Original Article

Coaching and continuity make a difference: competence effects in a youth sport program

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Abstract:

The involvement of youth in sports has the potential to generate positive effects on the fundamental skills for development. Brazil is considered one of the most democratic places for youth sports participation, due to social programs offered by the Government and the ease of entry/access. The goal of this research was to understand the competence effects on youth athletes as reported by both the experienced coaches and their former youth athletes in a sports program participation. The present research was conducted on the *Programa Segundo Tempo* [Second Half Program], which assists disadvantaged youth throughout Brazil. A total of 11 coaches and 7 adults who formerly took part in the program for a long period participated in the study. Interviews were completed using scripted open and closed questions. Interpersonal relations were associated with the establishment of lasting friendships. Behavioral and emotional self-regulations were associated with the perception of positive changes. The coaches and ex-participants in the sports program observed these dimensions. Our results show that the professional competence of the coaches combined with the program continuity, including the presence of the coaches in the community promoted a sense of perception of personal development in the sporting program. The competence effects identified in this study seem to be strongly influenced by the mandatory higher education degree for the coaches and due to the long-term permanence of the program, as observed by the former youth athletes. Therefore, understanding the sports program proposed by the Social Project and the coaches' view is necessary for the creation and maintenance of sport environments favorable to positive youth development. Both the coaches as well as their former student-athletes perceived that being able to intervene for longer periods in the same community was instrumental in performing better and impacting positively on the youths. Therefore, we suggest that supporting capacity building of coaches and their long-term presence in a community are the key issues necessary for promoting positive competence effects in the youth participation in sporting activities.

Key Words: Young; Coach; Sport participation; Positive Development; Vulnerability; NGOs

Introduction

The involvement of youth in sports has received attention from multiple sectors of the society for its potential to generate positive effects on fundamental skills for development throughout life (Gould & Carson, 2008; Holt et al., 2017; Turnnidge, Côté, & Hancock, 2014). To help decrease the probability of exposure to risky behaviors and to assist in the involvement of young people in quality activities, interest in the promotion of sport in socially vulnerable populations has grown (Luguetti et al., 2017a; Luguetti et al., 2017b). Given this context, the participation of sport coaches is crucial in ensuring that sport can lead to positive life skills acquisition (Cote & Gilbert, 2009; Côté & Hancock, 2016).

In Brazil, it is mandatory to have an undergraduate degree in Physical Education to be a coach, even when acting in community sports projects (Brazil, 1998) – exceptions for soccer and martial arts. Thus, in the Brazilian context, the participation of the coaches in this program is not a voluntary action, but of a paid professional. This seems to imply organized and professional process, which promotes sport in social projects as an important context for sports initiation (Galatti, 2017; Reverdito, Carvalho, & Gonçalves, 2016).

Brazil has been considered one of the most democratic places concerning access to sport due to youth participation in social programs within non-governmental organizations (NGO) and governmental programs. In the last census (2012) a total of 24,926 NGOs related to sports and recreation were identified (IBGE, 2012). Government activities and programs exist on federal (Kravchychyn & Oliveira, 2015; Reverdito et al., 2016), state and municipal levels (Machado, Galatti, & Paes, 2015), with particular attention to the socially vulnerable

youth. The result of this social interventions was the ease of access to sport participation for these young people (Côté & Hancock, 2016).

These sporting environments used to be considered as a way of reducing the exposure of youth to situations of social risk (Hirama & Montagner, 2012). Nowadays, they are seen as important environments for initial steps in developing high-performance athletes. For example, the Brazilian male basketball have two national leagues in Brazil. In the Senior League (NBB), 7% of the athletes had their first access to basketball training through some NGOs, while in the Junior League (LDB, with U23 years old players), this number increases to 14% of the athletes (Darido da Cunha et al., 2017). Olympic medalists in Rio2016, Rafaela Silva (judo), Isaquias Queiroz (canoeing) and Maicon Andrade (taekwondo) spent their initial developmental years in sport with some NGOs. Therefore, more research is needed in the context of NGOs, since it represent the most accessible and significant sporting activities for youth, especially in the developing countries.

Structured activities in which young people can voluntarily engage is a fertile environment for positive development, since they combine intrinsic motivation and high levels of concentration (Larson et al., 2015; Reverdito et al., 2017a). The youth can explore challenging and progressively complex scenarios in addition to the self-regulation of behavior and emotions. Reciprocity within interpersonal relationships can evolve into lasting emotional bonds between athletes, in addition to that between coaches and athletes. Extracurricular sports participation programs may therefore be considered important developmental activities (Agans et al., 2014; Côté, Turnnidge, & Evans, 2014; Holt et al., 2017). These programs may include developing skills that could be transferred in an explicit or implicit manner to non-sports environments (Côté & Hancock, 2016; Holt et al., 2013; Lee & Martinek, 2013).

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) defined the competence effects as demonstrated acquisition and development of knowledge, skills or abilities (intellectual, physical, social, emotional, motivational) of a person to lead and drive their own behavior through scenarios and domains of development (Bronfenbrenner, 2011). The bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2011) proposes that competence effects emerge from the person-context interaction, demonstrated by the engagement of the person in a significant activity on a regular basis. The effectiveness of the competence depends fundamentally on the quality of the interactions (person-context) over time. The coach has a significant role regarding sports participation, especially in the Brazilian social projects context, in which assistance are given to vulnerable children, with fewer possibilities of involvement in a structured activity conducted by a professional (Reverdito et al., 2017b; Reverdito et al., 2020). Studies conducted on coaches working under these situations are still incipient, while on the other hand, it is rare to find studies on the competence effects shown by young people engaged in sport.

The coach conducts the teaching-training process and plays an important role when developing and applying professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge to develop specific competence effects (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). In this perspective, managing an environment capable of delivering positive experiences is the main challenge of a coach in sport participation. Such environment allows scenarios in which young people might use as many biopsychosocial resources as much as possible in order to reduce the possibility of hurtful experiences during development (Reverdito et al., 2020). The coach is able to observe and perceive the main changes and the competence effects associated with participation in sports demonstrated by young people over time.

The amount of time that a coach spends with youth in sport is an important determinant of how the coach reports competence effects demonstrated by the youth, especially in sports participation programs for disadvantaged young people. The immersion of the coach over time depends on the relationship of trust with the community and the continuity of actions and policies from the government (Reverdito et al., 2016). We consider the coach as one of the key points for the development of young people in social projects (Luguetti et al., 2017a). However, we found no study investigating coaches working in these same programs (i.e., participation sports aimed at disadvantaged youth) in different regions for at least 24 consecutive months. There is also a scarcity in the literature of the perceptions of former youth athletes of their coaches.

The aim of our study is to explore the competence effects reported by experienced coaches and former youth athletes in a nationwide sports participation program. By identifying these competence effects through former youth athletes and through experienced coaches working in extracurricular sport programs, there could be a clearer understanding and promotion of positive development for disadvantaged youth. Thus, this study contributes to the investigation of competence effects and life skills associated with sport participation as reported by experienced coaches and former youth athletes who have been involved in the participation program for disadvantaged young people.

Material & methods

The research was developed in *Programa Segundo Tempo* (PST) [Second Half Program], which assists approximately 3,600.000 disadvantaged young people throughout Brazil between 2003 and 2015 (Brasil, 2015). As the Brazilian law requires, all coaches must possess a Physical Education degree. The PST also offers annual continual professional development on coaching education with the view of improving coaches' pedagogical practices.

Study design and sample

Coaches (n = 11) and former youth athletes (adults) (n = 7) from the PST of Brazilian municipalities (n = 3) with the longest continuous operating time (between the years 2003-2013), out of the 498 municipalities, participated in the study. The municipalities are in the South (n = 1), Southeast (n = 1) and Northeast (n = 1) regions. Consideration was given to the time the coaches (M=81.81 months) and former youth athletes (M=46.28 months) were involved in the program, ensuring the recruitment of participants who could reflect the experience in the sport in that context. Coaches were asked to indicate former youth athletes who had participated in the program. Tables 1 and 2 contain the profile of the participants including age, coach and former youth athletes declared time of participation in the PST, previous experience in the sport, interview duration, and academic background. Ethics Committee for Research in Humans of the Faculty of Medical Sciences of the University of Campinas (CAAE: 34480114.1.0000.5404). All participants signed an informed consent form.

Table 1. Coaches, age, time participating in the PST (estimated), duration of the interview, and academic background.

City Coach	Sex	Age	Time (months) in PST	Extracurricular experience in the sport	Duration of the interview min./sec.
1 : M-1.1	M	27	24	Regional and State: refereeing. Initiation: association football and volleyball	22'50"
2 : M-1.2	M	26	84	International: BMX	39'17"
3 : M-1.3	M	48	120	Regional and State: football association.	13'15"
4 : M-1.4	F	27	24	No	15'18"
5 : M-4.1	M	50	84	National: professional football association	30'40"
6 : M-4.2	F	48	96	No	19'05"
7 : M-4.3	F	36	96	Initiation: dance and artistic gymnastics	44'32"
8 : M-4.4	F	48	96	Regional: artistic gymnastics	25'46"
9 : M-4.5	F	28	96	Initiation: swimming	15'12"
10 : M-4.6	M	27	120	Regional: basketball	19'39"
11 : M-5.1	M	46	60	State: volleyball	33'40"
M = 37.36		M = 81.81	Σ = 277'14"		

Abbreviations: M = male; F = female

Table 2. Former youth athletes, age, time participating in the PST (estimated), duration of the interview, and academic background.

City Former student	Sex	Age	Time (months) in PST	Extracurricular experience in the sport	Duration of the interview min./sec.	Academic background
1 : M-1.1	M	21	84	PST Initiation: football association	23'36"	UG – PE
2 : M-1.3	F	22	36	PST Initiation: various sports	21'04"	UG – PE
7 : M-4.1	F	27	36	PST	16'25"	UG – PE
8 : M-4.2	M	21	60	PST	33'10"	UG – PE
9 : M-5.1	F	18	60	PST	16'11"	ISE
10 : M-5.2	M	21	24	PST	19'06"	CSE
11 : M5-5.3	F	18	24	PST	11'48"	ISE
M=21.14		M=46.28	Σ =140'40"			

Abbreviations: UG –PE: undergraduate in Physical Education. M: male; F: female; ISE: incomplete secondary education; CSE: complete secondary education

Research instruments and procedures

Data were collected over a six-day period in which the first author was an active observer in the PST in each of the selected municipalities. The observations were important to help understand the perception of the coaches and former students regarding the practice of sports and direct participation. The interview included the reported competence effects noted by coaches and former youth athletes from the participation of the youth in PST as the theme generator. Participants were initially asked: "Has the sport experience in the PST developed competencies, knowledge and life skills?" Audio of the interview was captured on a Sony ICD-PX312 digital recorder and then fully transcribed.

Data analysis

After a pre-analysis, three PhD researchers with at least 10 years of experience in investigating youth sport, following Bardin (2011) content analysis procedures, analyzed the data. NVivo10 Windows software was

used to organize and analyze the selected data for the encoding, categorization, and inference processes (Bardin, 2011). The encoding process consisted of identifying, in the interviews, competences generated from the experience of youth in sports to lead and direct their own behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 2011). The content is divided into key terms and categories were created during the encoding process.

Data reliability

In a qualitative manner, the reliability of the study was evaluated following Creswell (2014) method. The first author researcher integration in the context was undertaken for 7 days, with constant interaction with the different program actors, the coaches, the students and other community members.

This process offered the researcher a clear view of the program daily proceedings, creating a relationship of trust with the participants. The fact that all the interviews were conducted by the first author assured that the same approach and procedures were taken. After data transcription, the same researcher was responsible for the preliminary coding of the data. Finally, the other three experienced researchers met to analyze and express agreement (or not) regarding the interpretation of the data. In addition, the strategies adopted to support the validity of this study have already been documented (Luguetti et al., 2017b; Vierimaa et al., 2017).

Results

Coaches and former youth athletes reported competences for life. After the content analysis, we noted that the categories “personal relations” and “self-regulation of behavior and emotion” were evident and relevant for discussion. All respondents mentioned the categories “interpersonal relations” (Tables 3 and 4) and “behavioral and emotional self-regulations (Tables 5 and 6), as the key competences associated with the practice of sports. Below we highlight the most representative sentences/phrases that are not repeated.

Table 3. Reports from the coaches of the competence effects generated by sports in the interpersonal relations dimension.

Respondent	Coaches' records
M-5	[...] socialization, they must work collectively, it cannot be done by a child on its own [...]. [...] it must be in group, friendship, socialization, understanding of the child?, I think it is just that a child participates in sporting event in which the child already socializes [...]. [...] never happened for a kid to leave our group and drift away, they are always together. [...] they talk more and have an even better socialization [...]
M-6	[...] some kids get there; some are too shy [...]
M-7	[...] in the development of a child and even socializing with other children.
M-8	[...] you can tell that the kid can share his/her responsibility with others [...].

Table 4. Reports from the former youth athletes of the competence effects generated by sports in the interpersonal relations dimension.

Respondent	Former students' records
M-1.1	[...] the vast majority of the friends and friendship itself, they came from sports. From an early age, and until today, since childhood, without a doubt it came from the schools. [...] I see that sports are a much healthier friendship. Friends and great people that I'm sure I'll keep in my heart.
M-1.2	Involvement with people [...]. As team sports also the idea of groups, to think as a group.

Table 5. Reports from the coaches of the competence effects generated by sports in the self-regulation of behavior and emotion dimension.

Respondent	Coaches' records
M-1	[...] of discipline, of limits, many things.
M-3	Therefore, he has to have a 'non-trespassing line', he must follow rules, if not followed it may become dangerous to him. For the most part, for liking the project many children end up staying and accepting the rules.
M-4	Help on house tasks, be more committed, be on time, and be more obedient.
M-5	[...] many mothers already came to me to say that while practicing the sport the kid changed completely at home, wanting to study, talking more and even socializing better [...].
M-7	[...] and others have [...] a violent behavior. Therefore, this is something that we always use with them, lots of discipline [...].
M-10	[...] you can detect changes in behavior [...]. [...] this is very important, to create this ability, the willingness to share, you can see leaders who have a leadership profile [...]. [...] certain behaviors of the students can be detected and then restrained, [...].

Table 6. Reports from the former youth athletes of the competence effects generated by sports in the self-regulation of behavior and emotion dimension.

Respondent	Former students' records
M-1.1	[...] hiding some wrong words among the kids [...]. [...] loyalty within the sport; [...]. [...] the discipline. [...] the games have rules, so in our own lives, we have to follow the rules, [...].
M-4.1	[...] the commitment [...]. [...] being on time, responsibilities with things [...]. [...] respect [...]. [...] I got a lot better. I was rebellious, aggressive, sometimes I didn't have a lot of patience and then I started working on all this, and I think sports have helped me work on all those things [...].
M-5.2	Discipline. Sports generate discipline; without discipline, you cannot practice any sports. [...] I learned how to be more responsible; to appreciate whom I have at home [...]. So, the discipline from sports taught me a lot of things.

Discussion

The possibility of using sports in promoting Positive Youth Development (PYD) in vulnerable children had led to considerable efforts on the part of the society and researchers. However, we know little about the competence effects developed in association with youth participation in sports, especially from the reports of experienced coaches and former youth athletes. The access to coaches in these programs and their discontinuity are great challenges to studies with this approach. In addition, “Personal relations” and “self-regulation and emotions” are fundamental dimensions in human development and these may be associated with the crave for independence and identity, phenomena faced by youths (Bronfenbrenner, 2011).

Based on the reports from the coaches and former students, interpersonal relations were associated with the establishment of long lasting friendships. This result points to the importance of the quality of interpersonal relations, for both continuity in the program and to the creation of enduring friendship bonds (Côté, Turnnidge, & Evans, 2014; Scales et al., 2015). Behavioral and emotional self-regulations were associated with the perception of changes.

Marked by the quest for independence and identity as an individual, the period of adolescence is also a moment of body and environmental changes (Larson, 2011), affecting emotional, cognitive and motivational systems. The respondents highlighted self-regulation as important for establishing discipline in relation to sports practice. The self-regulation of behavior and emotions is developed in the balance between individual and contextual forces and capabilities; they are predictive of positive development (Lerner et al., 2015). Success in contributing to improving tendencies towards violent behavior, respecting, recognizing and complying with rules and limits, respecting individuality, the desire to share and establishing competent leaders were reported.

The two categories analyzed – interpersonal relations and self-regulation – have also been associated with other dimensions of everyday life (family, work, school, professional choice, and responsibilities). Regarding the concept of transfer of competencies and skills to non-sports contexts, these results corroborate the studies by Lee and Martinek (2013) and Turnnidge, Côté, and Hancock (2014). The authors agree with the relevance of the theme and recognize the need for other studies, especially on the quality of the intervention and the range within other dimensions.

Competence effects demonstrated in the sports environment and reported by coaches and former students are caused by processes and interactions that perhaps might not be explored in other environments (Reverdito et al., 2015). Biopsychosocial resources are mobilized to the maximum at minimum cost in relation to the objective dimension of life, as accented by Gould, Flett, and Lauer (2012) and Bruner et al. (2014).

Studying the development of youth in different activities, Larson, Hansen, and Moneta (2006) observed that sports featured higher values in the emotional regulation, teamwork experiences and, mainly, for the initiative dimensions when compared with global values of other organized activities. Our study shows recognition and respect for others, proactive leadership behaviors, desire to help (in sports training and at home), and ability to share as important outcomes related to the sport participation experience. Investigating specifically the experience of youth in sports, the studies of Gould, Flett, and Lauer (2012) and Bruner et al. (2014) found the values of these dimensions to remain higher; being task-oriented is the main difference when compared with other activities, according to the authors.

The practice of sports is a significant activity capable of causing promising processes for the positive development of the youth. However, participation in sports alone does not guarantee the direction of effects (competences or inefficiencies), since complex interactions are necessary to create the competence effects.

Thus, the development of competencies is influenced by the quality of the established interactions (Côté, Turnnidge, & Evans, 2014; Reverdito et al., 2020). By having knowledge of these properties, coaches will be able to promote and explore environments rich in possibilities to plan interventions that facilitate positive experiences in sports.

Conclusions

As coaches are responsible for various existing processes in sports, such as the management of environments and people, our focus shifts to the reports of these professionals regarding the positive development of the youth participating in the PST. Our results suggest that the combination of professional competence of the coaches and the duration/continuity of the program in addition to the involvement of the coach in the community can favor the perception of positive development in the youth. This was confirmed by the reports of the former youth athletes. So, regarding the management of Sport Participation Programs focused on fostering positive developments on the disadvantaged youth, promoting coaches' education in this way can aid in the perception of the effects of perceived competences (besides the availability of professional knowledge) to promote adequate actions for the environment. In communities of disadvantaged youth, bonds of trust are fundamental to promote and consolidate actions through sport as a way to foster competence. Thus, maintaining the coach for long periods in the community allows for the establishment of affective and trusting bonds.

Interpersonal relations and self-regulation of behavior and emotion were the reported competence effects by coaches and former students in relation to the sports participation. These dimensions reinforce the subjective sphere of feelings that emerges from the voluntary engagement in sports, since they characterize stability and changes for the youth. These results demonstrate the potential of the development of sports in environments in which there are few opportunities for activities aimed at human development, especially for disadvantaged youth. From this, the practical implications of these results can reach the dimension of the sports sessions' content, by reinforcing actions that value the quality of interpersonal relationships and an active attitude of youth in understanding the changes in their behaviors and emotions, the positive development has the potential to occur.

The competence effects identified in this study seem to have been strengthened by the mandatory higher education degree for the coach and to the long-term presence in the program, as observed by the former youth athletes. Therefore, understanding the sports program proposed by the Social Project and the coaches' view are necessary for the creation and maintenance of sport environments favorable to the positive development of youth. The coach intervention for longer periods in the same community has proven to be effective for their own performance and perception. Therefore, we suggest that supporting coaching development, in addition to his/her long-term presence in a community as key points for fostering competence effects in youth participant in sporting activities.

Limitations and Future Directions

The limits of an exploratory study of qualitative nature must be recognized. However, the results have brought new perspectives for understanding the experience of youth in sports, especially the nature of sports as an activity in need of investigation. First, sport should not be seen only as a support for other domains, but as an environment capable of encouraging fundamental opportunities for the development of youth throughout the course of their lives. Brazil represents an important research scenario, since it is mandatory that coaches possess degree in Physical Education participate in sport coaching. Finally, a longer period of field research is recommended to investigate the nature and quality of the activities offered in relation to the competence effects demonstrated by youth and reported by the coaches is needed.

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