sense of right and wrong, and integrity including showing respect for all (Bailey and Ross, 2009; NCF, 2009). In contradiction, Watson and White (2007) contend that the prevailing culture of coaching for competition is more akin to a warlike preparation where the opposition is recognised as the barrier to

success and, at worst, the enemy. In order to counter this prevailing culture there is a need to learn from physical education practice (Jones, 2006). To this end, we turn now to an examination of the educational discourse of competition and moral development in order to elicit a number of practice-based recommendations for coaching. For coaches, the question arises: how might we best understand the complex social process of coaching in order to ensure the positive holistic development of the young people in our care, despite the potential pollution of inappropriately framed competitive environments? The answer, we would argue, lies in an examination of contemporary, constructivist pedagogic theory. In the following section we attempt to contribute to bridging the void between coaching practice and pedagogic theory, by considering the potential of competitive sports experiences to provide opportunities for young people to experience moral development; a factor inherent in the ‘C’ of Character as presented by the UK Coaching Framework (NCF, 2008).

Sports coaching, young people and contemporary pedagogic theory

The majority of coaching practice in the UK remains dominated by direct pedagogies requiring the replication of movement such as skills and patterns of play, as directed by coaches (Jones, 2006). Cassidy et al. (2009) suggest that there are a number of concerns arising from such approaches: a lack of cognitive involvement, limited knowledge generation, participants devoid of active investment in the process, a dampening of creative problem solving ability, and inhibited social development. These issues are accentuated by an increasingly child-centred appreciation of pedagogy in schools leading to an adjustment of young people’s expectations of their involvement and investment in the learning process (Cassidy *et al.*, 2009). SCUUK’s Coaching Framework Consultation Report (Townend, 2009) reinforces this assertion by highlighting that when discussing weaknesses in coaching provision children are most likely to cite issues of ‘over-coaching’, i.e. sessions characterised

by rigidity, coach-dominance and lack of play or expression. Light and Dixon (2007: 159) suggest that such practice is out-dated:

Within the context of rapidly changing social conditions in developed societies, traditional approaches to teaching and learning that view learning as a simple process of internalising a fixed body of knowledge have become outdated and ineffective. The traditional emphasis on content, or what we feel our students should learn, has become less important than the need to help them learn how to learn and to think critically about both content and process.

Constructivist pedagogies challenge the most common models of practice featuring the coach as knowledge dispenser and power holder. Such pedagogies criticise linear coaching processes based upon replication and reproduction (Light and Dixon, 2007) and challenge deliverers to help young people to become innovative and critical thinkers. Across the UK coaching landscape, didactic delivery dominates, inhibiting coaches' abilities to develop intellectual competencies and a sense of critical thinking (Cushion et al., 2003). In seeking a participant needs-led approach, coaches (of young people at least) need to adopt more athlete-centred pedagogic practices. Such models share a number of common features. Athletes become increasingly dependent on one another whilst undergoing cognitive as well as physiological challenges. Coaches seek to create environments that facilitate the holistic development of the athletes. Situations are constructed in ways that provide authentic sporting experiences for athletes and allow coaches to place the educative burden on the activity and the environment (Gréhaigne et al. 2003). Within athlete-centred models, the importance of procedural knowledge is irrefutably upheld; however, technique should be introduced at developmentally appropriate stages; often after the athletes have come to

understand ‘why’ the technique is important. Technique delivered prior to understanding leads to inhibited transfer between practice and performance (Butler and McCahan, 2005). Coaches must also appreciate that athletes do not begin with the same knowledge-base, learn at the same rate, or acquire skills in the same way (Butler and McCahan, 2005). It should also be noted that enhancing declarative knowledge can precede and aid the development of the procedural (doing) (Barnum, 2008).

Contemporary sports pedagogy suggests that skilled performance is the result of a construction of the learner’s life experiences (Light and Dixon, 2007). This perspective casts doubt upon the value of technique-led approaches to coaching, but also of guided-discovery pedagogies which lead athletes to a pre-determined endpoint. Athletes should be considered as ‘legitimate peripheral participants’ i.e. they should be encouraged to develop a deeper, more mature and fuller sense of participation within their sporting community over time. Coaches should consider the social contexts and prior experiences of participants in order to develop a greater sense of how their athletes’ understanding is constructed.

Constructivist pedagogic principles may sound idealistic; perhaps even unrealistic, given the present nature of coaching in the UK. However, evidence of such approaches infiltrating the coaching system through formal education courses (e.g. Roberts, 2010) suggests a step in the right direction. Whilst a comprehensive guide to the application of these principles is beyond the scope of this chapter, we have chosen an example of an athlete-centred coaching process which we believe represents an actionable component for coaches who are keen to explore the kind of principles that we have discussed. To this end, we present the following scenario

as an example of how such a model might be implemented by a coach wishing to facilitate learning through educationally meaningful small-sided modified games.²

Participant needs-led coaching through situated learning

Within the context of sports coaching ‘situated learning’ requires coaches to place participants alongside opponents in ‘live’ situations rather than in deliberate practice-style activities. Richard and Wallian (2005) suggest that there are two essential components to situated learning within sports coaching: (i) the observation of game play behaviours, and (ii) critical thinking through the debate of ideas and negotiated meaning. Athletes should be placed as active participants in the ‘real’ environments, given the opportunity to observe what goes on, and explore their own role through involvement and experimentation. Mistakes yield excellent opportunities for the coach to aid development and should not merely be viewed as a consequence of incorrectly acquired technique. It is the role of the coach to prompt a deeper consideration by the participants of the environment through open-ended questioning (e.g. ‘why were group A more successful than group B?’). Learners are encouraged to answer such questions through a meaningful discussion of ideas and enabled to enact their own solutions to the problems in play by applying their thoughts to the ‘real’ live environment (Richard and Wallian, 2005). Within such situations it is hoped that athletes will be able to construct their own understanding of effective performance – an illustration of a participant needs-led approach to coaching, rather than a content-based, coach-centred model (Gréhaigne et al., 2003). Mallett et al. (2009) suggest that through such an approach, the likelihood of a positive learning experience is greatly increased due to the emphasis on

² See, for example, Slade (2010).

participant ownership of process, engagement (learning by doing), and the opportunity to apply solutions to emerging problems back in the real environment.

Debating ideas is an important pedagogical tool. Indeed, many studies have shown that the verbalization of such thinking can enhance learning (Richard and Wallian, 2005). Whilst this may present difficulties for students who do not use language well, it is an important part of the development of critical thinking. Richard and Wallian (2005) describe three steps to the debating of ideas following the involvement and observation stages:

1. Invite description of the events;
2. Participants to give their interpretations and explanations;
3. Extrapolate efficient strategies.

Such a model of learning may comprise a radical shift for the majority of coaches. Pearson and Webb (2008) suggest that questioning is one of the most difficult elements of the coaching process to master and undoubtedly facilitation of the debate of ideas will, for some, be similarly challenging. However, if sports coaches aspire to modify their everyday practices then they must be willing to constantly review their practice in light of changing social constructs and contemporary theory. The implications of this constant process of review are both challenging and far reaching, but then that this is nature of professional practice. The final challenge for us here is to articulate how this appreciation of contemporary pedagogic theory compliments the philosophical critique of the nature of the competitive environment as outlined above. Thus, in the final section of the chapter, we suggest how coaches might focus on ‘real’ environments, whilst embracing the notion of the opponent as one to strive *with* and not *against*.

Participant needs-led coaching through a re-evaluation of the nature of competition

Bergmann Drewe (1999: 14) stipulates that: “although physical educators may not be able to change societal values regarding winning and losing, they can make progress in striving to diffuse the win at all costs mentality by stressing the striving together in the pursuit of excellence”. The key to such a shift lies in the original essence of the root words for competition - com-petitio (striving together) (Bergmann Drewe, 1999). The sense here is that competition cannot (and does not) exist without an opponent. To this end, the starting point for our morality in competitive sporting encounters must be the recognition of the inherent reliance upon the opponent for the experience to exist. This elevates the opponent above and beyond that of ‘enemy’ to a pre-requisite asset in the pursuit of our best. As Morgan (2003: 187) states:

The principle value of athletic competition is not in the winning but in the process of overcoming the challenge presented by a worthy opponent. What makes competition in sports morally defensible is seeing it as a mutual quest for excellence ... athletes ought to win (or lose) gracefully, treat their opponents with respect, have respect for the rules of the game, and challenge their opponents.

Bergmann Drew (1999) argues that athletes will encounter moments during competition when decisions have to be made to discern whether or not certain behaviours would be morally defensible. For athletes to make such decisions they must have some underlying moral theory or framework to guide them; the coach has a responsibility to develop such frameworks. As outlined above the use of game-based ‘live’ environments within training

allows athletes to experience moments of moral conflict. Hsu (2004) suggests that, when faced with problems of moral conflict within competitive situations, it is impossible for athletes to resolve these situations without critical thinking skills. Hsu (2004: 149) continues:

Not all sports participants or relevant agents are wise enough or capable enough to think critically ... thus moral education regarding how to develop participants' critical thinking in sport plays a very important role. One important means by which a coach or a teacher can facilitate moral development is through example.

The role of the coach in modelling moral behaviour is important. However, this is not enough to ensure character development. Hsu (2004) recognises that a morally educated sports person will demonstrate behaviours not only in accordance with a specific principle (e.g. fair play) but also an appropriate disposition (e.g. respect for others and empathy) instigated by their critical thinking skills. As coaches then, we must first recognise the need to instil in our athletes the value of not breaking rules but, in addition, we must also instil a sense of right and wrong based on a demonstrable set of underpinning values. Coaches must recognise the respect due to opponents, to the game itself and to fellow athletes who make our striving for excellence possible and help the young people in their care to develop such an understanding for themselves. Coaches must therefore consider how they can develop realistic environments within coaching sessions whereby morality can be modelled, negotiated and developed within the athletic community.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have sought to argue that by embracing contemporary pedagogic theory, coaches can balance the demands of competitively-based UK sport policy with the more holistically-focussed coaching strategies. We contend that embracing this kind of holistic approach will facilitate increased participation, reduce drop-out, and enhance the enjoyment of young people in sporting environments (Cassidy *et al.* 2009). UK sports policy appears wedded to the value of competition; however, we have argued that this presents coaches with a number of problems. Coaches must seek to counter the notion that early specialization is a pre-requisite for reaching elite performance and to encourage a broad sampling of sports experiences. The coaching community also need to continue to invest in the notion of ‘master’ children’s coaches and challenge the conception of the most competent coaches always being aligned with expert, adult, performance. Furthermore, coaches need to recognise that competition is often framed in a combative manner and that this can be detrimental to the ethical and moral development of young people. A truly ethical coaching framework must consider participants’ pathways in terms of their holistic development. Such consideration demands an examination of the environments in which young people devote much time and energy, often pursuing a system which so keenly reinforces a win-at-all-costs mentality. A literate sportsperson understands not only how to play, but also how to play within the rules, both written and unwritten. Likewise, it has been argued that a holistically minded coach will seek to ensure that participants understand that sport is more than a tool for personal glory and reward.

In order to develop the necessary skills to aid young peoples’ holistic development, coaches need to embrace contemporary pedagogic models; a principle which is commensurate with current coaching policy and the professionalization agenda. For the majority of coaches in the UK, this represents a considerable shift both in practice and mindset. Nevertheless, by

learning how to frame competitive situations authentically and appropriately through embracing pedagogic models such as situated learning, coaches will be more likely to produce athletes capable of making difficult decisions in these environments. The competitive environments dictated by contemporary sports policy present a considerable challenge for youth sports coaches and, in this sense, our aim has been to present a compelling case for embracing contemporary pedagogic principles in order to aid the holistic development of the young people in our care.

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