



The role of community sports coaches in creating optimal social conditions for life skill development and transferability – a salutogenic perspective

Sabina Super, Kirsten Verkooijen & Maria Koelen

To cite this article: Sabina Super, Kirsten Verkooijen & Maria Koelen (2016): The role of community sports coaches in creating optimal social conditions for life skill development and transferability – a salutogenic perspective, *Sport, Education and Society*

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2016.1145109>



Published online: 15 Feb 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The role of community sports coaches in creating optimal social conditions for life skill development and transferability – a salutogenic perspective

Sabina Super , Kirsten Verkooijen and Maria Koelen

Department of Social Sciences, Chair Group Health and Society, Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Sport is widely recognised as having the potential to enhance the personal development of socially vulnerable youth, yet there is very limited knowledge on how community sports coaches can create optimal social conditions for life skill development and transferability. We adopt a salutogenic approach in order to study whether and how community sports coaches create these optimal social conditions. Based on the salutogenic framework, a thematic analysis was conducted of 15 in-depth interviews with community sports coaches providing sports lessons to socially vulnerable youth. As part of the interviews, the sports coaches were presented with several training scenarios and asked how they would respond in specific training situations. The results showed that the sports coaches aimed to create meaningful sporting experiences for youths. These meaningful sporting experiences were considered a precondition for keeping youths engaged in the sporting activities, as well as a precondition for life skill development. The sports coaches specifically focused on creating little moments of success and on making sure that the youths felt they belonged to a group. In order to ensure that the youths could experience moments of success, specific coaching strategies were implemented to increase the youths' comprehensibility and manageability in specific sport situations. According to the sports coaches, experiencing little moments of success could contribute to an increase in socially vulnerable youths' understanding of the everyday challenges that they face, as well as contribute to their ability to deal with these challenges. Creating meaningful sporting experiences may help youths 'to learn to cope' – a skill that could be beneficial over their lifespan and in different societal domains.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 26 August 2015
Accepted 19 January 2016

KEYWORDS

Salutogenesis; socially vulnerable youth; sense of coherence; coping; sport pedagogy

1. Introduction

Socially vulnerable youth are characterised by an accumulation of negative experiences with the institutions of society (e.g. family or school) that lead to distorted relationships with those institutions and to social disconnectedness (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Coalter, 2012; Vettenburg, 1998). Sport is widely recognised as having the potential to enhance the personal development of socially vulnerable youth, using its capacity to repair some of these distorted relationships, albeit with the warning that sport in itself does not produce positive outcomes (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Gould &

Carson, 2008). A large body of research emphasises the importance of the social conditions within the sports setting for positive youth development (Haudenhuyse et al., 2012; Sandford, Duncombe, & Armour, 2008).

The sports coach is a key player in creating social conditions for positive youth development (Camiré, Forneris, Trudel, & Bernard, 2011; Trottier & Robitaille, 2014), especially in relation to creating a safe and motivational sports climate in which there are opportunities for life skill development. To a great extent, the coach's characteristics and direct and indirect teaching strategies influence whether learning processes occur in the sports setting and whether these lead to the transferability of life skills to other societal domains (Gould & Carson, 2008). However, little is known about how sports coaches can approach life skill development for socially vulnerable youth, especially in the context of transferability (Camiré, 2014; Gould & Carson, 2008; Turnnidge, Côté, & Hancock, 2014). This study aims to investigate whether and how community sports coaches create optimal social conditions for life skill development and transferability.

Turnnidge et al. (2014) distinguish two approaches to transferability: the explicit and the implicit approach. The explicit approach includes the deliberate teaching of life skill transferability during the sports programme, for example by discussing the applicability of life skills in other societal domains. Based strongly on positive youth development principles, several sports programmes build on explicit strategies to promote the transferability of life skills (Papacharisis, Goudas, Danish, & Theodorakis, 2005; Walsh, Ozaeta, & Wright, 2010). Research into the effectiveness of sports programmes adopting the explicit approach shows promising results, but at the same time questions are raised about the sustainability of these programmes (i.e. they rely on funding and other resources) and the primarily adult-driven learning process (Turnnidge et al., 2014). In addition, although community sports coaches sometimes do receive formal coaching training, very often such training focuses on the technical aspects of sports coaching (e.g. exercises to develop specific sporting skills) and not on the pedagogical knowledge necessary for life skill development and transferability. Furthermore, very often sports lessons are provided by volunteer sports coaches who have had no formal training of any kind (Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012). Within community-based sports programmes, the sports coaches are often focused on developing skills without paying specific attention to the transferability of these skills to other societal domains. This implicit approach does not mean that no deliberate strategies are implemented to teach life skills, but the sports coaches rather focus on creating optimal environments in which youths can learn these skills without specifically discussing transferability. The implicit approach relies on youth-driven or experiential learning and is based on the idea that youth can be active agents in their own development (Holt, Tink, Mandigo, & Fox, 2008; Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005).

It is important to examine how sports coaches approach the issue of transfer. Recent studies investigated how excellent sports coaches taught life skills to their athletes and how they addressed transferability (Camiré et al., 2011, 2012; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007). However, these studies only included excellent sports coaches who had received both formal and informal training. Trottier and Robitaille (2014) conducted interviews with high school sports coaches and community sports coaches, and they found evidence that the sports coaches adopted two different explicit transfer strategies: having specific discussions to demonstrate the usefulness of the learned life skills in non-sports settings and asking athletes to put the learned life skills into practice in another societal domain. Several sports coaches also stated that they promoted life skills transfer without applying specific strategies (i.e. implicit approach). However, this study included only high school basketball coaches and community swimming coaches, reducing the generalisability of the findings to other sports settings. In addition, the question remains as to how community sports coaches can enhance the personal development of socially vulnerable youth in comparison to the athlete groups currently studied.

Research on the influence of sports participation on the personal development of socially vulnerable youth has been strongly based on the positive youth development paradigm (Damon, 2004). The present study aims to complement this body of knowledge by adopting a salutogenic

perspective. The salutogenic model was introduced by Antonovsky (1979, 1987) and focuses on how people manage everyday-life challenges by adopting strategies to deal with the stressors they are facing. Socially vulnerable youth face these stressors on a daily basis, and being able to deal with them effectively is crucial for their personal development, as it may help them to lead a healthy and productive life. At the same time, youth who experience more stress in various life domains often have a reduced coping ability compared to 'normal' youth (Moksnes, Rannestad, Byrne, & Espnes, 2011). The sports setting might be a setting in which socially vulnerable youth can learn to develop the strategies and to identify the resources that can help them to deal with the challenges of everyday life. Taking a salutogenic perspective, we aim to understand how community sports coaches create optimal social conditions for life skill development and transferability.

2. Theoretical framework

Antonovsky's (1979) salutogenic model focuses on the question of what keeps or makes people healthy. The salutogenic approach is complementary to the pathogenic approach, which focuses on the causes and risk factors for disease. According to Antonovsky, people are confronted with stressors throughout their lives, and being able to deal with them allows individuals to move forward, to develop and to lead a healthy and productive life. Stressors in themselves are not negative; on the contrary, they can be salutary if people are able to deal with them effectively. In order to deal with the stressors of everyday life, people need to develop strategies, for example by avoiding stressors, by defining them as non-stressors or by managing them (Antonovsky, 1987). For this latter strategy, it is important that people are able to understand the challenge they are facing, identify resources to deal with the challenge and feel that dealing with the challenge is meaningful. This ability to deal with everyday-life challenges is reflected in the salutogenic concept of sense of coherence (SOC). SOC consists of three components: comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness, and is defined as 'a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement' (Antonovsky, 1987, p. 19). The resources that can be used to deal with stressors are called general resistance resources (GRRs), which can be found within the individual (e.g. attitudes or knowledge) or within the environment (e.g. social support or money).

The salutogenic model aligns well with the positive youth development paradigm, as both appreciate the assets and resources that youths have available to meet the demands of everyday life, rather than focusing on the risks or stressors in young people's lives. At the same time, the salutogenic model adds to the positive youth development approach because it aids in understanding how youths can effectively deal with the stressors of everyday life and how this ability to cope develops in youths' lives. Nonetheless, current salutogenic research in young populations is limited. Several studies have focused on quantitatively assessing the correlations between SOC and various health behaviours (Humphrey & McDowell, 2013) and health outcomes such as emotional health (Moksnes, Espnes, & Lillefjell, 2012) and mental health (Lekkou, Åström, & Hägglöf, 2007). In addition, researchers have begun to study how SOC develops in childhood and early adulthood (García-Moya, Moreno, & Jiménez-Iglesias, 2013; Marsh, Clinkinbeard, Thomas, & Evans, 2007). However, further research is necessary to examine the factors that contribute to the development of SOC, the role of various developmental contexts in building up SOC (García-Moya et al., 2013) and the possibilities for strengthening SOC explicitly, for example in sport-for-development settings (Super, Wagemakers, Picavet, Verkooijen, & Koelen, 2015). As sport is often seen as a promising setting for positive youth development, taking a salutogenic approach we aim to complement the current literature in the field by investigating how community sports coaches create optimal social conditions for life skill development and transferability.

3. Methods

3.1. Study design and participants

This study is part of the research project Youth, Care and Sport that aims to unravel the value of sport for socially vulnerable youth (Super, Hermens, Verkooijen, & Koelen, 2014). Interviews were conducted with 15 sports coaches (9 male, 6 female) working with socially vulnerable youth in local sports clubs. All these sports coaches provided training at community sports clubs, sometimes located in local schools. The sports coaches offered different types of sports (see Table 1). The length of their experience in training socially vulnerable groups differed, as well as the extent to which they received formal coaching training. Several sports coaches trained ‘normal’ groups in which one or more vulnerable youths participated, four sports coaches additionally gave training to ‘specialised’ groups with only youth from youth care organisations. Youth care organisations in the Netherlands provide services to youths who are (temporarily) experiencing problems in their personal development, for example because they have learning or behavioural problems or because they live in settings that hinder this development (e.g. parents incapable of providing proper care). The Dutch youth system contains three layers of care, of which the primary layer (i.e. for detecting problems and intervening at an early stage) and the secondary layer (i.e. for specialised care) are referred to as ‘youth care’. This includes school social work, educational counselling services as well as more specialised (mental) health care.

3.2. Procedure

The sports coaches were selected after consultation with the youth care organisations about the local sports clubs with which they often collaborated. The coaches were chosen in such a way that there

Table 1. Detailed information about the sports coaches.

Sports coach	Gender	Type of sport	Trainer experience	Pedagogical background	Setting of sports activities
John	Male	Soccer	>10 years	Limited, mainly by experience and technical training courses	Community sports club
Peter	Male	Kickboxing	5–10 years	Followed several courses on pedagogy	Sports lessons in schools
Brian	Male	Various sports, mainly soccer	>10 years	Extensive pedagogical knowledge	Community sports club + specialised groups at community sports club
Maria	Female	Basketball	<2 years	No pedagogical background	Sports lessons in schools
Christy	Female	Basketball	<2 years	Extensive pedagogical knowledge	Sports lessons in schools
Michael	Male	Judo	>10 years	Limited, mainly by experience	Community sports club
Lisa	Female	Budo sport	>10 years	Extensive pedagogical knowledge	Community sports club + specialised groups at community sports club
Emma	Female	Gymnastics	>10 years	Limited, mainly by experience and technical training courses	Community sports club
Evelyne	Female	Hockey	5–10 years	Limited, mainly by experience and technical training courses	Sports lessons in schools
Charlie	Male	Basketball	5–10 years	No pedagogical background	Sports lessons in schools
Marc	Male	Hockey	<2 years	No pedagogical background	Community sports club
Claire	Female	Hockey	2–5 years	Extensive pedagogical knowledge	Community sports club
Tom	Male	Hockey	2–5 years	No pedagogical background	Community sports club
Jack	Male	Tennis	2–5 years	Limited, mainly by experience	Community sports club + specialised groups at community sports club
Richard	Male	Soccer	2–5 years	Limited, mainly by experience	Community sports club + specialised groups at community sports club

was a large variation in type of sports, age and sex of the sports coach, as well as experience in training socially vulnerable youth. The selected sports coaches were contacted and asked whether they were willing to participate in the interview; they all agreed. They were asked to give informed consent on the understanding that they had the right to leave the study at any point in time without giving a reason, that the interviews would be tape-recorded and that their anonymity would be guaranteed. The interviews were conducted by two researchers (SS and KV) and lasted between 20 and 62 minutes (on average 43 minutes). The interviews took place at the interviewee's preferred location.

3.3. Interview guide

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the sports coaches. The interviews started with background questions addressing the training experience of the sports coaches, the composition of the teams they trained and their pedagogical background. These background questions were followed by three blocks of questions based on the coaching literature (Camiré et al., 2012; Gould et al., 2007). These three blocks aimed to (1) explore the philosophy of the sports coaches when they provided training; (2) question more practically how the sports coaches provided training; and (3) examine the sports coaches' understanding of 'socially vulnerable youth', as well as explore how they adapted their training (if at all) to socially vulnerable youth.

Several training scenarios were described to the sports coaches, and they were asked to imagine how they would respond in each of these scenarios. The scenarios described different types of youths and addressed various types of problem behaviour that are often prevalent in youth care settings. The scenarios were based on interviews conducted with youth care professionals, where they described the issues and behaviour of socially vulnerable youth (Hermens, Super, Verkooijen, & Koelen, 2015). In preparation for the interviews, the main investigator (SS) conducted two pilot interviews to ensure that the interview questions were comprehensible and that the scenarios were understandable for the interviewees.

3.4. Data analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim style and then coded and analysed using software for qualitative data analysis (Atlas.ti). In order to ensure anonymity, all the participants were assigned pseudonyms. A thematic analysis was conducted following the guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006), which distinguished six phases in thematic analysis starting with familiarising oneself with the data and generating initial codes. The initial coding was conducted by the first author (SS). A deductive approach guided by the salutogenic model was used for the analysis. Codes relating to the salutogenic model were mapped onto the data set. These codes were based on the salutogenic literature (Antonovsky, 1979, 1987) and included the three SOC components (i.e. comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness) and the three characteristics of life experiences that may strengthen SOC (i.e. consistency, load balance and socially valued decision-making). In addition, data segments that indicated a coaching action or philosophy were coded (Trottier & Robitaille, 2014), as also data segments that indicated either an implicit or an explicit transfer strategy (Turnnidge et al., 2014). After the initial coding, the codes were ordered in themes, and a thematic map of the data was produced. Codes that did not fit the themes were reviewed to see whether they formed a new theme. On the basis of these codes, the second author (KV) coded half of the interviews. The coding was compared to ensure that the data segments were categorised correctly. The two researchers' categorisation was almost identical; any discrepancies in categorisation were discussed with the third author (MK) until agreement was reached. A first version of the results section was drafted by the first author (SS) using quotations from the transcripts. The results section was then reviewed by the two other researchers (KV and MK) to ensure that the text rendered an accurate description of the data.

4. Results

The results section is divided into two segments. The first section deals with the coaching actions to create optimal conditions for life skill development and transferability. The second section deals with the question of how sports coaches approach the transfer of life skills in community sports settings.

4.1. Creating optimal conditions for life skill development

The sports coaches had specific ideas on how to create a sports environment in which socially vulnerable youth could develop and learn life skills. In the following paragraphs, several aspects of the sport coaches' efforts to improve life skill development are addressed. The results are structured on the basis of the three SOC elements.

4.1.1. Meaningfulness: a precondition for engagement and learning

When asked about the overall philosophy of offering sports to socially vulnerable youth, all the sports coaches replied that offering fun activities for youths was most important. Sport was considered an outlet for youths because of the opportunities it creates to forget about the issues they had to deal with in everyday life. Offering fun activities was essential in keeping youths engaged in the sports lessons as it ensured that they would return every week:

When they are having fun, they will come. When they are not having fun, they will stop coming. Or they have to come because of their parents. And when they are not having fun, they will become annoying. (Brian)

Besides enjoyment being considered a precondition for youth engagement, it was also considered a prerequisite for life skill development and transferability. Five sports coaches, for example, mentioned how enjoyment opened the door to personal development and improved performance:

The first thing you say is the word fun and that is why I say that first ... because the second thing [personal development] only comes second in this target group. Because if there is no fun to be had, then they will leave ... they will drop out. And you will never get to the second point [personal development]. So, first of all, you will just have to make sure they are having fun and then you can start changing the second. (Jack)

In addition to creating a fun sports environment, eight sports coaches emphasised that creating a safe and motivational climate was important as well, for example:

At the sports club I always say very clearly to the parents ... of course we are a judo centre, a multi-action club, we are a club. But at the club our striving is very important ... the child must feel socially and emotionally comfortable and then the rest will also work out fine. (Lisa)

The sports coaches also emphasised that, as part of a safe and motivational climate, it was important to make sure that youths felt appreciated in their team, that they felt they were part of a group and, most importantly, that they felt they were a 'normal' part of society. There was a strong focus on 'forgetting all the problems' and ensuring that the youths would not be labelled 'problematic'. Nine sports coaches described how important it was for the youths to be part of a 'normal' group:

It is just ... I can imagine that these people feel alone as well sometimes. Because I notice ... I think ... you do notice that you are different. And then it seems good to me to have something where you can have something in common with other people. And then it is nice if you at least can be part of a team where you can actually feel a team spirit. (Marc)

The idea that sport was a meaningful activity for socially vulnerable youth permeated all the interviews. Making sure that the youths experienced sport as a meaningful activity could help in reaching behavioural goals, in making sure that they persisted when things got tough, in motivating them to try something new, in strengthening their personal development and, finally, in improving their competitive performance. During the training sessions, the sports coaches tried to create little moments

of success, complimenting every accomplishment and being positive about the youths' attempts to take on a new challenge:

Compliments if he does ... no, not only if he does something well. Just always give them compliments. I know that helps for sure. Because it is just ... it is just good to hear that you are good at something. That must be nice even for someone who is insecure. (Marc)

4.1.2. Comprehensibility: make it insightful

In discussing the various training scenarios, the sports coaches clearly demonstrated *how* they tried to create little moments of success (i.e. meaningfulness). They did so, first of all, by making sure that the youths understood how they could achieve success (i.e. comprehensibility). And second, they made sure that the youths could identify the skills they could use to be successful (i.e. manageability). Regarding the first aspect, several coaching actions were taken to increase the youths' comprehensibility. One important strategy used by the sports coaches was to structure the training sessions, as indicated by John:

Well, what is most important ... is that you eh ... offer structure ... that is really important in any case. And structure means ... well, being on time ... uh ... where do we meet ... dressing room ... always the same dressing room, for example. Always train on the same field. They need that too, that is a resource. (John)

Twelve sports coaches mentioned that they stimulated youths to reflect on specific situations to increase their understanding of the situation and to help them to identify strategies that they could use to deal with sport-specific situations. Because the sports coaches asked questions, instead of giving instructions and feedback, the youths had to take an active role in their personal development. John explained how novice coaches often make the mistake of instructing youths, instead of asking questions:

I think that many novice coaches think that you have to prompt them and do everything yourself. And that is especially difficult with youths who are in youth care, because they already have to do so many things ... they have to do this and that ... they have been through this and that ... and I think you have to choose a different attitude by making them self-conscious and by making them responsible. (John)

These coaching strategies, such as having a clear structure during training and asking youths questions in order to encourage them reflect on situations and actions, may help them to understand 'how things work' in the sports environment. In addition, this comprehensibility might transfer to other societal domains, as pointed out by Brian:

But I do think that you will learn things here [sports club] ... that you learn to understand why things are the way they are. That is what you learn there too and eventually you are going to use that to survive in society. (Brian)

The sports coaches also indicated that they held to the same rules, values and norms as those applicable in the community or at school. For the 'specialised' groups, the sports coaches adopted the same structure and rules as in the 'normal' training groups at the local sports club. These commonalities between groups and societal domains, according to the sports coaches, helped youths to understand what was 'normal' and what was expected from them in society. Brian stated:

If you learn ... well ... also at a company it works the same ... or at school too ... that is also offering structure ... then you must be on time ... but also at a club ... you must be on time. And then you have your classmates or team sports for example, you have to deal with one another. If you are too late for the team, then your trainer will be fed up, and those children will be distracted. If you arrive too late at school ... then the teacher is explaining something and has to start over again. So those are many of the same things that you can come across and I think you learn the same thing everywhere. At the sports club you have the same learning elements as in school or at work. (Brian)

4.1.3. Manageability: balance between stressors and resources

The sports coaches also aimed to increase the youths' ability to identify skills that they could use to be successful. It is very important to note that success was not necessarily defined in terms of 'victory', but also very often in terms of 'mastery'. A central component of the training sessions was the balance

between challenges and resources, so as to increase the youths' sense of manageability. Nine sports coaches were wary of implementing easy and repetitive exercises, as this would not stimulate youths to take a next step. Several sports coaches indicated that, in order to attain personal development, the youths would need to face challenges of a very diverse nature in order to move forward. This is exactly where learning and personal development takes place, as indicated by Charlie:

Lots of variation, yes. So that the children do not say ... oh what a difficult exercise. No, then they know to play tag with the ball, if they stop they are out. Those kinds of things. Lots of variation and try to do something different every week. Those children really like that. And at a certain point they will learn by themselves. (Charlie)

Other sports coaches warned against experiences of failure, and they emphasised the importance of easy exercises, so that the youths could succeed. Brian explained how he balanced the difficulty of the exercises in order to challenge the youths to improve as well as to ensure that they could succeed:

You have to shape the exercise in such a way that you are sure that he can succeed the first time. For example ... a nice example ... is with hockey. Last week the children were allowed to choose either the large or the small ball. He took the larger ball, but instantly had some good shots. He scored ten times and then I took the smaller ball. While he could do it easily, but he just needs some confidence ... the larger ball is important. You must constantly make sure that he experiences moments of success. And at the point that he is starting to experience many moments of success during the easy exercises, he is going to take the next step. No sooner than that. (Brian)

To keep the balance, sports coaches needed to offer resources to tackle the challenges. They used several strategies to do this. One of these involved letting the youths come up with the resources themselves, by asking them what they would need to complete the exercise. Other strategies included providing clear rules during the lessons, encouraging team work, providing structure in the exercises and giving them various options from which to choose during an exercise. Maria gave an example of how asking questions could help youths to tackle an exercise and create a moment of success:

And usually we ask, what do you need to be able to complete the exercise? And in general there is always some incentive that makes the youths do the exercise. For example by playing against me or the other sports coach, so he knows, well, ... then I cannot get hit unexpectedly or ... I want to be on this or that side. And then we adjust the exercise in such a way that the youth can still participate and experience that moment of success. (Maria)

For many youths, competition is a challenge that they actually like. Competition plays an important role in sports in general, and some sports coaches indicated that competitive elements could offer youths extra motivation to perform. For example, Claire explained how she used competitive elements to increase the focus of the youths during exercises:

What I can do as well is to work with points. We are going to shoot at goal. Scoring on the center or right hand side earns 2 points, through the middle is 1 point. Then we are going to see who scores the most points ... and very often you see that by including a competitive element in the exercise ... then they are already ... oeh I want to win, so I will concentrate more. (Claire)

Other sports coaches were more reluctant to include competitive elements in their training, as this could negatively influence the youths' self-confidence, if they failed in the exercises or would lost a competition game. This could then disturb their feeling of manageability. Jack explained why he did not include competitive elements in his training:

Because at the outset, in the first place, you want youths to start liking sport. It is already very difficult to get them involved in sport. And well ... failing, having fear, losing ... that is quite a big issue with these youths, with this group of youths. Yes, then it is ... especially if we compete against each other ... I am afraid to come to the sports field and I lose to you. (Jack)

4.2. Community sport coaches' transfer strategies

As shown in the previous section, all the sports coaches had very clear ideas about their coaching philosophy and their coaching actions. However, most of the sports coaches indicated that they did not intentionally use strategies to stimulate life skill transferability, and hence they fitted in the

implicit approach. Three sports coaches made reference to explicit strategies, but this was limited to mentioning to the youths that the skills they demonstrated during the training sessions were also applicable in other societal domains. Peter explained, for example, how he emphasised to the youths the importance of displaying perseverance both during the sports lessons and in everyday life:

It helps you a lot with school, with work. I always say, the same perseverance and discipline that you need during your exam period ... is what you need during the [sports] lesson. And that what I now have to squeeze out of you, you can later do on your own. It is the same perseverance, self-confidence and discipline you need when you have been rejected for the twentieth time for an internship or a job. (Peter)

One of the reasons for not paying explicit attention to transfer was that, according to the sports coaches, the youths should not experience the sports setting as an educational or a therapeutic setting. The main objective of the sports coaches was to provide a fun activity for them and to divert their attention away from everyday hassles and problems. Sports participation was seen by the sports coaches as an outlet for youths. Richard explained why he tried to refrain from creating a therapeutic atmosphere during sports lessons:

You should just look at it like this: they are just youths or children with emotional baggage. But in principle, you do not want to know everything about that. Because that is not what you are for. That is why they have guidance [from youth care professionals]. You are there just for fun. And that is also the way they have to think about you. (Richard)

A second reason for not paying explicit attention to the transfer of life skills was a lack of time, as John explained:

Ehm ... well I think for sure you will take that [life skill transfer] with you, but trying to pay explicit attention to it? I think that ... but I think that it is very difficult as a trainer to do that as well. In all honesty, I think that there is just not enough time. (John)

Although, in general, the sports coaches paid limited attention to explicit strategies for life skill transferability, they firmly believed that youths transferred life skills, such as perseverance, team work and respect, from the sport setting to other societal domains. Thirteen sports coaches indicated that life skill transferability was an automatic or unconscious process:

Yes, I absolutely believe in it [transfer of life skills]. Absolutely! Yes, they pick things up by themselves ... or by themselves ... they pick it up from the training sessions and the matches and the circumstances surrounding the sporting experiences ... what you should do ... or should not do ... what you can do differently ... so what normal guys do ... they pick that up absolutely. (John)

5. Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to investigate whether and how community sports coaches create optimal social conditions for life skill development and transferability. The community sports coaches interviewed in this study gave sports lessons to socially vulnerable youth, and they believed strongly in the transferability of life skills to other societal domains. In general, the sports coaches adopted an implicit transfer strategy, focusing strongly on creating a safe, fun and motivational climate for youths. Even though most of the sports coaches did not employ explicit strategies to increase life skill transferability, they held clear ideas about how to create optimal social conditions for personal development. Their coaching philosophies included enjoyment as the main objective of sports lessons. In addition, the sports coaches emphasised the importance of providing meaningful experiences by creating a sports environment in which the youths would feel appreciated and 'normal', allowing them to forget the hassles and problems of everyday life. Little moments of success were created by making sure that the youths understood how they could achieve success and what skills they could use to be successful in the sports setting. By increasing the youths' comprehensibility and manageability in sport-specific situations, the sports coaches tried to create meaningful sporting experiences that could contribute to the youths' understanding of the challenges of everyday life, as well as to their ability to deal with these challenges.

In line with other studies that emphasised the importance of enjoyment for personal development (Adachi & Willoughby, 2014; Light & Harvey, 2015), fun and enjoyment were the primary elements of the coaching philosophies in this current study. In addition, the sports coaches focused on creating sports environments where youths would feel safe and 'normal'. In this study, we have labelled these actions as creating meaningfulness. According to Antonovsky (1979), meaningfulness is the feeling that 'the demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement (p. 19)'. In order to keep youths engaged in the activities, as well as to attain personal development, this meaningfulness was considered a precondition by the sports coaches. This corresponds with the idea of Antonovsky (1987) that the motivational component of meaningfulness is most important for salutary movements:

The direction of movement will be determined by the sense of meaningfulness. If one strongly cares and believes that one understands the problems confronting one, there will be a powerful motivation to seek out resources, being loath to give up the search until they are found. Without any such motivation, however, one ceases to respond to stimuli, and the world soon becomes incomprehensible; nor is one impelled to search for resources. (p. 21)

The sports coaches strongly emphasised the need to build a safe and caring climate in order to create these meaningful experiences. Indeed, the importance of a safe and caring sports climate for youth development has been stressed by many researchers (Camiré, 2014; Cronin & Allen, 2015; Haudenhuyse et al., 2012).

The sports coaches mentioned a plethora of coaching actions that they used to create little moments of success (i.e. meaningfulness). The actions were mainly directed at making sure that the youths understood 'how things work' (i.e. comprehensibility) and giving them the opportunity to experience mastery (i.e. manageability). The sports coaches placed great emphasis on enhancing the youths' sense of comprehensibility and manageability by balancing the difficulty of the exercises and the skills the youths possessed to be successful. This balance meant that the challenges during the sports lessons should not be too difficult, but on the other hand they should not be too easy either, because then the youths would not learn anything. From a salutogenic perspective, it can be argued that stressors can be salutary and even necessary in order to move forward (Antonovsky, 1979). At the same time, stressors can be harmful if there is no adequate response available and hence can lead to breakdown. Consequently, it is important that the youths have adequate response options to deal with the stressors in the sports setting. The experience of not having enough resources (e.g. skills) to deal with a challenge can hinder personal development; this results in generalised resistance resources-resistance deficits in Antonovsky's (1987) terminology. In this respect, some sports coaches warned against the use of competitive elements in the sports setting, because the youths might experience feelings of failure if they lost a match for example. Bean, Fortier, Post, and Chima (2014) conducted a systematic literature review of the negative physical and psychological effects of organised sports on youth and developed a model to explain the circumstances in which positive versus negative experiences may arise. Three factors were considered important in making this distinction: the level of practice volume, the motivational climate created by sports coaches and the intentional teaching of life skills. Negative experiences in sports are more likely to occur if young athletes engage in a high volume of training, if little attention is paid to the motivational climate and if there is no intentional teaching of life skills. Hence, the sports coach plays an important role in ensuring that youths have positive sporting experiences in order to reach positive youth development.

According to salutogenic theory, SOC develops in childhood and early adulthood when people have life experiences characterised by consistency, overload-underload balance and socially valued decision-making (Antonovsky, 1987). These three characteristics of life experiences seemed to be present in the coaching actions examined in this study. In relation to consistency, the sports coaches focused on creating a clear structure in the training sessions. In relation to an overload-underload balance, the sports coaches implemented exercises that were both challenging and

manageable. The last characteristic, socially valued decision-making, is more difficult to relate to the coaching actions, because the sports coaches at first sight did not seem to include youths in decision-making during the sports lessons. However, as Jakobsson (2012) found in her qualitative study among Swedish teenagers that the meaningfulness of sport for youths lies in 'sharing sporting activities [with peers] with a common goal' (p. 12). This element is reflected in the coaching actions, as the sports coaches placed a strong emphasis on team work and being part of a group. Cronin and Allen (2015) examined the relationship between the coaching climate, youth developmental experiences and psychological well-being and found that the effect of the coaching climate on psychological well-being was mediated via the development of personal and social skills (e.g. controlling one's emotions or relationship development). They did not find evidence for the mediating effect of the other developmental experiences (i.e. cognitive skills, goal setting and initiative); this suggests that sports coaches should encourage youth to develop their personal and social skills in order to facilitate positive youth development.

We adopted a salutogenic approach because this aligns with the idea of sports as a tool for personal development. Its use in this study has improved our understanding of how sports coaches create optimal conditions in the sport setting for the personal development of socially vulnerable youth. The central concept of the salutogenic model, SOC, reflects the ability of people to orient themselves towards given stressors, to select a strategy in order to deal with these stressor and to feel that dealing with stressors is a meaningful activity (Antonovsky, 1979). This ability to deal with everyday-life stressors could help socially vulnerable youth to recognise challenges in the course of their lifespan. In this respect, it is important to note that SOC is a global orientation that can be applied to any given situation, as it addresses people's ability to deal with stressful situations even though they have not encountered the specific situation before. In line with this idea, it can be argued that young people with a stronger SOC are more likely to be able to use their life skills (i.e. their GRRs) to combat everyday-life stressors throughout their lives and in various situations. If sports participation leads to increased levels of SOC, this may explain why youth can transfer their life skills to other societal domains. This is not necessarily an explicit process intentionally steered by the sports coaches. As suggested by Turnnidge et al. (2014), sports can be beneficial for youth development without explicit attention being paid to life skill transfer when the activities are structured properly and when they stimulate youths to become active agents of their own development (Holt et al., 2008; Larson et al., 2005). The sports coach, however, plays an essential role in the implicit approach in the context of creating an environment that is conducive to youth's life skill development and transfer. For example, it is essential that the sports coaches ensure that the sporting experiences of youth induce implicit reflection in order to strengthen SOC (Super et al., 2015). As pointed out by several researchers, awareness of and reflection on the acquired life skills are essential to life skill transfer (Connaughton, Hanton, & Jones, 2010; Tamminen & Holt, 2012). However, longitudinal research is needed to confirm the idea that youths can develop and transfer life skills within the implicit approach.

Previous studies have examined the role of the sports coach in life skill teaching, and some studies have also addressed coaching strategies for life skill transfer (Camiré et al., 2011; Gould et al., 2007; Trottier & Robitaille, 2014). The results of our study align with the aforementioned studies regarding the strategies the sports coaches employ for positive youth development. The salutogenic focus of this study, however, has also drawn our attention to other aspects of the coaching strategies for personal development. As the salutogenic approach offers insights on what contributes to the personal development of youths and their ability to cope, this approach allowed us to examine some of the dilemmas community sports coaches experience in providing sports to socially vulnerable youth. These dilemmas became visible in the coaching scenarios where the sports coaches often seemed to struggle to find a balance between comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness. As discussed in the results section, creating meaningful sporting experiences was considered most important for sports participation as well as life skill development. Through these meaningful experiences, youths could acquire feelings of comprehensibility and manageability. At the same time, as

competition was seen as something that was very meaningful to youths, a minimum amount of comprehensibility and manageability was also seen as a requirement for creating moments of success during competition. It is therefore important to note that the three SOC elements are closely interlinked and cannot be considered separately (Super et al., 2015). Strengthening SOC is therefore a complex procedure that should include both actions that empower youths to use their available resources to meet the challenges they are facing and actions that stimulate them to reflect on their understanding of the challenge and the resources that they have to deal with them.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Sabina Super  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2586-1953>

Funding

This work was supported by NWO, the Dutch Organisation for Scientific Research [grant number 328-98-007].

References

- Adachi, P. J. C., & Willoughby, T. (2014). It's not how much you play, but how much you enjoy the game: The longitudinal associations between adolescents' self-esteem and the frequency versus enjoyment of involvement in sports. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 43(1), 137–145. doi:10.1007/s10964-013-9988-3
- Antonovsky, A. (1979). *Health, stress and coping*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Antonovsky, A. (1987). *Unraveling the mystery of health. How people manage stress and stay well*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bean, C., Fortier, M., Post, C., & Chima, K. (2014). Understanding how organized youth sport may be harming individual players within the family unit: A literature review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 11(10), 10226. doi:10.3390/ijerph111010226
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Camiré, M. (2014). Youth development in North American high school sport: Review and recommendations. *Quest*, 66(4), 495–511. doi:10.1080/00336297.2014.952448
- Camiré, M., Forneris, T., Trudel, P., & Bernard, D. (2011). Strategies for helping coaches facilitate positive youth development through sport. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*, 2(2), 92–99. doi:10.1080/21520704.2011.584246
- Camiré, M., Trudel, P., & Forneris, T. (2012). Coaching and transferring life skills: Philosophies and strategies used by model high school coaches. *The Sport Psychologist*, 26, 243–260. Retrieved from <http://journals.humankinetics.com/tsp-back-issues/tsp-volume-26-issue-2-june/coaching-and-transferring-life-skills-philosophies-and-strategies-used-by-model-high-school-coaches>
- Connaughton, D., Hanton, S., & Jones, G. (2010). The development and maintenance of mental toughness in the world's best performers. *Sport Psychologist*, 24(2), 168–193. Retrieved from <http://www.scopus.com/inward/record.url?eid=2-s2.0-77955892221&partnerID=40&md5=2d8c059529d2f9958d7f43eba6c66c71>
- Cronin, L. D., & Allen, J. B. (2015). Developmental experiences and well-being in sport: The importance of the coaching climate. *Sport Psychologist*, 29(1), 62–71. doi:10.1123/tsp.2014-0045
- Damon, W. (2004). What is positive youth development? *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 591, 13–24. doi:10.1177/0002716203260092
- Fraser-Thomas, J. L., Côté, J., & Deakin, J. (2005). Youth sport programs: An avenue to foster positive youth development. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 10(1), 19–40. doi:10.1080/1740898042000334890
- García-Moya, I., Moreno, C., & Jiménez-Iglesias, A. (2013). Understanding the joint effects of family and other developmental contexts on the sense of coherence (SOC): A person-focused analysis using the classification tree. *Journal of Adolescence*, 36(5), 913–923. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2013.07.007
- Gould, D., & Carson, S. (2008). Life skills development through sport: Current status and future directions. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 1(1), 58–78. doi:10.1080/17509840701834573
- Gould, D., Collins, K., Lauer, L., & Chung, Y. (2007). Coaching life skills through football: A study of award winning high school coaches. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 19(1), 16–37. doi:10.1080/10413200601113786

- Haudenhuyse, R., Theeboom, M., & Coalter, F. (2012). The potential of sports-based social interventions for vulnerable youth: Implications for sport coaches and youth workers. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 15(4), 437–454. doi:10.1080/13676261.2012.663895
- Hermens, N., Super, S., Verkooijen, K. T., & Koelen, M. (2015). Intersectoral action to enhance the social inclusion of socially vulnerable youth through sport: An exploration of the elements of successful partnerships between youth work organisations and local sports clubs. *Social Inclusion*, 3(3), 98–107. doi:10.17645/si.v3i3.139
- Holt, N. L., Tink, L. N., Mandigo, J. L., & Fox, K. R. (2008). Do youth learn life skills through their involvement in high school sport? A case study. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 31(2), 281–304. Retrieved from <http://www.scopus.com/inward/record.url?eid=2-s2.0-46049109960&partnerID=40&md5=305afb695a0a988e9a8d0ff8f47195e1>
- Humphrey, K., & McDowell, A. (2013). Sense of coherence as a predictor of risky health behaviours amongst teenage girls on a targeted youth development programme. *Journal of Public Mental Health*, 12(3), 146–152. doi:10.1108/jpmh-10-2012-0009
- Jakobsson, B. T. (2012). What makes teenagers continue? A salutogenic approach to understanding youth participation in Swedish club sports. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 19(3), 239–252. doi:10.1080/17408989.2012.754003
- Larson, R., Walker, K., & Pearce, N. (2005). A comparison of youth-driven and adult-driven youth programs: Balancing inputs from youth and adults. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 57–74. doi:10.1002/jcop.20035
- Lekkou, S., Åström, T., & Hägglöf, B. (2007). Self-reported mental health and sense of coherence among Swedish and Greek adolescents. *Review of Clinical Pharmacology and Pharmacokinetics, International Edition*, 21(1), 13–26. Retrieved from <http://www.scopus.com/inward/record.url?eid=2-s2.0-34248212753&partnerID=40&md5=dbab3ed0593a8bc32b01e8a0632815ad>
- Light, R. L., & Harvey, S. (2015). Positive pedagogy for sport coaching. *Sport, Education and Society*, 1–17. doi:10.1080/13573322.2015.1015977
- Marsh, S. C., Clinkinbeard, S. S., Thomas, R. M., & Evans, W. P. (2007). Risk and protective factors predictive of sense of coherence during adolescence. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 12(2), 281–284. doi:10.1177/1359105307074258
- Moksnes, U. K., Espnes, G. A., & Lillefjell, M. (2012). Sense of coherence and emotional health in adolescents. *Journal of Adolescence*, 35(2), 433–441. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2011.07.013
- Moksnes, U. K., Rannestad, T., Byrne, D. G., & Espnes, G. A. (2011). The association between stress, sense of coherence and subjective health complaints in adolescents: Sense of coherence as a potential moderator. *Stress and Health*, 27(3), e157–e165. doi:10.1002/smi.1353
- Papacharisis, V., Goudas, M., Danish, S. J., & Theodorakis, Y. (2005). The effectiveness of teaching a life skills program in a sport context. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 17(3), 247–254. doi:10.1080/10413200591010139
- Sandford, R. A., Duncombe, R., & Armour, K. M. (2008). The role of physical activity/sport in tackling youth disaffection and anti-social behaviour. *Educational Review*, 60(4), 419–435. doi:10.1080/00131910802393464
- Super, S., Hermens, N., Verkooijen, K. T., & Koelen, M. (2014). Enhancing life prospects of socially vulnerable youth through sport participation: A mixed methods study. *BMC Public Health*. doi:10.1186/1471-2458-14-703
- Super, S., Wagemakers, A., Picavet, H. S. J., Verkooijen, K. T., & Koelen, M. (2015). Strengthening sense of coherence: Opportunities for theory-building in health promotion. *Health Promotion International, Online First*. doi:10.1093/heapro/dav071
- Tamminen, K. A., & Holt, N. L. (2012). Adolescent athletes' learning about coping and the roles of parents and coaches. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 13(1), 69–79. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2011.07.006
- Trottier, C., & Robitaille, S. (2014). Fostering life skills development in high school and community sport: A comparative analysis of the coach's role. *Sport Psychologist*, 28(1), 10–21. doi:10.1123/tsp.2012-0094
- Turnnidge, J., Côté, J., & Hancock, D. J. (2014). Positive youth development from sport to life: Explicit or implicit transfer? *Quest*, 66(2), 203–217. doi:10.1080/00336297.2013.867275
- Vettenburg, N. (1998). Juvenile delinquency and the cultural characteristics of the family. *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health*, 3, 193–209. doi:10.1515/IJAMH.1998.10.3.193
- Walsh, D. S., Ozaeta, J., & Wright, P. M. (2010). Transference of responsibility model goals to the school environment: Exploring the impact of a coaching club program. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 15(1), 15–28. doi:10.1080/17408980802401252