THE COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION

A Qualitative Investigation of Female Students in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT
This study investigated the importance of the coach-athlete relationship within a physical education environment. The study aimed to explore the factors of the relationship between students and their teachers which might influence their engagement in the subject. Following semi-structured interviews with secondary school female students (n = 6, age range 13-14 years) the data was thematically analysed. Results indicated that the relationship between student and teacher had a strong influence on engagement within physical education. Emergent themes revealed the key factors to developing a positive relationship were approachability and trust, teacher effort and care, and mutual respect. Findings are discussed in light of coach-athlete relationship literature, particularly Jowett’s (2007) 3 Cs model of closeness, commitment and complementarity. Practical implications to enhance the engagement of female students in physical education are provided.

KEY WORDS: coach-athlete relationship, physical education.

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SOMMARIO
Questo studio esamina l’importanza della relazione allenatore-atleta all’interno di un ambiente di educazione fisica. Lo studio intende esplorare i fattori della relazione tra gli studenti e i loro insegnanti che possono influenzare il loro impegno in questo ambito. In seguito a interviste semi-(structurate alle studentesse di scuola secondaria (n=6, età 13-14 anni) è stata fatta un’analisi tematica dei dati. I risultati indicano che la relazione tra studente e insegnante aveva una forte influenza sull’impegno nell’educazione fisica. I temi che sono emersi hanno mostrato come i fattori chiave per sviluppare una relazione positiva erano accessibilità e fiducia, impegno e attenzione dell’insegnante e reciprocità rispetto. I risultati sono discussi alla luce della letteratura allenatore-atleta, in particolare del modello delle 3 C di Jowett (2007) vicinanza, impegno e complementarità (closeness, commitment and complementarity). Vengono fornite implicazioni pratiche per migliorare l’impegno delle studentesse in educazione fisica.

PAROLE CHIAVE: relazione allenatore-atleta, educazione fisica.
Introduction

The lack of participation in sport amongst females is a growing concern in the United Kingdom (UK). By the age of 14, only 12% of girls in the UK are achieving the recommended amount of physical activity, with 23% of women stating that their experiences in physical education (PE) lessons deterred them from physical activity in later life (Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation, 2013). Further research indicates that adolescent females are less likely to participate in physical activity than their male counterparts (Vescio, Wilde & Crosswhite, 2005), and there are higher attrition rates among girls in school sports (Schofield, Mummery, Schofield & Walmsley). Indeed, children’s motivation, particularly girls’, to participate in sport diminishes as they progress through school (Garrett, 2004). Therefore, physical education is essential to improving and maintaining physical activity levels amongst females.

Participation levels of adolescent girls can be enhanced in PE through the provision of active role modelling within the school environment (Vescio et al. 2005). Moreover, PE teachers can positively impact the female students’ future health status, self-worth and emotional well-being (Warner, Dixon & Schumann, 2009). Woods, Tannehill and Walsh (2012) contend that making physical activity in the curriculum enjoyable is fundamental to engaging girls in PE. Physical education teachers then, have a central role in enhancing the engagement of females, both within the school environment and beyond. Research from the sports coaching domain suggests an enhanced relationship between coach and athlete increases athletes’ enjoyment and motivation levels (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). The coach athlete relationship can be defined as a dynamic and complex coaching process which enables coaches and athletes’ needs to be expressed and fulfilled (Jowett & Cockerill, 2002). The quality of this relationship influences personal traits such as, determination, leadership, confidence and self-reliance (Norman & French, 2013). Further research has demonstrated that the coach-athlete relationship can impact team cohesion (Jowett & Chaundy, 2004), passion (Lafrenière, Jowett, Vallerand, Donahue & Lorimer, 2008) and satisfaction (Lorimer & Jowett, 2009). Considering the notion that female students who have positive experiences in PE lessons often hold a positive perception of sport participation later in life (Jones, 2013), a greater understanding of the pedagogical relationship is warranted.

The aforementioned research has been situated in the context of coaching rather than physical education. Whilst the roles of coaching and teaching are strongly linked through their objectives of teaching skills, technique and strategies (Drewe, 2000), they are also distinctly different as teaching often involves working with larger groups to a rigid curriculum (Chelladurai & Kuga, 1996). Furthermore, studies of this nature have thus far focussed greatly on elite sport with limited applicability to the physical education environment. Moreover, the sporting environment is male dominated and consequently coaching practices have ‘primarily been developed by male practitioners and tailored towards a male base’ (Mackinnon, 2011), again making it difficult to generalise to a female population, a group at high risk of physical inactivity. The current study therefore, aims to investigate the characteristics of the student-teacher relationship within physical education, using coach-athlete relationship theory as a theoretical framework.
Materials and Methods

A qualitative method was employed to get closer to the participants’ perspective through detailed interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain special insight into subjectivity, voice and lived experiences (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997). In accordance with Wengraf (2001), the interview guide was formulated by linking theoretical concepts with the aims of the research. Specifically questions were derived from Jowett’s (2007) 3 Cs model, which offers an explanation of the processes and outcomes of the coach-athlete relationship. This is comprised of three interconnected constructs: closeness (emotions), commitment (thoughts), and complementarity (behaviours). The interpersonal construct of closeness represents coaches’ and athletes’ affective ties, such as liking, respecting, trusting, and appreciating each other. Commitment describes a cognitive attachment and a long-term orientation toward one another. Finally, complementarity reflects behavioural transactions of cooperation, responsiveness, and affiliation (Jowett, 2009).

Participants were secondary school female students (n=6; age range 13-14 years) from two different schools. A purposeful sampling technique was utilised as the individuals studied were able to purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study (Cresswell, 2007). Parental consent and institutional ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. This method leads to data saturation being achieved more quickly than alternative techniques (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Thematic analysis of the transcribed interview data elicited three key themes which characterised the teacher-student relationship. These are presented below with example quotations from students.

Approachability and trust

Approachability and trust emerged as key issues as students outlined the importance of feeling comfortable in the presence of their physical education teachers. “Even though I don’t really like PE I do feel like I can talk to the teachers honestly. Mrs **** is a good listener… She talks to me more like she’s a student as well which makes it a lot easier to ask or tell her things.” “It’s important to be able to trust your PE teachers because school is difficult sometimes and it would be nice to be able to have a teacher who will listen.” Participants highlighted why they felt trust was so important with teachers and how it relates to their experience in lessons. However, students felt the lack of time in PE lessons restricted the development of relationships. “PE teachers don’t get to spend as much time with us students so it’s quite difficult for them to build a good relationship with them.”

Teacher effort and care

Interlinked with the development of a trusting relationship was students’ perceptions of teacher effort and care. “Teachers ask about how we’re getting on in other subjects which is nice… because that shows how much they care about us because they don’t just talk to us about PE… When my teacher congratulated me about getting an award in assembly it made me feel great and gave me a bit of motivation to carry on trying hard.”

Results

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“Mr **** gives us nicknames which is funny and the lesson is just more relaxed. He tries to make bonds with the girls around the school, not just in PE, like if he sees us around he has a laugh with us.”

Students felt valued when teachers interacted with them on a more holistic level, rather than restricting the relationship to the physical education environment.

**Mutual Respect**

The development of mutual respect between students and teachers was emphasised by participants to establish and maintain a positive relationship.

“It's really important that there is a respect between students and the teachers in PE. ...Mrs **** always says that respect that is a two way thing and it is important that you earn it.”

“It makes us feel more motivated in PE. He makes us feel more comfortable, like he feels more like a friend than a teacher. He's like a really good friend, but knows where the line is when it comes to getting work done.”

Participants respected their teachers if a traditional hierarchical relationship was relaxed, yet there was an understanding of the relative roles of students and teachers. As part of a mutually respectful relationship, collaboration between teachers and students emerged as a sub-theme in increasing engagement.

“It is definitely better when we work together. Sometimes lessons get boring and he asks us what we could do to have more fun or make us work harder... Recently they've given us the chance to choose a new sport to practice in lessons like stuff that we've never done before... It's just nice to know we get a say in what we do in some lessons.”

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The results indicate some salient features of the teacher-student relationship within physical education. Emergent themes revealed three key characteristics of the teacher-student relationship which influence learners’ engagement within the subject: approachability and trust, teacher effort and care, and mutual respect. Here, these results are discussed in light of the coach-athlete relationship literature with specific reference to Jowett's (2007) 3 Cs model. Limitations of the study are addressed and implications for practice are given. Participants emphasised the importance of the approachability of teachers in physical education. In particular, students valued opportunities to talk to their teachers and the relationship was strengthened when teachers empathised and listened to students.

Through approachability and trust, students implied that they were more likely to engage in PE, even if they previously disliked the subject. This resonates with Jowett's (2007) construct of ‘closeness’ which represents coaches’ and athletes’ affective ties, such as liking, trusting, and appreciating each other. Closeness may improve the coach-athlete relationship and consequently enhance team cohesion (Jowett & Chaundy, 2004), passion (Lafrenière et al. 2008) and satisfaction (Lorimer & Jowett, 2009). In corroboration, Salminen and Liukkonen (1996) emphasise the significance having closeness and emotional connection with a coach can have on satisfaction levels. Therefore teachers should provide opportunities for dedicated ‘one to one’ time with students and ensure they create a safe, supportive climate in which students feel comfortable to discuss any issues.

Interlinked with the theme of approachability and trust, participants revealed how relationships are developed through teacher effort and care. In particular, students perceived greater teacher effort and care when staff showed an interest in them outside of the PE environment. Students suggested the relationship strengthened when PE teachers interacted with them outside of lesson time, often informally, but also within lessons when the topic of conversation was not necessarily about PE. The application of effort to build a positive relationship aligns with Jowett’s (2007) concept of ‘commitment’, a cognitive attachment and long term orientation to one another. In support, Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela (1998) asserted that coaches with a genuine commitment to athlete development can help enhance the trust and respect between them and ultimately improve their motivation levels, whereas a lack of social support negatively impacts athlete satisfaction levels (Gould & Bridges, 1997). This is reflected in the current study as participants made specific references to the interest PE teachers showed regarding their academic progress in general, showing a holistic approach to student development. Physical education teachers should ensure they connect with students across a range of school activities. Through greater perceptions of effort and care, teachers demonstrate more commitment to students, which can subsequently impact students’ commitment towards and engagement within physical education.

Mutual respect emerged as another pertinent characteristic of the pedagogical relationship between teacher and student. Data suggests that whilst students enjoyed a personal, jovial element to the relationship, they also valued the discipline instilled by...
teachers. Respect was established with clear roles and an understanding of learning objectives. This is echoed in the coach-athlete relationship literature as Poczwardowski, Barrot and Henschen (2002) emphasise the importance of respect, mutual needs, goals and shared knowledge in building a positive relationship. Students felt respect was mutual when they were able to collaborate with their teachers. Specifically, students provided input into learning activities and the physical education curriculum, indicating a balance of power incongruent to traditional hierarchical relationships. This reflects the latest review of the national curriculum, which emphasises the new freedom schools have to create a ‘local curriculum’ that is most beneficial to their students (Department of Education, 2013) and is underpinned by further links to Jowett’s (2007) 3Cs model. The concept of ‘complementarity’ represents coaches’ and athletes’ behavioural transactions of cooperation, responsiveness, and affiliation. In this case, behaviours indicate the relative roles of teachers and students whilst cooperation is present when students have input into the PE curriculum. It is recommended therefore, that schools and teachers have a degree of flexibility when planning lessons and the wider curriculum to engage female students through enhanced cooperation.

Whilst the key themes emphasise characteristics of a positive relationship, participants also highlighted the lack of time teachers spend with students, with interactions restricted by the minimal hours of PE lessons per week. As a result, the potential for developing a good relationship is often compromised. This problem is also evident in coaching as Jowett and Ntoumanis (2004) suggest that due to competitive environments, coaches spend less time with their athletes and the relationship suffers. This demonstrates the difficulties PE teachers encounter when building relationships with students, further emphasising the need for a flexible curriculum and greater interaction across wider school activities.

The findings of this study provide useful insight into the student-teacher relationship within a physical education environment, however, the limitations of this study must be addressed. The unrepresentative nature of the sample may limit the extent to which findings can be generalised. However, the purpose of qualitative research is to generate ‘rich’ data from a small sample (Gratton & Jones, 2004) and therefore provide a platform for further research. Another limitation is the comparison between teaching and coaching, which have some important differences. Indeed, they are distinctly different as teaching often involves working with larger groups to a rigid curriculum (Chelladurai & Kuga, 1996). Although coach-athlete relationship theory provides a framework for better understanding the teacher-student relationship, practitioners should be aware of these key differences when applying the findings.

In conclusion, this study has revealed three key characteristics of the teacher-student relationship within physical education: approachability and trust, teacher effort and care, and mutual respect. Practical implications for teachers and schools include opportunities for ‘one on one’ time to promote trust and a comfortable environment for students to interact with their teachers. Staff should also show a holistic interest in student development and interact with learners through a range of cross-school activities not limited to the PE setting. Furthermore, schools should encourage cooperation and collaboration by enabling students input into their own learning activities and curriculum. The concepts of approachability and trust, teacher effort and care, and mutual respect reflect those of Jowett’s (2007) 3Cs model of closeness, commitment and complementarity, and the wider body of coach-athlete relationship literature. Whilst there are some important differences between coaching and teaching roles, this research extends the body of knowledge into pedagogical relationships, which can lead to greater engagement within physical education and sport.
References


