Addressing the Gap in Coach Training for Volunteer Youth Sports Coaches: Integrating Sports Based Youth Development with the Xs and Os through Core Practices

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In the field of sports-based youth development, there has been a growing awareness of how coaches can effectively mediate the sports experience to bolster positive, prosocial outcomes (Gould, et al., 2012; Petitpas, et al., 2005; Bean, Whitley & Gould, 2014). Coach training has been identified as a potentially effective intervention for ensuring the benefits of sport participation reach more youth (Aspen Institute, 2015; Conroy & Coatsworth, 2006). To date, there are a number of high-quality trainings provided for volunteer youth sports coaches that focus on the essential attitudes and behaviors of coaches that have been shown to create a climate that leads to positive outcomes: Positive Coaching Alliance (www.positivecoaching.org), Coaching Effectiveness Training (Smith & Smoll, 2002), and the American Sport Education Program (Martens, 1997), to name a few.

There are still barriers, however, to widespread implementation of training for volunteer coaches. Though the percentage of trained volunteer youth sports coaches has grown over the last decade, still only 1 in 5 youth sports coaches are being trained in youth development (Aspen Institute, 2015). Further, volunteer coaches, especially those who are new, must learn not just how to interact positively with youth and create an empowering sporting environment but also how to run drills, plan a practice, manage a competition, comply with safety guidelines, and more. Due to time and money constraints (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005), recreational organizations must often choose a single training: safety, or Xs and Os, or youth development. The Aspen Institute, through its Project Play Initiative which seeks to improve the access to and quality of youth sports opportunities nationally, has recently called for organizations to address this issue by exploring coach training that can “offer core competencies in one comprehensive package” (Aspen Institute, 2016, p. 16).

The purpose of this presentation is to inform a more comprehensive approach to coach training by presenting the findings from a study designed to identify the “core practices” of effective youth sports coaching. Core practices, a notion that comes from the field of teacher education, are the strategies and routines that are most impactful at achieving athlete outcomes across the range of athlete outcome domains, including the 4cs of competence, confidence, connection, and character (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). Identifying and demonstrating these high leverage, core practices — those that attend to multiple outcomes simultaneously — will allow programs to offer volunteer youth sports coaches training that addresses a range of important coach competencies and skills in an integrated fashion.

The framework for this study comes from the work of teacher educators who have developed the notion “ambitious teaching” to describe high-quality teaching which embodies the belief that all children, regardless of race, gender, or class are capable of engaging with intellectually rigorous subject matter content (McDonald, et al., 2013; Windschitl, et al., 2012; Fogo, 2014). Ambitious teaching is what teacher educators are aiming for as they prepare and support those new to the profession. To assist with teacher preparation, teacher educators have gone a step further and identified the core practices that define ambitious teaching. These core practices consist of the “instructional strategies, routines, and moves teachers enact that are empirically based and promote learning across diverse groups of students” (Fogo, 2014, p. 152). The core practices are what ambitious teachers do, day in and day out, to engage students in deep thinking about content.

This study maps “ambitious teaching” and “core practices” onto Cote and Gilbert’s conceptual model of coaching effectiveness and expertise, which posits that coaching effectiveness occurs at the intersection point of coaches’ knowledge, coaching context, and athlete outcomes (2009). This study seeks to extend this framework by identifying
what, specifically, happens at the intersection of coaching knowledge, context, and athlete outcome domains. What do effective coaches do to achieve the desired athlete outcomes in their coaching contexts? There are four primary research questions: 1) Are there universal core coaching practices – across sport – and, if so, what are they? 2) How do effective coaches enact these practices? 3) Do core practices attend to multiple athlete outcome domains simultaneously? And, if so, how? 4) In what ways are core coaching practices specific to coaching context: athlete age, competitive level, program type?

The project is a two phased, mixed methods study. The first phase is a Delphi study, a series of web-based surveys of 15-20 expert coaches, to come to agreement on coaching core practices. For the first survey, participants receive a list and descriptions of coaching core practices gleaned through literature review (National Standards for Sports Coaches, 2006; http://www.teachingworks.org/work-of-teaching/high-leverage-practices). The participants provide feedback that includes both Likert scale ratings of the practices as well as feedback and/or justification for the rating. Participants are also asked to include suggestions for core practices. Researchers analyze the results, ranking the list of practices based on average ratings; eliminating practices at the bottom end, and adding any new practices that emerged through comments. Further, an ANOVA is conducted to identify differences between the responses of coaches of individual sports and team sports, girls’ coaches and boys’ coaches, and recreational and select teams (Fogo, 2014).

Once the core practices are identified, phase two is a qualitative field study of coaches to better understand how core practices are implemented. Observations and videotaping are guided by an observation protocol created from the Delphi results. Researchers observe and videotape approximately 4 practices and 1 competition of 9-12 coaches. The observations serve as supplements to the videotaping, providing context and “look fors” to aid in the review and analysis of the videos. The videos are analyzed and coded, using StudioCode based on identifying features of the ambitious coaching core practices.

The subject population for both phases is “expert” coaches, defined as those who have 7 or more years of experience (at least 5 as a head coach); have achieved some level of competitive success with their teams, and display and espouse a coaching philosophy congruent with the principles of sports based youth development. The participant selection is guided by a panel utilizing guidelines laid out by Clayton in his seminal work about the Delphi process (1997).

The results will provide a set of core coaching practices, with associated descriptions and video demonstration of how those practices can be effectively implemented for athlete development and competence. These elements can be used to shape new approaches to coach training.