

Original Article

Athlete-Centred coaching using the Sport Education model in youth soccer

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Abstract:

While Sport Education has shown to be effective in promoting students' participation in the student-centred learning tasks in teaching physical education, there have been no studies reporting the use of this pedagogical model in youth sport settings. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to describe and understand players', coaches' and parents' perceptions and experiences of a soccer season when using the model in a Finnish junior sport club. Twenty-three players, their three coaches and four parents from one junior sport club participated in the study. The Sport Education season consisted of 11 practice sessions over eight weeks. Within that season, the players had additional roles as fitness trainers, skill coaches, captains and referees. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Results suggested that players were successfully affiliated within their small teams and that they enjoyed having the autonomy and responsibility. Most of the players took their roles seriously and were prepared to instruct their peers. Based on our results, we conclude that this first attempt to implement Sport Education in sport clubs showed promising results in making the environment more player friendly.

Key Words: - Model based instruction, Sport Education, athlete-centred, youth sport

Introduction

The traditional role of the sports coach has been to enhance athletes' physical, technical and strategic skills in order that they can succeed in competitive situations. By consequence, the leadership style of coaches has been stereotyped as telling athletes what to do, and the role of the athlete is to listen, absorb, and comply. Martens (2004) has described the coaching scenario where all decisions are made by the coach as "coach-centred", and according to Kidman (2005), is a disempowering form of leadership which takes ownership and responsibility of sporting experiences away from the athletes. In a more athlete-centred approach, coaches encourage and empower their athletes to gain and take ownership of the coaching processes (De Souza & Oslin, 2008). There is an increasing call for allowing athletes to take responsibility for their own learning and performance (Jones Armour, & Potrac, 2002). Athlete ownership accentuates giving athletes autonomy for decision making with the clear purpose of offering them opportunities to make choices, develop higher levels of motivation, and learn how to develop solutions (Kidman, 2005). Cassidy, Jones, and Potrac (2009) outline how the empowered athlete is actively stimulated to participate in directing and shaping their athletic life, including tactical strategizing and the content and delivery of training sessions.

Kidman and Lombardo (2010) have identified three major components of an athlete-centred approach. These include using the Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU; Bunker and Thorpe, 1982) approach to content development, questioning (see Light Harvey, & Mouchet, 2014), and establishing a team culture. In addition, Kidman and Lombardo highlight athlete ownership and responsibility, and point to strategies for developing a team full of leaders and rotating athlete roles. Similarly, De Souza and Oslin (2008) proposed three guidelines for implementing an athlete-centred approach to coaching. In this case, the goal is to provide a positive and safe environment, encourage player input, and make time for it to happen. While general statements about the benefits of an athlete-centred approach in sports coaching have been made, a number of researchers have recommended a more in-depth examination of existing practices, dominant discourses, philosophies and ideologies regarding implementation (Jones, 2007; Jones et al., 2002; Nelson, Cushion, Potrac, & Groom, 2014). For athlete-centred principles and frameworks to also be effectively incorporated into coaching strategies, examples of good practice are needed. Although evidence exists that highly successful elite sport coaches can enact an athlete-centred approach to coaching (see Hodge, Henry, & Smith, 2014), the implementation of this approach is said to be neither straightforward nor unproblematic (Cushion, 2013). Nelson et al., (2014) support this notion when they suggest that coaches and coach educators choosing an empowerment approach are "choosing to fight against the existing dominant discourse and its associated practices and expectations" (p. 526). Even though there is a current international trend (Canada, Finland, New Zealand) to use the term "athlete-centred" to describe both an approach to sport, as well as a philosophy of coaching, there is still

a lack of empirical research on athlete-centred coaching. However, research on athlete autonomy can provide support for the ideas about shared leadership and athlete ownership (Jones & Standage, 2006). In an intervention with elite hockey players, Richards, Mascarenhas, and Collins (2009) emphasized engagement and empowerment into coaching strategies through reflective practice principles and found that team identity was strengthened and players were able to respond quickly to the high-pressure within international plays. Moreover, studies have revealed that perceived autonomy support from teachers or coaches in a physical education or youth sport context was positively related to daily, leisure time and physical activity and class physical activity engagement (Fenton, Duda, Quested, & Barrett, 2014; Standage, Gillison, Ntoumanis, & Treasure, 2012). The importance of these components is also demonstrated in teaching physical education while research with using games centred approaches have shown increase in intrinsic motivation (Harvey & Jarrett, 2014; Jones, Marshall, & Peters, 2010). There is an evolving acknowledgement and acceptance of coaching as being educational or pedagogical, which assumes that coaching has more to do with teaching and learning than anything else (Cassidy et al., 2009; Jones, 2007). Within research on physical education, the use of pedagogical models has received increased support (Kirk, 2013; O'Sullivan, 2013). Within the various models that have been developed, the common connection could be located in Lave and Wenger's (1991) idea of situated learning. Barker, Quennerstedt, and Annerstedt (2015) describe pedagogical models as following constructivist-inspired approaches, in which students can interact with one another to construct content knowledge and improve their interpersonal skills. Of all various pedagogical models that have appeared within sport pedagogy, Kirk (2013) has noted that Sport Education is the most researched, and is the most soundly justified philosophically. Within Sport Education, the development of a competent, literate, and enthusiastic sports person are the key learning outcomes (Siedentop, 1994). A competent sportsperson has developed the skills and strategies to the extent that he or she can successfully participate in a game. A literate sportsperson is one who understands and is knowledgeable about the rules, traditions, and values associated with specific sports. An enthusiastic sportsperson plays and behaves in ways that enhance, preserve and protect the sport culture. In order to achieve these learning outcomes, Sport Education has several key features (Siedentop, Hastie, & van der Mars, 2011) that distinguish it from traditional physical education but that are easily implemented in a youth sport context.

Most outstandingly, units are organized as sports seasons that continue for an extended period of time, and students are assigned to teams that remain together for the entire season. These teams are the cornerstone for the development of a sense of identification and affiliation among students. Students receive increased responsibility and take on roles additional to player, such as coach, referee, manager, trainer, statistician, to name a few. The season within Sport Education mirrors that of a traditional sport setting, where skills practice and nonconsequented mini games take place before a more formal competition phase and the festive final event. It should be noted however, Sport Education has three significant differences from sport as it takes place within the community setting. These include (i) the requirement that everyone plays all the time, (ii) game are modified to promote developmentally appropriate competition, and (iii) players are responsible for roles other than that of player. Sport Education has received substantial attention within the sport pedagogy literature over the past two decades. Comprehensive reviews (Araújo, Mesquita, & Hastie, 2014; Hastie, 2012; Hastie, Martínez & Calderón, 2011; Kinchin, 2006; Wallhead & O'Sullivan, 2005) have presented empirical evidence that Sport Education is a positive experience for students and teachers in a variety of settings in physical education. Nevertheless, these reviews did not identify a single study where Sport Education was implemented in a community sports setting. From a youth sport perspective, however, the lessons from research on Sport Education are notable. First, Sport Education has been shown to promote participation in the student-centred learning tasks and being members of persisting teams stimulates students' personal and social development in form of increased accountability, cooperation and trust. Moreover, the perception of an ownership of the curriculum was important for the significant student enthusiasm. Interestingly, Sport Education has showed to be an attractive approach for students who are low on motivation (Menickelli & Hastie, 2014; Perlman, 2012). While it could be expected that most children participate in youth sports of their own volition, there will still be a large variation in their motivation and effort levels. As noted earlier, despite its reported empirical and practical benefits, the Sport Education model has yet to be validated within a youth sport context (see Harvey, Kirk, & O'Donovan, 2014; Penney, Clarke, & Kinchin, 2002). The purpose of this study then, was to provide a descriptive account of a cohort of players', coaches', and parents' perceptions and experiences of a soccer season when using the Sport Education model.

Methods

Participants and Setting

Participants in this study were 23 players (10–11 years of age) born during the same year and members of an age group soccer team in mid-Finland. Most of the players had been with this team for five years with the same coaches. The team was representative of the local community and consisted mainly of middle-income households. Although it was designated as a boys team, there were also two girl members who were average to high skilled players. None of the players had experience with a Sport Education approach. Signed informed consent for the study was obtained from the coaches and the players' parents prior to data collection. In order to insure the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were used in reporting the findings.

The coaches of this team were three men with a background as soccer players, although not at the elite level. All three were coaches because their child played on the team and they had from five to eleven years of coaching experience. Each had taken part in a basic soccer coach education course, but none of them was familiar with the Sport Education model.

Design and Procedure

The three coaches were initially invited to a meeting where the structure of Sport Education model was presented in addition to research findings and theoretical underpinnings. At the same meeting, the coaches and the researchers mutually planned the structure for the Sport Education season and agreed that it would be implemented over an 8-week period. During this time of the year, the team practiced three or four times weekly, depending on the availability of training facilities and matches. In order to achieve the goals of contextualization and realism, players participated in an 11-session Sport Education season while at the same time they also had regular coach led practice sessions and practice matches and tournaments. We wanted to have an ecologically valid (Davids, 1988) approach that clubs would be likely to replicate in the future. The structure was different from implementing the Sport Education model in school settings. However, adaptations are in line with what the creator of Sport Education, Siedentop (2002) intended and that there is no one best and exact way enacting a Sport Education season. While coaches were not at this moment interested in learning the model, the first and the second authors were responsible for the organization of the Sport Education practice sessions and in which the regular coaches acted as helpers and provided players with feedback. The coaches decided to form the teams based on the players' previous attendance in practice and on their skill level, and the roles of captain, fitness and skill coaches, and referees were developed. It was also decided that these roles would rotate from session to session. Table 1 provides an outline of the progression of the season, which followed the traditional three phase format (i.e. introduction and skill/role development, pre-season scrimmage phase, and formal competition).

Table 1. Location¹, length of practice, attendance and player roles² in practice sessions

Session	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Location	Un	Gy	Ba	Gy	Mi	Ba	Mi	Mi	Ba	Gy	Ba	
Length (min)	90	90	45	90	60	45	60	60	45	90	45	
Attendance	16	16	16	18	18	20	11	17	16	16	19	
Team 1												Sum
Adrian	x	S	R	F	-	C	-	S	-	F	S	8
Charlie	x	R	S	R	F	R	C	R	S	C	F	11
Liam	-	C	R	S	R	F	-	C	-	-	x	7
Alex	x	F	C	R	-	R	F	R	-	S	-	8
Elias	x	-	-	C	S	S	R	F	R	-	C	8
Leo	-	-	F	-	C	R	S	-	F	-	x	6
Team 2												
Anton	x	S	-	-	R	-	-	S	-	C	-	5
Melvin	x	R	S	R	F	R	C	R	S	R	x	11
Emma	-	-	R	-	-	R	-	-	C	-	F	4
Gustav	-	-	C	C	S	-	R	F	R	F	S	8
Theo	x	R	F	F	C	S	S	R	F	S	C	11
Team 3												
Adam	x	S	-	F	S	C	F	S	R	S	x	10
Albin	x	R	S	R	F	R	-	R	S	C	F	10
Leon	x	C	-	S	R	-	-	C	-	R	-	6
Benjamin	-	-	-	-	-	F	-	-	C	-	C	3
Max	x	F	-	C	R	S	-	F	R	R	x	9
Gabriel	x	-	-	R	C	R	S	R	F	F	S	9
Team 4												
Simon	x	S	R	F	R	C	S	S	-	C	S	10
Felix	x	R	S	R	F	R	-	R	S	R	F	10
Sara	x	C	R	S	R	F	-	-	F	F/S	C	9
Harry	-	R	C	R	S	R	F	R	C	R	x	10
Rasmus	-	-	R	-	-	S	-	-	R	-	x	4
Linus	x	F	F	C	C	R	-	-	-	-	-	6



¹ Location and size: Un = 10m x 20m; Gy = 15m x 25m; Ba = 40m x 60m; Mi = 9m x 18m

² Roles: C = Captain; S = Skill coach; F = Fitness coach; R = Referee; x = No roles; - = Absent

During the first phase, the researcher led the introduction session by providing the players with information about the idea of Sport Education and explaining the specific responsibilities associated with

different roles. Skill coaches were responsible for designing and implementing skill practice, fitness coaches were responsible for warm-ups and the captain for the team conduct and the diplomas. Following this, the teams were given time to decide upon a name. The researcher also provided instructions about generic warm up activities and the session ended with a short basketball game in the assigned teams due to limited gym space. All parents were invited to attend this session and were informed that we would randomly interview them about their perceptions and experiences of their child's participation in a Sport Education season. Role descriptions, team members, and a role rotation schedule were posted on the teams' private internet site.

The preseason phase was designed for students to work in their teams with practices led by the players while the researcher managed the different practice parts and the regular coaches supervised and encouraged players in different teams. During this phase no formal records were kept of game results. The season ended with a culminating tournament during the last session where all teams played against each other and finally an awards ceremony where all players received recognition in form of diplomas.

Each practice session was scheduled for 45 to 90 minutes and began with team practice time (see Table 2). Sessions during the pre-season phase involved initial warm-up fitness routines led by the fitness coach, followed by a skill practice phase led by the skill coach. The regular coaches provided the focus for skill practice (passing, ball control, heading, to turn, dribbling, to fake), which was different for each session. At the end of the practice session, the four teams competed in unofficial matches with referees from other teams officiating in a rotating schedule. In the smallest practice hall, only two teams played unofficial matches with one team acting as referees and the fourth team conducting fitness practice in a small fitness room.

Model Fidelity

A Sport Education benchmark instrument based on that of Sinelnikov (2009) was used to validate the model implemented. Benchmarks included in this study were; season, team affiliation, student roles and responsibility, game play, formal competition, culminating event, and festivity. Two researchers planned and implemented the season and each practice session which served to confirm the existence of Sport Education benchmarks in the study. The first author was a faculty member at the university and has several years of experience of teaching Sport Education to pre-service and in-service teachers. He has also taught Sport Education in a local high-school as well as he has conducted studies with Sport Education. The second author was a graduate student and had experience of Sport Education from university courses and student teaching. The researchers met weekly with the intention to deal with any queries and to discuss solution to various problems.

Data Collection

A qualitative approach was adopted for this study. Data were collected through participatory and non-participatory observations, and informal and structured interviews throughout the Sport Education season. The use of multiple data collection techniques during the whole season would help us to become more confident in understanding Sport Education in a junior soccer club. Player, coach, and parent interviews provided an inside view while researcher observation through field notes offered an observer and outside perspective. The observation of practice sessions served as a starting point for interviews with players, coaches and parents. A total of 28 formal and informal interviews were conducted, of which 23 were individual and five group interviews. Twenty interviews were conducted with players, while four were with the regular coaches and a further four with parents.

The purpose of these interviews was to capture players' and coaches' experiences, engagement, and perceptions of their work with Sport Education prior, during, and after the season. Because parents were observing practices and their voices have not before been reported in Sport Education research, we decided to include them as one data source. Four parents were randomly selected among those who observed practice sessions. We were interested in how they perceived Sport Education during the practices and particularly what they heard from their children at home.

All interviews were recorded and later transcribed, and each practice session was videotaped. The second author acted as the primary interviewer and observer and similarly wrote and kept all observation field notes. Field notes were taken during and after each practice session and completed after viewing the videotaped session each week with a focus on both the players' and coaches' actions and comments. The first and second authors met weekly to look at the data and discussed the interview procedures and questions.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

To achieve familiarization with the data, the first and second authors repeatedly read field notes and interview transcripts. Data were analyzed using an inductive constant comparative approach. The analysis was data-driven and the themes were distilled from the data base in describing the Sport Education season experiences. During a two-step process, (1) data was reduced down into meaningful units and (2) units with similar properties were collated to form broader themes. Evidence supporting the respective themes was compiled on one document. The first two authors met and discussed themes they had developed and shared supporting data. The noted themes were then collapsed to facilitate presentation of the findings.

Table 2. Skill focus, structure and content, and data collection during the Sport Education season.

<i>Practice session</i>	<i>Skill focus</i>	<i>Structure and content</i>	<i>Data collection</i>
-		Meeting with coaches	Field notes
1		Introduction to players, coaches and parents. Players come up with names for their team. Examples of fitness activities and basketball in four small teams (45 min.).	Interview, video recording, field notes
2	Passing	Warm up (20 min.), skill practice (30 min.), and game play (35 min.). Discussion about this session and roles and skill theme for next session.	Interview, video recording, field notes
3	Width and depth in the game	Warm up (10 min.), skill practice (15 min.), and game play (20 min.). Discussion about this session and roles and skill theme for next session.	Interview, video recording, field notes
4	Faking and heading	Warm up (20 min.), skill practice (30 min.), and game play (35 min.). Discussion about this session and roles and skill theme for next session.	Video recording, field notes
-		Observation during a tournament.	Field notes
5	Passing game	Warm up (10 min.), skill practice (20 min.), and game play and fitness task sheet (30 min.). Discussion about this session and roles and skill theme for next session.	Interview, video recording, field notes
6	Ball control and dribbling	Warm up (10 min.), skill practice (15 min.), and game play (20 min.). Discussion about this session and roles and skill theme for next session.	Interview, video recording, field notes
7	Passing and heading	Warm up (10 min.), skill practice (20 min.), and game play and fitness task sheet (30 min.). Discussion about this session and roles and skill theme for next session.	Interview, video recording, field notes
8	Passing and heading	Warm up (10 min.), skill practice (20 min.), and game play and fitness task sheet (30 min.). Discussion about this session and roles and skill theme for next session.	Video recording, field notes
9	Turning and dribbling	Warm up (10 min.), skill practice (15 min.), and game play (20 min.). Discussion about this session and skill theme for next session. The team decides the roles for next session. Examples of and instructions for making diplomas.	Video recording, field notes
10	Passing	Warm up (20 min.), skill practice (30 min.), and game play (35 min.). Discussion about this session. The team decides the roles for next session, no referees. Diploma reminder.	Video recording, field notes
11	Final tournament and diplomas	No warm up or skill practice. Just matches with regular coaches as referees. Matches 3 x 10 minutes. A celebration of Sport Education season winning team. Diplomas to all players and a discussion about the season.	Interview, video recording, field notes
-		Interviews with players and coaches.	Interview

Several steps were taken during analysis to facilitate trustworthiness and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A researcher journal was used to keep track of the data analysis which increased the confirmability of the study. Verbatim quotes from field notes, players, coaches and parents were retained in order to stay close to the data and for the result text, we chose the best of the selected quotes which are identified by coach number or player pseudo name. The strategy of triangulation was on two levels employed to assure credibility and confirmability (Patton, 2002). First, peer debriefing sessions between the first and second author involved the researchers challenging each other's interpretation of the evidence. Secondly, findings were confirmed through data triangulation by comparing field notes and interview data from different groups.

Results

Four themes were generated from the analysis of observation and player, coach and parent interview data. These were given the titles of, "autonomy and responsibility", "team affiliation", "competition", and "player's roles".

Autonomy and responsibility

One main feature of Sport Education is to give all students the possibility of being in the centre of all actions. There was certainly evidence that in this setting, that goal was achieved. Observations showed that the players were serious about having a particular role and were responsible in carefully preparing and planning their own part of the practice sessions. Prior to the season, both parents and coaches suggested that they would expect the players would mature over the eight weeks. As Coach Two commented “I think giving children responsibility is very important and they will like, grow. Their engagement will be different”. However, there was evidence that they were positively surprised as to how well players succeeded in being responsible for the practices. One parent in particular noted that players liked Sport Education because they received more responsibility in the soccer practices. In addition to having responsibility for practice activities, players also reacted to team strategy for improving the game, which is evident in the following excerpt from field notes:

Simon (coach): Time out! Or Sara you are the captain, ask for time out!

Simon: Ok, come here and sit down!

Simon: We are losing; we have to get more goals. We have to change to two defenders and then one offensive player. But then we need to both attack and defend with the same intensity and then we need to pass the ball more.

Simon: Does anyone have something you want to point out?

All: laughing

Linus: Score goals

Sara: Move without the ball

Simon: That was good.

Harry: Look for empty space

Simon: That was also good. Let's go in now.

The coaches were so impressed with what they saw during this season that they decided to implement player led warm-ups as normal praxis in their future practice sessions. Some players also noted that they had improved in taking responsibility during this season. Adrian said “I think I have become better at taking responsibility”. Being responsible also meant for the players that they could decide and choose among themselves what to do within certain boundaries. Alexander noted that Sport Education “is fun and that we can select what we shall do and like that. And then we are in different groups and we can come up with a name for the team”. The players had initially a positive attitude to having a responsibility role after the model was presented, although Linus said “Yes fun, but then it can perhaps be somewhat demanding”. Coach Two and one parent noted that players learned that soccer practice is not just about having fun, but they have learned to also focus on what they are doing. The parent said: “players realize that soccer not just a playing around and that they need to be serious in practice”. The players were prepared and had planned their practice sessions. The coaches selected high skilled players as fitness and skill coaches for the first practice session in order to set the standard for player led practice. Field notes from the first practice session revealed that “everyone had tasks planned in advance. Three skill coaches had written plans while one had thought about it”. This engagement continued through the season and as one skill coach even brought his own radar device to motivate and measure ball speed for the players in his team.

The players used different sources in planning. For example, Adam said that he “went a little through if passing was the theme, so I thought what kind of tasks could we have and then I looked a little from the computer” while one parent noted that “Albin discusses with other players, friends and persons with coach experience, then he also writes down practice tasks”. Many players came up with individual and new tasks that the coaches had not used in the team practice.

Team affiliation

The coaches explained that the team spirit was good and that there were seldom problems between the players, although the players did have high expectations of each other. During the Sport Education season there was a positive atmosphere in practice and players helped and respected each other. Particularly high skilled players helped lower skilled players by providing them feedback and suggestions for practice tasks. Two teams came up with their own “team song” that they used before the matches and during time-outs. Although the team spirit was initially positive, Coach Two said that “the team cohesion has improved. It is not so much that they complain about other as it was before, that they have come together as a team, I think”.

With the goal of creating an even competition, the coaches selected four teams based on the players' previous participation in practice and their performance level. The final tournament showed that the teams were indeed even, with only one match having a goal difference of more than one. The players enjoyed their teams and that they belonged to the same team for the whole season. Theo said that “you become acquainted with them” and Sara noted that “it was fun, because you notice that team cooperation improved all the time”. In addition, team strategy and match play improved, with Gabriel noting that “it felt good to be together with them and you knew how they run”.

Competition

Fair competition is one feature of Sport Education and competition is a central aspect of youth sport. The warm up tasks were often about winning or to be the fastest. This fact was also evident to one parent who

stated “they compete more than they do in real competitions. It would be good to take that away. That they would realize that we do not compete against each other rather we do this as well as possible”. However, to be successful in matches was always important to the players, as Adrian noted “that we won the tournament”. Other players also pointed out that they wanted to compete and win, although Sara said: “it is also good to lose sometimes, but it is boring”. The fitness and skill coaches frequently used physical punishments such as push-ups and sit-ups when team members did not show effort, cheated or were the slowest one in a fitness task. Sara said that “then you learn and you don’t do it any more”. In interviews with the coaches, Coach Three said “meanwhile we also use something like that, so when it does not work you have to do a little bit extra” and Coach Two stated that “they are more eager to use it than we, so obviously they like it”.

Player roles

The Sport Education roles included in this study were fitness and skills coaches, captains and referees. Every player had a specific role during each practice session in a rotating format, which meant that all players had a chance to try all different roles during the season. The players had initially a positive attitude towards having different roles, although Linus said that the captain role seemed to be more demanding while they had to prepare diplomas and Theo felt that to be a referee was challenging because it could be difficult to make the right calls. However, they were serious about their roles and asked if the referee could use red and yellow cards.

The players enjoyed having roles, though the lack of authority was for some players a challenge. Elias stated that “sometimes it was so and so because they don’t have the same respect as you have for a regular coach”. However, the coaches pointed out the impact of having a role for the more discreet and reluctant players. Field notes showed that “Liam is a very good referee! The coaches were impressed and surprised how good he was. He was new to the team and shy, but in his referee role he was very confident and everyone respected his decisions”. Also the less motivated players showed higher effort in practice as Coach Two said “especially when they have had their own task and were coaches, so their motivation and commitment were much higher than it is in normal practice sessions”.

Most players liked to be the skill coach and they did not feel the task difficult nor problematic. Adam said “you could do pretty much there and you have learned quite a lot in practice so it was fun to choose which one to use”. Several coaches showed similar behavior as Simon (field notes):

A good coach, leader, and confident. Gave clear instructions, motivated, participated himself in practice, showed examples and provided feedback and hints. He encouraged the weaker players and took time out during the game to reflect on how the team played. His comments: “listen here”, “keep the pace up”, “you received with the wrong foot, look”, “good, many good passes now”, and “now try hard (he gave a bad pass himself), I too”.

Nonetheless, all player coaches did not show similar behaviors. Although Albin took his role seriously and used his written plan, he failed to conduct an effective skill practice. The fact that he seemed unsure meant that he had difficulty getting his voices heard. The instructions were also slightly unclear, and it was difficult for other players to understand what to do. The coaches felt it was important that all players should be referees and thereby learn to respect the referee and get an understanding that it is not so easy to be a referee. While one parent was dubious whether all players would buy in to having roles and responsibility, the players were enthusiastic about taking this role. In the beginning of the season they were unsecure in their role as a referee. They could not make a call and had problems to stay with the decision. However later in the season, they were more consistent with their calls and were able to defend their positions. They reported they enjoyed being a referee particularly as it allowed them to get an additional view of the game. One player (Adam) even stated that “when I get older I will probably take a referee course. It’s fun to be a referee”. Whereas several players had other hobbies and because it is voluntary to participate in youth sports, player nonattendance was a factor affecting the roles in this study. This was seen as a main difference when compared with compulsory school physical education with respect to implementing a Sport Education season. At the most, 20 players participated in one practice session. At the first information meeting with players, coaches and parents, we agreed that the players themselves should take care of changing roles within the team if they are unavailable to participate. This, however, did not work out in practice. Only a few times had some players agreed to switch roles. On the other hand, there were always other players that voluntarily took the role of the missing player. The coaches also identified player nonattendances as a weakness in implementing Sport Education in youth sport contexts.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to describe and understand players’, coaches’, and parents’ perceptions and experiences of a soccer season when using the Sport Education model in a youth sport club in Finland. Findings provide initial evidence that the Sport Education model can be an effective methodology for improving athletes’ ownership and responsibility for their own learning and performances. Although this study was implemented in one sport and one team, it adds to the existing literature supporting the use of Sport Education as a practical example of athletes-centred coaching (Jones et al., 2002; Kidman & Lombardo, 2010).

Autonomy is one of the most important attributes of motivation toward physical education and physical activity and the Sport Education model effectively showed that players were engaged and successful in responsibility tasks despite their young age. They spoke passionately about their experiences in the Sport

Education season because they could make decisions and be responsible for their own actions. These positive autonomy and motivational indices are consistent with findings (Browne, Carlson, & Hastie, 2004; Perlman & Goc Karp, 2010; Wallhead & Ntoumanis, 2004) reporting increases in enthusiasm and enjoyment among students in Sport Education classes in physical education. The findings also lend support to previous motivational research on the positive effect of perceived autonomy support from teachers or coaches in a physical education or youth sport context (Fenton et al., 2014; Standage et al., 2012).

By allowing players to set up and run their own practices and in game play to choose the roles they wished to have within their teams, they are given voice and everyone was made to feel important. These players took their responsibilities seriously and prepared by planning exercises and writing them down on paper. In addition to being responsible for their own role, they even took responsibility for improving the team performance in match play. This finding supports those in the study of MacPhail, Gorely, Kirk, and Kinchin (2008) in which physical education students discussed and reflected how to improve game efforts. While the role of the players became more active in making choices and learning how to develop solutions and the regular coach became more a facilitator, the players felt important and were actively engaged in the tasks, and gained a deeper understanding. One of the main claims made for Sport Education is that it creates greater student awareness, engagement and motivation during physical education classes (Araújo et al., 2014; Hastie, 2012; Hastie et al., 2011; Kinchin, 2006; Wallhead and O'Sullivan, 2005). In general, the players in this study expressed that they had 'fun' and enjoyed the practice sessions. A novel feature of this study was the inclusion of parents' views of their children's participation in Sport Education. Both the parents and coaches thought it was favourable to give more responsibility to the players. While they expected that players should be empowered through having more responsibility, they were surprised how well the players succeeded and how they enjoyed acting as leaders. An additional positive situation occurred when coaches were so impressed by the model and players being responsible that they wanted to introduce player led warm-ups as standard procedure during practice sessions and matches. Team cohesion was strong and players were enthusiastic about belonging to their small teams. Teams also came up with their own team songs, a feature that MacPhail et al. (2008) reported within physical education research. By participating in the same team during this season, players also expressed that they learned how other players in the same team played in matches which helped them to improve match play. In normal tournaments and matches, there are eleven players on one team which means that active involvement and recognizing all players is challenging. On the other hand, in practice sessions during scrimmages they play in small teams, however with constant variation of team members. In practical terms this mean that the Sport Education model can provide players a chance to more in depth understanding of how other players think and play. Moreover, players also helped and motivated each other. The high skilled players were often observed helping the weaker players by giving them feedback and advice about practice tasks. These results are consistent with the results from physical education classes (MacPhail, Kirk, & Kinchin, 2004; MacPhail et al., 2008) where the stronger students in the group showed patience and willingness to help their team members that they understood that all team members are important to perform as a team.

The organizational framework of Sport Education includes a developmentally appropriate environment where teams compete during practice in pre-season and in the final tournament (Siedentop, 2002). Similarly, competition, whether of a sporting nature or otherwise, plays an important role in children's lives and particularly among those involved in youth sports. The current study showed that competition was important for the players and they seemed to enjoy the opportunity to compete. Previous studies in physical education have showed that competition is a central part of the model and that student enjoy these competitions (Carlson & Hastie, 1997; MacPhail et al., 2008). In this study, fitness coaches in particular used a competitive structure in their practice tasks. Players needed to show effort, even to the extent that player coaches used physical punishment as a method to motivate other players to try their best during practice. This finding supports the notion that the culture in youth sport is specific and that coaches act as role models, and these coaches noted that they now and then use physical punishments to keep player on their toes. However, neither players, coaches, nor parents noted that physical punishment was a negative thing.

Siedentop et al. (2011) have noted that having responsibility roles is one of the key differences between traditional youth sport and Sport Education. As a member of a team, the primarily role for a person is that of a player. Our findings showed that player enjoyed having the opportunity for trying new things and making decisions. In addition, they liked having other players as coaches. These results support previous research in teaching physical education (Browne et al., 2004; Carlson & Hastie, 1997; Hastie & Sinelnikov, 2006). Moreover, the regular coaches highlighted the positive impact of Sport Education on the more silent and shy or less motivated players. They noted how these players' interest in soccer improved and how they were more engaged when they had roles with responsibilities. The coaches also commented that these players were those who advanced the most during the Sports Education season. Our observations support the fact that the possession of a role motivated, engaged, and even gave more confidence to some players. Research in physical education using Sport Education has also demonstrated how students with previously low interest were more engaged and their attitude toward physical education improved when they had important roles in the team (Menickelli & Hastie, 2014; Perlman, 2012; Tsangaridou & Lefteratos, 2013).

The small step made in this study in giving control away and moving towards a more athlete centred coaching is a fundamental shift in the coaching process. The approach with player ownership means that coaches are relocated to stand back and observe, act as facilitators and be less directive and they even have to come out of their comfort zone (Cushion, 2013). Previous research has showed that it is challenging to shift from traditional directive to athlete-centred focus due to existing discourses (Reid & Harvey, 2014; Thomas, Morgan, & Mesquita, 2013). Similarly, it has not always been easy to let the control go and give students additional responsibilities when teaching physical education through the Sport Education model (Curtner-Smith, Hastie, & Kinchin, 2008; Ko, Wallhead, & Ward, 2006).

The current study proposes that the structure of the Sport Education model has many commonalities with an athlete-centred approach for fostering a climate where athletes take ownership for the coaching process. While examples of such a climate has been asked for by researchers (Jones, 2007; Jones et al., 2002; Nelson et al., 2014), this study provides promising evidence of what works in a coaching context. However, we identified a problem because the context in youth sport is different from compulsory school physical education and this was noted in player absences from practice sessions. While participation in practice sessions was voluntary and players had other hobbies, players with responsibility roles missed practice sessions which resulted in imbalanced team numbers. Therefore teams were sometimes merged and players had to substitute missing responsibility players, although no major complications were evident as a result of these actions. In older and more dedicated athletes it would be expected there should be fewer absences which would result in less disruption to team composition.

Research in physical education (Hastie, Sinelnikov, & Guarino, 2009; Hastie, Calderón, Rolim, & Guarino, 2013; Layne & Yli-Piipari, 2015) has shown that an increased opportunity for practice during a Sport Education season may lead to gains in skill and match performance, which also often is the main focus in youth sport. Although one primary goal of Sport Education is to develop competent sport persons, the current study did not measure player skill or match performance. However, an athlete with increased ownership and perceived autonomy can have a positive effect on their motivational outcomes and may indirectly affect the model's potential for developing player skill and match performance. Further research is therefore required to examine the possible effect on player skill development.

An interesting methodological feature arose when implementing Sport Education in the youth sport context in Finland. Layne and Hastie (2015) pointed out that less research was available on the implementation of Sport Education in the primary grades, which could be due to the responsibilities placed upon the student. This connects to the question if student or player coaches have enough content knowledge to instruct their peers (Hastie, 2000), although Wallhead and O'Sullivan (2007) showed how teachers used both task cards and debriefing meetings with student coaches to overcome these concerns. However, young athletes have spent several years in their sport with both deliberate play and practice and 10–12-year-old academy soccer players were able to reliably assess their peers' performance (Holt, Kinchin, & Clarke, 2012). While many studies have used sports where the participants were novices to the sport (Layne & Hastie, 2015), these soccer players can be viewed as having sufficient content knowledge to instruct their peers.

While these coaches did not fully take over the implementation of the model and were more in facilitator roles, the next challenge is to train coaches to implement the model within their own team. The current findings showed that the implementation is complex and time consuming, and the training is not just a case of passing on content knowledge. Historically, coaches employing a Game Centered Approach (Cushion, 2013) and teachers implementing Sport Education (McCaughtry, Sofo, Rovegno, & Curtner-Smith, 2004; McMahon & MacPhail, 2007; Romar, 2013) have noted that adapting an innovation is more demanding and time consuming than traditional coaching or teaching. From a coach education perspective then, Sport Education requires opportunities for coaches to collaboratively plan, test and evaluate the model. Such opportunities could also make coaches aware of the challenges of employing an innovative practice in a conservative sport culture.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a soccer season when using the Sport Education model in a youth sport club in Finland. The most important conclusion to be drawn from this study is that Sport Education has great potential in terms of enabling athletes to become active participant in youth sports, although there is a need for more empirical research. One of the positive features of the Sport Education model in youth sport is the opportunity to provide athletes an ownership of their sport participation within certain boundaries. In this new context, the players expressed that they enjoyed being members of small teams, and appreciate the opportunities to be autonomous and have responsibilities during practice, a fact that also was identified by their coaches and parents. Although this study has contributed to the coach education literature on how an innovation approach from physical education teaching can optimize athlete-centred coaching, there are limitations that must be considered. The study is limited to one small self-selected group of young athletes. There is also the possibility of bias in that the researchers implemented the model and were aware of the study objectives. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be readily generalized to all youth sport contexts. While it always will be problematic to introduce innovations to sport, this study provides a beginning step in explaining the positive outcomes of Sport Education in endowing young athletes. Regardless, more research is needed to confirm the effectiveness of

the Sport Education model with coaches trained to implement the model and with individual and team athletes of different ages and gender. Despite its limitations, however, the results of this study have shown that the Sport Education model, when implemented in appropriate forms by coaches, has many structural features for enhancing an athlete-centred approach, as has been asked for in coach education literature.

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