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1                   **Learning in Sport: from Life Skills to Existential Learning**

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## Learning in Sport: from Life Skills to Existential Learning

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### **Abstract**

Youth sport is habitually promoted as an important context for learning that contributes to a person's broader development beyond sport-specific skills. A growing body of research in this area has operated within a life skills discourse that focuses on useful, positive and decontextualised skills in the production of successful and adaptive citizens. In this paper, we argue that the ideological discourse of life skills, underpinned by ideas about sport-based positive youth development, has unduly narrowed the research on learning in sport to only what is deemed functional, teachable, and economically productive. After considering the problems associated with the currently dominant life skills approach, we explore existential learning as an alternative perspective on conceptualising and studying learning in sport. An existential approach provides a non-instrumental theory of learning with an emphasis on discontinuity, relational self and 'becoming', opening an avenue for exploring various forms of informal learning under-explored in sport. We discuss the applications of this alternative approach for future research and practice in learning in youth sport.

*Keywords: positive youth development, athletes, discontinuity, informal learning, identity*

## Learning in Sport: from Life Skills to Existential Learning

30  
31 The belief that sport can play a significant role in shaping young people's broader  
32 development, and offers a valuable learning experience, has become widespread in policy,  
33 research, and community sport programmes. The European Commission's (2007) *White*  
34 *Paper on Sport*, for example, attests that "sport has an educational dimension and plays a  
35 social, cultural and recreational role" (p. 3), and that "through its role in formal and non-  
36 formal education, sport reinforces Europe's human capital" (p. 5). It has, however, been  
37 argued that, in physical education, there is a striking lack of clarity on what this educational  
38 dimension of sport actually is and what exactly is being learned through participation  
39 (Larsson & Karlefors, 2015; Penney & Chandler, 2000; Redelius, Quennerstedt, & Öhman,  
40 2015). Scholars in physical education have explored these questions through a range of  
41 epistemological positions and learning theories (e.g., the special issue of *Sport, Education*  
42 *and Society*; Quennerstedt & Larsson, 2015), with a concern raised that the literature is  
43 somewhat fragmented and there has been little accumulative effect to build a coherent  
44 knowledge base (Tinning, 2015).

45 In contrast, in sport psychology-based discourse that focuses on youth development and  
46 learning through leisure-time sport participation, researchers have increasingly focused  
47 attention on the concept of *life skills*. Here, the idea of sport as an avenue for learning 'things'  
48 broader than sport skills has manifested in attempts to pin down a set of transferable skills  
49 such as goal setting, time management, and teamwork, and to develop applied programmes  
50 focused on the development and transfer of these skills (e.g., Allen & Rhind, 2019; Gould &  
51 Carson, 2008; Hemphill, Gordon & Wright, 2019). Kendellen and Camire (2017) situated the  
52 very justification of youth sport in life skill development, suggesting that "for sport to be of  
53 value to the masses, the skills developed in this context must be applicable in domains  
54 beyond sport" (p. 395). Typically, life skills have been studied within one of three broad

55 agendas: (1) positive socialisation of ‘at-risk’ youth, (2) sport-for-development projects  
56 (predominantly in the Global South), and (3) equipping (pre-)elite athletes intensively  
57 involved in sport to transition successfully from the athletic career to work-life (Coakley,  
58 2011). We situate the following arguments within the context of youth athletes in (pre-)elite  
59 sport, while we also aim to address the learning-in-sport discourse more broadly.

60 The aim of the present paper is to critically examine the content, the process and the  
61 justification of learning in sport that relates to ‘things’ broader than sports skills. We argue  
62 that the life skills discourse has led to a premature narrowing of research focus to ‘things’ that  
63 are deemed useful, positive, teachable, concrete and ‘objectifiable’. At the same time, deeper  
64 types of learning, with the potential to shift or even transform athletes’ ways of being-in-the-  
65 world, have largely been omitted from the research agenda. To address this gap, the article is  
66 structured as follows. Firstly, we explore the ‘whats’, ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ of life skills before  
67 arriving at the philosophical justification of this agenda. Secondly, we develop the concept of  
68 existential learning as one alternative to life skills, which we suggest can complement our  
69 understanding of learning in sport in important ways. We conclude with considering the  
70 benefits of researching learning in sport through an existential framework and provide  
71 suggestions regarding how this might be undertaken.

## 72 **Life Skills in Sport: A Compelling Narrative?**

73 Life skills development has emerged as an influential discourse in the past two decades  
74 and has informed several applied programmes (e.g., Allen & Rhind, 2019; Danish, 2002). In  
75 their oft-cited review, Gould and Carson (2008) defined life skills as “those internal personal  
76 assets, characteristics and skills such as goal setting, emotional control, self-esteem, and hard  
77 work ethic that can be facilitated or developed in sport and transferred for use in non-sport  
78 settings” (p. 60). Typically, life skills have been conceptualised within positive youth

79 development (PYD)<sup>1</sup> ideology that “focuses on the promotion of any number of desirable  
80 competencies or outcomes in young people” (Gould & Carson, 2008, p. 59). Sport-based  
81 youth development (SBYD) is a more specific term for sport programmes that explicitly  
82 develop life skills (Hemphill et al., 2019). With life skills established as the dominant  
83 discourse of learning in youth sport research, many efforts have been put into developing  
84 programmes that can deliver these life skills most effectively, whereas it has been rarely  
85 questioned what ‘a skill’ or learning actually is, and what else sport can teach us besides  
86 these competencies. Therefore, a critical assessment of the dominant research discourse is  
87 needed to establish whether the foundations of the programme are coherent, as well as to  
88 identify alternative perspectives that can broaden our horizons of what learning in sport is and  
89 could be.

### 90 **What is Being Learned: The Positive, Useful and Functional**

91 Within life skills discourse, the type of learning of interest seems exclusively the positive;  
92 the fundamental idea being that sport can increase the participant’s physical, psychological  
93 and social capital. In one of the few existing critiques of the PYD ideology, Coakley (2011)  
94 argued that much of the discourse rests on an essentialist, unexamined assumption that sport  
95 *is* inherently good (cf. Aggerholm, 2017). He suggested that PYD rests on an idea that sport  
96 has “a fundamentally positive and pure essence that transcends time and place so that positive  
97 changes befall individuals and groups that engage in or consume sport” (Coakley, 2011, pp.  
98 306-307). His own position (which is also shared by many scholars researching life skills and  
99 youth development in sport; e.g. Gould & Carson, 2008; Weiss & Bredemeier, 1983) was  
100 rather that sport *can* be good in certain circumstances. That is, he suggested that the positive

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<sup>1</sup> PYD has been described as originating from developmental systems theory that adopts a strengths-based conception of young people (Lerner et al., 2005). Coakley (2016) traced the proliferation of interest in PYD in sport to the 1980s and the rise of neoliberalism, whilst also arguing that some sport programmes have deviated from PYD ideology and used it as a tool for deficit reduction and social control.

101 developmental benefits of sport are dependent on material and cultural contexts and may vary  
102 depending on, for example, the sport subculture, social relationships, shifting meanings of  
103 sport across the life course, and social characteristics of participants. Few studies positioned  
104 within the life skills discourse have acknowledged ‘negative developmental experiences’  
105 (e.g., stress, ego-oriented climates, social exclusion) in sport too (Fraser-Thomas, & Côté,  
106 2009; Gould, Flett, & Lauer, 2012; Kendellen & Camire, 2015). However, scholars have  
107 typically treated these simply as problems to be removed from the sport experience, rather  
108 than opportunities for learning that could have some value. We will return to the role of  
109 negative experiences in our section on existential learning, to argue that they carry the  
110 potential to trigger questioning and reflection, and therefore should be recognised as carrying  
111 valuable potential for human learning.

112 Cronin and Allen (2017) conducted an extensive literature review to develop and validate  
113 a Life Skills Scale, identifying eight ‘key’ life skills as most prominent in extant literature:  
114 teamwork, goal-setting, time-management, emotional skills, communication, social skills,  
115 leadership, and problem-solving. Life skills are mostly considered universal (while implicitly  
116 carrying an Anglo-American flavour), as the literature rarely discusses differences in terms of  
117 cultural context. This constellation of competencies and characteristics resembles what are  
118 variously called key/core/generic/transferable skills in higher education (Anderson, 2005;  
119 Bolton & Hyland, 2003; Green, 1998). On an empirical and practical level, however, despite  
120 long-standing debates in education, researchers remain uncertain as to which skills are  
121 actually needed for employability (Suleman, 2016). This probably reflects the diversity of  
122 requirements in different jobs and fields, not to mention the important cultural differences in  
123 what is valued in employees (even if skills-based discourses appear to be colonising contexts  
124 with other cultural values and pedagogical traditions; Rear, 2013; Restad, 2019).

125        Problematically, besides fairly straightforward skills such as goal-setting and time-  
126 management, ‘skill-talk’ (Hyland & Johnson, 1998) both in sport and higher education also  
127 encompasses all sorts of personal qualities, values, attitudes, and attributes that, in conceptual  
128 analysis, do not appear as skills at all. For example, Gould and Carson’s (2008) well-cited  
129 definition describes life skills as “personal assets, characteristics and skills” (p. 61) (that is,  
130 three conceptually distinct things) including work ethic and self-esteem. For Pierce, Gould,  
131 and Camiré (2017), life skills “encompass a range of personal assets, including psychosocial  
132 skills, knowledge, dispositions, and identity constructions or transformations” (p. 195).  
133 Empirical studies have further grouped a wide variety of virtues, attitudes and characteristics  
134 under life skills, including surpassing oneself, pride, humility and courage (Trottier &  
135 Robitaille, 2014); discipline, trust and tolerance (Strachan, Coté, & Deakin, 2011); and self-  
136 reliance, family relations and motivation (Jones & Lavallee, 2009). Hyland and Johnson’s  
137 (1998) critique of ‘key’ skills in higher education is clearly applicable to ‘life’ skills in sport:  
138 “it is not clear how a concept with such an unclear logical status and apparently without any  
139 precise definition or range can carry the force of an educational programme” (p. 166). To  
140 clarify, philosophers often emphasise the association of skill with manual expertise and  
141 proficiency in a particular task, as distinct to mindset, courage, determination, and so forth  
142 (Breivik, 2016). Grouping work ethic, motivation, trust, and identity transformation under the  
143 label of skill seems mistakenly to conflate very different things in one category. While  
144 conceptually inaccurate, the ‘skills-talk’ also gives a false impression that the so-called skills,  
145 since they belong to the same category, can be taught in the same way, and learned by  
146 everyone. This observation brings us to the next question: how do athletes learn life skills?

#### 147 **Ways of Learning: Taught (versus Caught)**

148 Life skills can be usefully understood through a toolbox metaphor, where the learner adds  
149 new tools to the life-box to handle situations in everyday life. Some scholars have identified



150 life skills as a promising way to expand the professional arena of sport psychologists to work  
151 with at-risk youth, given that employment opportunities in elite sport remain scarce (Danish  
152 & Nellen, 1997). In this regard, it has been useful for applied sport psychologists that the  
153 scholarly debate about whether life skills are ‘caught’ (as a by-product of participation), or  
154 need to be intentionally taught, has increasingly favoured the latter position. That is, most  
155 scholars have argued that mere involvement in sport will not equip athletes with life skills (or  
156 facilitate ethical development; Harvey, Kirk, & O’Donovan, 2014) but educators (e.g.,  
157 coaches or sport psychologists) need to explicitly teach the skills to produce these benefits  
158 (Allen & Rhind, 2019; Gould & Carson, 2008; Hemphill et al., 2019).

159         The fundamental idea is that what is learned is a ‘life’ skill only if it can be  
160 transferred to another life domain (Gould & Carson, 2008). How exactly the transfer of what  
161 are variously labelled generic/core/key/life skills occurs (or not) is, however, still poorly  
162 understood and fiercely debated in education (Bolton & Hyland, 2003; Peck, 2016). Some  
163 scholars have argued that the existence of ‘free-standing’ skills of use in different domains is  
164 entirely illusory (Bolton & Hyland, 2003; Hyland & Johnson, 1998). Others have focused on  
165 the transfer of a specific ‘skill’ such as critical thinking and argued that it cannot really be  
166 taught because the process of thinking is intertwined with the content of thought  
167 (Willingham, 2008) and that framing critical thinking as a ‘skill’ is erroneous in the first  
168 place (Bailin, 2002). Others have adopted a more affirmative approach of transfer in certain  
169 conditions; however, Billing (2007) observed that there is little empirical evidence on the  
170 transfer of team and communication skills (which often appear at the top of life skills agendas  
171 in sport).

172         Despite these debates in education, many studies in sports context have been  
173 atheoretical and lacked any definition of life skills transfer (Pierce et al. 2017). To promote

174 conceptual clarity, Pierce et al. (2017, p. 194) proposed a model of life skills transfer where  
175 the concept is defined as:

176         The ongoing process by which an individual further develops or learns and  
177         internalises a personal asset (i.e., psychosocial skill, knowledge, disposition, identity  
178         construction, or transformation) in sport and then experiences personal change  
179         through the application of the asset in one or more life domains beyond the context  
180         where it was originally learned.

181 Their definition, however, again collapses various forms of human experience and activity to  
182 a category of skill where they clearly do not belong. Furthermore, although the ‘things’ listed  
183 as skills are obviously highly diverse, there is no indication that the processes of transfer are  
184 assumed to be different. It seems one thing to assume that a goal-setting method can be  
185 taught and then transferred from sport to education, but quite another to assume that identity  
186 construction (a complex reflective process of interpreting one’s embodied place in the world  
187 within culturally available frameworks of meaning across time) can be taught and transferred  
188 in the same way. Given that current literature emphasises that life skills need to be actively  
189 taught, we are wondering how coaches (who often contribute as volunteers and lack any  
190 education in pedagogy) should actually go about teaching athletes “identity transformation  
191 skills”.

192         As a final reflection, it is worth recognising that athletes often become skilled in less  
193 socially accepted ways of securing victory, such as cheating (Breivik, 2016). If we accepted,  
194 for a moment, the broad concept of skill informing the literature, the “skills” developed in  
195 sport might be expanded to include an obsessive focus on winning, ruthlessness, and ego-  
196 centricism (Hardy et al., 2017). Athletes have also been shown to be more aggressive than non-  
197 athletes (Kimble, Russo, Bergman, & Galindo, 2010). It would be, therefore, at least equally

198 vital to study how to *prevent* the so-called “skills” development and transfer to other life  
199 domains. This would, of course, first require challenging the pre-determined focus on  
200 accounting only for the positive qualities and adopting a more realistic perspective on what  
201 might be learned through sport.

## 202 **Why focus on life skills?**

203 While life skills are often represented as a programme to empower youth, the  
204 discourse itself implicitly rests on a form of capitalist production logic with the aim of  
205 creating economically productive, functional and adaptive individuals. Coakley (2016)  
206 situated the logic of PYD in sport in the ideology of neoliberalism, where sport is effectively  
207 viewed as “a tool of teaching dominant values, controlling boys (sic) identified ‘at risk’ (for  
208 engaging in deviance), and socializing young people to become personally responsible,  
209 physically healthy, self-confident, and motivated to be successful” (p. 24). While the current  
210 discourses of sport coaching ‘officially’ promote athlete-centred and autonomy-supportive  
211 practices, scholars drawing on Foucault (e.g., Denison, Mills & Konoval, 2017; Williams &  
212 Manley, 2016) have also noted that actual coaching practices often discipline and subordinate  
213 athletes to coaches’ control.

214 Notably absent from the literature on life skills in sport - compared to ‘core’,  
215 ‘transferable’ or ‘key’ skills in higher education - are critical thinking skills. As Denison and  
216 colleagues (2017) noted, “as it currently stands, empowering athletes is actually more about  
217 making athletes obedient and responsible not critical, questioning, independent and creative”  
218 (p. 779). Although some scholars problematise the notion that critical thinking should be  
219 conceived as a skill that can be taught (Willingham, 2008), it nevertheless often appears at  
220 the top of ‘core’ or ‘transferable’ skills in educational discourse. Its absence from life skill  
221 discourse in sport supports various critiques (Coakley, 2016; Denison et al., 2017), including  
222 that helping athletes become more critical of their experiences and social contexts are not at

223 the top of the learning agenda in sport. As critical scholars have noted, SBYD seems  
224 uninterested or unwilling to mobilise young people to take action in matters of systemic  
225 inequality and social change (Coakley, 2016; Rauscher & Cooky, 2016). It is perhaps telling  
226 that research has found that many members of the public consider athletes as unintelligent  
227 and too uninformed to form political opinions (Sappington, Keum, & Hoffman, 2019).

228         Philosophers of education have voiced several objections to the ‘generic’ skills  
229 agenda (Anderson, 2015; Green, 1998; Bolton & Hyland, 2003; Saeverot, 2013). Anderson  
230 (2015) suggested that the obsession with skills could be construed as a quest for a false sense  
231 of certainty rather than embracing and working with the inherent messiness and uncertainty  
232 that characterises human growth and learning. The non-linear and uncertain processes of  
233 learning are recognised by scholars working in physical education (Aggerholm, Standal,  
234 Barker, & Larsson, 2018; Tinning, 2015), but often silenced in the life-skills discourse that  
235 seems occupied at pinning down ‘universal’, exclusively positive outputs from sport  
236 participation. The centrality of skill transfer has also been contested on ideological grounds as  
237 deriving from economic rationales and thus potentially marginalising the types of learning  
238 that do not contribute to those ends (Green, 1998). Stolz (2014) noted that there is a paradox  
239 when justification of sport becomes embedded in instrumental and economic rationales (e.g.,  
240 developing work ethic) while many athletes actually pursue it to disengage from these  
241 contexts and for non-instrumental reasons; that is, for fun, engagement with embodied  
242 capabilities, and fantasy (that is, for its own sake). However, he also contended that it would  
243 be a mistake to assume that such “non-serious” activity has no educational or ethical  
244 significance.

245         In summary, the life skills approach to learning in sport focuses on intentional  
246 teaching (*how*) of positive and useful skills and competencies (*what*) to youth athletes so that  
247 they can become economically productive, successful and functional citizens (*why*). While

248 we have outlined some of the criticism and problems to be addressed within life skills (e.g.,  
249 the definition of skill and debates about transferability), our aim is not to offer solutions to  
250 these issues. Instead, in the next sections, we outline existential learning as an alternative  
251 perspective that reorients our thinking about what, how and why athletes might learn in sport.  
252 We suggest that the existential approach can be valuable in complementing and diversifying  
253 our understanding of the rich potential that sport has for human learning and development.

### 254 **Existential Learning**

255 The fundamental ideas of existential learning can be traced back to classic philosophical  
256 writings (e.g., Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger) but were more systematically  
257 developed in an educational context by Otto Friedrich Bollnow (1959, 1987) whose writings  
258 we adopt as a starting point of the following account. More broadly, the account of  
259 existential learning is grounded in the continental European tradition of *Bildung*. While  
260 *Bildung* does not have a direct counterpart in the English language, it has been described  
261 through notions of (trans)formation, (self)cultivation, and character development, and is  
262 often presented as an alternative to ‘training’ or ‘competence development’, which are  
263 underpinned by instrumental rationality (Kovalainen, 2018; Restad, 2019). Scholars in sport  
264 and physical education context have argued for the continued relevance of *Bildung* for  
265 understandings of education, development and learning in sport and physical culture  
266 practices (Agergaard, 2006; Aggerholm, 2015; Krüger & Neuber, 2011; Quennerstedt &  
267 Larsson, 2015). Existential learning, in particular, has also gained attention in educational  
268 research as a critical perspective that challenges the pre-eminent focus on measurement and  
269 skills development in contemporary educational practice (Biesta, 2015; Saeverot, 2013;  
270 Thomson, 2001).

271 **What is being learned?**

272 As opposed to life skills, existential learning embraces the ambiguities of human life and  
273 learning, and therefore the content of existential learning cannot be pinned down as a list of  
274 'life skills' (Biesta, 2015; Bollnow, 1959; Saeverot, 2013). In contrast to practical skills, the  
275 'object' of existential learning is the person's whole mode of being; that is, how they are  
276 attuned to the world, find meaning and value in life, and make life choices. The notion of  
277 transformation which has also appeared in life skills literature is central to existential  
278 learning; however, the way it is approached is very different from the acquisition and teacher-  
279 led perspective informing life skills. For analytic reasons, we can distinguish between  
280 existential learning that primarily concerns the self (subjectivity), one's relational existence  
281 (intersubjectivity) and one's world as such (life-world).

282         Existential learning concerns oneself (subjectivity), a self which is 'in-the-world' that  
283 is always relational and embodied. Some of the learning concerning the self can occur  
284 through disclosing, articulating and accentuating their experiences through reflection. For  
285 example, athletes might learn that they are (or aspire to become) strong, resilient and  
286 persistent, but equally they could learn about their weakness and fragility. Through sport,  
287 athletes are also likely to learn about their emotions, their embodied possibilities and  
288 limitations, and how they are attuned to a specific sport or physical-cultural world. Not all  
289 self-knowledge is 'positive' because athletes could also learn that they are ruthless and ego-  
290 centric, for example (cf. Hardy et al., 2017). As such, sport can offer an avenue for learning  
291 about one's beliefs, values, strengths and weaknesses - for better or worse. Through self-  
292 reflection, however, athletes can take a stance on their existence and commit to striving to  
293 change some aspects of themselves.

294         Importantly, existential learning also concerns our relations to others (intersubjectivity)  
295 and our world as such (life-world). Athletes could learn that their sporting relationships are

296 caring and supportive, or possibly instrumental and conditional on athletic success. Besides  
297 the positive assets, athletes could well learn something they really did not want to learn about  
298 their relationships or their sport, and that is not helpful in any particular way (e.g., Ronkainen  
299 & Ryba, 2017). Learning about the kinds of things in the cultural world of sport that do not  
300 align with one's beliefs and values (e.g., exploitation of athletes) could lead to  
301 disillusionment and cynical dis-identification (Roderick, 2014). By not predetermining  
302 learning as only what makes athletes 'stronger' or 'better', an existential account of learning  
303 is also able to capture deeply negative and unexpected experiences (Bollnow, 1959).

304 We have given examples of 'negative' learning experiences mainly because they are so  
305 often silenced in accounts of learning in sport, but existential learning could also relate to  
306 spiritual awakening or finding new (positive) meaning from sport. Existential approaches  
307 emphasise that the personal meaning of sport forms the tacit background of athlete learning  
308 and development and the 'what' of learning can only be understood within this broader  
309 framework of significance (Aggerholm, 2015; Ronkainen, 2018). In addition, existential  
310 accounts emphasise that not all learning is always explicit, but can occur as a changed mode  
311 of being that might not even be conscious and cannot be easily articulated (Aggerholm,  
312 2015). Much of our learning happens 'under the radar' and is not recognised, and therefore  
313 some would argue that it is problematic to call it learning at all (Jarvis, 2012). However, we  
314 become aware of what we have actually learned when something disrupts our tacit,  
315 harmonious state of living. This moment of disruption lies at the centre of 'how' existential  
316 learning occurs.

### 317 **How is it being learned?**

318 By now, it might be evident that existential learning is mostly concerned with those  
319 experiences that are not part of the official curriculum, and could not be formalised or  
320 standardised as part of coaching practice. In contrast to metaphors of adding 'tools' to a

321 'toolbox', existential perspectives emphasise that learning cannot be understood as a wholly  
322 cumulative nor continuous process that can be controlled by the educator (Bollnow, 1986).  
323 As Saeverot (2013) noted, education is always an uncertain process, and the teacher (coach,  
324 sport psychologist) can never simply force upon another individual a new perspective or  
325 meaning. Therefore, an existential account of learning emphasises the subjectivity of the  
326 learner and focuses on how the person who is learning responds to encountering something  
327 new and unanticipated (Jarvis, 2012).

328 Many existentialist scholars have suggested that learning is primarily triggered by an  
329 encounter with 'negativity': that is, we collide with something unfamiliar and surprising  
330 which triggers the process of reflecting and questioning (Brinkmann, 2017; Gadamer, 2004).  
331 For Gadamer (2004), the experience of negativity points to us that something is not as we  
332 expected it to be, requiring us to correct or extend our understanding. Bollnow (1959, 1987)  
333 often focused on the major disruptive experiences in human life and described the process of  
334 existential learning through concepts of *encounter*, *crisis* and *awakening*. For Bollnow  
335 (1987), *encounter* referred to a profoundly stirring contact with otherness, whether in another  
336 human being, an idea, or culture, that is, "against another reality, through which I in my own  
337 existence am placed in question" (p. 143). In a sport context, such otherness could be  
338 anything that disrupts the athlete's everyday 'natural attitude', taken-for-granted ways of  
339 knowing and being in the sport-world, whether it is a new coach, (de-)selection, an opponent  
340 who has a different way of being, unexpected performance (for better or worse),  
341 injury/illness, or a cultural transition. An encounter is something that takes us by surprise - a  
342 disjuncture that ruptures the everyday lifeworld marked by harmony and continuity (Jarvis,  
343 2012). It is something that cannot be planned or taught by an educator in a similar way as life  
344 skills; it is a potential *crisis*.



345 For Bollnow (1987), *crises* belong to human existence as those inevitable moments  
346 that stand out starkly in our individual and collective lives. In sport psychology, researchers  
347 have focused on crises such as career transitions crisis (Stambulova, 2017), coach-athlete  
348 crisis (Jowett, 2003) and performance crisis (Bar-Eli & Tractinsky, 2000), with applied  
349 recommendations often focused on how to prevent them from occurring. While Bollnow  
350 (1987) certainly did not promote active attempts to trigger crises either, he considered them  
351 intrinsic to human life and potentially valuable for human learning and development. He  
352 linked *crisis* with *critique* and suggested that moments of crisis can contribute to developing  
353 a critical perspective where the state of human affairs and one's own mode of being are no  
354 longer taken as self-evident. A crisis can thus confront the person with the inability to go on  
355 'doing' life in exactly the same way as before, demanding a critique of her/his personal  
356 beliefs, values and practices. A potential (yet not inevitable) outcome of encounter and crisis  
357 is *awakening* which in Bollnow's thought refers' to Heidegger's notion of truth as  
358 unconcealment (Koskela, 2012). As Koskela (2012) noted, awakenings are sudden, unique  
359 moments when we gain new conceptions of ourselves and our world. Bollnow (1959) also  
360 recognised the religious origin of the concept and considered it to have an important ethical  
361 dimension ('awakening of conscience'). Through awakenings, we can become more attuned  
362 to our way of being and that of others, potentially developing a new sense of connectedness,  
363 curiosity, moral awareness and openness to experience (Gadamer, 2004; Saeverot, 2013).

364 Despite the emphasis on uncertainty and learner-led processes, the existential  
365 approach does not imply that coaches and other leaders in sport have no role, or only an  
366 arbitrary role, in the young athlete's learning and development. Saeverot (2013) described  
367 existential education as indirect pedagogy, where the educator (or sports coach) seeks to  
368 awaken students' interest in a new perspective on life with any methods that resonate with  
369 their life-worlds (e.g., stories, arts, etc.). Facilitating such openings can provide the athlete

370 with the possibility of making existential choices of their own, exploring new ways to relate  
371 to sport, and connecting with others in the sport life-world. Thomson (2001) drew on  
372 Heidegger to frame teaching as 'letting learn' while also observing that teaching is more  
373 difficult than learning because the teacher has to learn how to let students learn. That is,  
374 rather than occupying the position of an expert who deliberately teaches specific life skills to  
375 athletes, a coach who is informed by an existential perspective would aim to foster  
376 engagement and reflection on various expected and unexpected situations encountered in the  
377 sport life-world, without forcing them into pre-determined outcomes. With respect to crises,  
378 Bollnow (1959) emphasised that once they arise, the educator's role is to recognise their  
379 pedagogical potential and caringly accompany the student in exploring their meaning and  
380 overcoming crises. As such, the sports coach who draws on an existential perspective does  
381 not rely on standardised programmes, but on awareness of the athlete's horizons of meaning  
382 and the special value of existential moments as they occur. This also requires that the coach  
383 knows the athlete on a personal level to understand how they find meaning in sport and what  
384 matters to them in life more broadly.

### 385 **Why focus on existential learning?**

386 Drawing on Kierkegaard, Saeverot (2013) argued that the aim of existential education  
387 is to cultivate an individual's distinctiveness and capacity to be a self. Biesta (2015) argued  
388 that education always functions in three interrelated domains: developing  
389 qualifications/competencies (adding skills), socialisation (into dominant values), and  
390 'subjectification' of people. While life skills address the competencies and socialisation  
391 domains, existential learning highlights the importance of subjectification or differently put,  
392 the awakening of the individual (Bollnow, 1959). Summarising Bollnow's (1959) existential  
393 account of human development, Koskela (2012) explained that Bollnow's vision of  
394 education:

395 Is not instrumental in nature, is not *for* something, be that employment, family life, or  
396 social activity. Bollnow's discontinuous forms of education educate *in* something.  
397 The outcome is not an instrument for achievement; rather, the outcome changes the  
398 self. (p. 126)

399 For Biesta (2015), subjectification in education concerns "the ways in which students can  
400 be(come) subjects in their own right and not just remain objects of the desires and directions  
401 of others" (p. 235). As such, it does not subscribe to the economic and social cohesion  
402 agendas implicit in life skills but aims at supporting individuals in widening their existential  
403 possibilities of being-in-the-world and being-with-others. Bollnow (1959) and Saeverot  
404 (2013) were careful to emphasise that existential education does not ideologically imply  
405 radical individualism where the aim is simply to be different from others. Rather, as our  
406 existence is necessarily a *being-with*, our subjectification involves openness to the otherness  
407 of others. Just as existential scholars refuse to consider students as objects of educational  
408 intervention, they emphasise that our freedom always comes with responsibility for the other.  
409 Saeverot (2013) also argued that skills-focused education, with its focus on personal  
410 competencies and success, has the danger of leading to a non-relational, lonely and  
411 irresponsible existence, where the student (or athlete) is deprived of profound encounters  
412 with others and difference. Existential learning aims to develop athletes who are aware of,  
413 and reflect critically on their engagement with sport and people in it, and could contribute to  
414 avoiding the exploitation of athletes as well as engagement in practices that are often  
415 culturally accepted but can cause profound harm the self and others (e.g., winning at all costs,  
416 normalisation of injury, unhealthy eating practices).

417 We have summarised the key points of difference between life skills and existential  
418 learning in Table 1 below. Although we have highlighted the differences for analytic  
419 purposes and critiqued life skills in the sections above, we agree with Biesta (2009, 2015)

420 that competence development and subjectification are both necessary dimensions of  
 421 education and should not be considered in dualistic terms. What is important for coaches and  
 422 other educators in sport is to find a balance between the different domains while  
 423 remembering that even those programmes that officially focus ‘only’ on life skills are also  
 424 influencing the subjectification of the youth athlete.

425

426 **Table 1. Differences between life skills and existential learning**

	LIFE SKILLS	EXISTENTIAL LEARNING
WHAT?	Skills and competences (Objective, standardised)	Being-in-the-world (Subjectivity, uniqueness)
	Positive entities/experiences	Both positive and negative experiences (crisis)
	Functional abilities	Understanding, attunement
	Active dimensions	Both active and passive dimensions (e.g., openness, receptivity, affectivity)
HOW?	Mainly taught	Mainly caught
	Teacher-led	Learner-led
	Linear and continuous processes	Non-linear and discontinuous processes
	Accumulation / Adding to the toolbox	Crisis -> Critique -> Transformation
	Demonstration, modelling	Encountering otherness
	Practising in a narrow sense (improving skills)	Practising (effort and repetition) in a broad sense aimed at self-transformation
WHY?	Employability, productivity	Meaningful life

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Socialisation to dominant norms    Critical awareness

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Adaptation

Authenticity

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### **Discussion**

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The aim of this paper has been to challenge the burgeoning life skills discourse and to discuss existential learning as one alternative way of theorising and studying learning in sport. In our critical review of literature on life skills, we have contested these on conceptual, theoretical and ideological levels. We have argued that many ‘skills’ discussed in the life skill literature are not really skills at all, and should not be conceptualised as such because such categorical error also gives a wrong impression about how the so-called skills might be developed or transferred. Furthermore, reducing learning in sport solely to life skills that are (supposedly) useful, teachable, measurable and possible to standardise, may generate a false sense of control that obscures the inherent uncertainty of human learning. While life skills increasingly focus on teacher-led processes, scholarship on informal learning in work reminds us that 70-90% of organisational learning inevitably occurs outside formal training situations and is not always aligned with managers’ intent (Cerasoli et al., 2018). Therefore, it is plausible to assume that athletes learn various things in sport besides formalised life skills, whether we recognise it or not. Moreover, the critiques of ‘skill-talk’ and associated notions of transfer in educational literature warn us that we should not assume that developing and transferring skills is easy; that we are far from understanding the transfer process, and some scholars challenge whether it exists at all; and that there is cultural variation in what skills are recognised as such or valued in workplaces or life in general.

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Setting aside technical difficulties with the concepts of skill and transfer, our more fundamental objection to the life skills programme is its reductionist and shallow ideology

449 where sport participation becomes a mere instrument of developing human capital and  
450 reducing ‘deviance’ in the service of the economic system. Especially as life skills are  
451 increasingly promoted in sport-for-development programmes in the Global South, they can  
452 appear suspiciously like a colonialist project aimed at promoting Western individualism,  
453 neoliberalism and associated values. At the same time, life skills offer little capacities for  
454 young athletes to think and act differently, to resist dominant ideas, or learn from sport  
455 (rather than learn for life) without a prescribed ‘right’ answer. As such, life skills can  
456 function to narrow, rather than open, youth athletes’ horizons and potentiality of being and  
457 becoming.

458 An existential perspective reminds us that learning is never merely a cumulative and  
459 directed process, but a discontinuous one involving encounters with ‘negativity’ - that is,  
460 surprising things, events and people that put our existence in question. We argue that  
461 adopting such broader understanding of learning in sport, which also encompasses the  
462 unexpected, unproductive and informal, offers a more realistic understanding of youth  
463 athletes’ life-worlds and the sporting experience. Relatedly, negative (i.e., unwanted, as  
464 distinct from ‘negativity’ that refers to otherness more broadly) experiences are increasingly  
465 recognised as a vital part of athletes’ journeys in research on growth following adversity (see  
466 Howells, Sarkar, & Fletcher, 2017, for a review), resilience (see Galli & Gonzales, 2015, for  
467 a review) and “the rocky road to success” (Collins & MacNamara, 2017). However, many  
468 studies within these traditions adopt the same instrumental approach underpinning life skills  
469 and are focused on “optimizing and exploiting the rocky road” (Collins & MacNamara, 2017,  
470 p. 336) rather than understanding the existential significance of disjuncture on athletes’ ways  
471 of being-in-the-world. That is, most literature on adversity and crisis in sport implicitly falls  
472 within Biesta’s (2009) qualifications/competencies function of education, as distinct from the  
473 subjectification function that is the ‘aim’ of existential learning. While the former is oriented

474 towards individual success and adaptability, the latter is oriented toward meaningful life and  
475 authenticity, a capacity to be a relational self.

476 Research on existential learning in sport holds the potential to broaden our understandings  
477 of youth athlete development but is not without methodological challenges. Given that so  
478 little is known about this kind of learning, qualitative approaches focused on an in-depth  
479 exploration of participant experiences seem warranted. While interviewing is the most  
480 common method for qualitative researchers, using it to gain insight on existential learning  
481 might not be particularly easy because dominant discourses associate learning with formal  
482 education and people might not recognise relevant experiences as ‘learning’ (Eraut, 2004).  
483 Inviting participants to share and reflect on experiences of discontinuity in their sport-lives,  
484 whether via storytelling, reflective writing or various arts-based methods, could be promising  
485 starting points for studying existential learning. In a similar way as existential education  
486 emphasises the quality of the relationship between the teacher and the student, the research  
487 relationship and researcher’s understanding of the participant’s life-world are likely to be  
488 crucial for developing rich understandings of participant experiences. Furthermore,  
489 longitudinal approaches would be particularly valuable for understanding how existential  
490 learning shapes athletes’ ways of thinking, feeling and acting in the world.

491 Our account of existential learning has focused on discontinuous forms of education  
492 described by Bollnow (1959), but there are also other existential approaches that might  
493 provide different and complementary analytical strengths. For example, Merleau-Ponty’s  
494 work on embodiment and bodily habits (Standal, 2015; Standal & Aggerholm, 2016) as well  
495 as practising models drawing on existential thought (Aggerholm, 2015; Aggerholm, Standal,  
496 Barker, & Larsson, 2018) focus on more continuous forms of development and learning. In  
497 addition, researchers on outdoor education, recreation and learning have drawn on existential  
498 ideas to illustrate meaningful learning experiences in the outdoors (Allen-Collinson, 2018;

499 Allen-Collinson, Jennings, Vaittinen, & Owton, 2019; Gurholt & Sanderud, 2016; Taniguchi,  
500 Freeman, & Richards, 2005). Here, movement activities in the outdoors are centrally about  
501 exploration and receptivity to the unknown, rather than teacher-led content and pre-packaged  
502 outcomes. Finally, while we consider existential learning as one particularly promising  
503 approach to complement the narrow, skills-focused discourse of learning in sport, it should be  
504 recognised that several other directions have potential to broaden our understandings of  
505 learning in sport. For example, critical and feminist pedagogies (Darder, 2003),  
506 developmental approaches (Bredemeier & Weiss, 1983) and various models of informal  
507 learning (for a review, see Sawchuk, 2008) address important areas that remain  
508 underdeveloped or absent from the discourse of learning in sport and can help in broadening  
509 our understanding of the complex processes of becoming who we are through playing sport.

## 510 **Conclusions**

511 Life skills have provided a useful discourse for sport psychologists that promises to deliver  
512 useful skills and competencies to sports participants. In a critical analysis, however, it appears  
513 a shallow pedagogy that narrows, rather than opens, possibilities of questioning, learning and  
514 becoming for those involved in sport. As Anderson (2015) somewhat provocatively argued,  
515 in skills-based education “students are dehumanized in the process by having no control over  
516 the expectations for their learning, and by it being presumed that they require skill sets to be  
517 ‘dumped’ into them” (p. 88). In this article, we have argued that existential learning can  
518 provide a much-needed addition to the literature, which brings attention to learner-led  
519 informal processes, uncertainty of life and learning, and those types of learning that are not  
520 necessarily marketable (useful, productive) but could contribute to developing critical  
521 awareness and openness to experience (and thus have value in human life). While sport  
522 programmes are increasingly justified by their economic benefits that are partly realised  
523 through life skills, it is worth remembering that sport and physical cultures also have their



524 non-instrumental value, carry the potential to bring meaning to people's individual and  
525 collective lives, and might teach us important lessons about what it means to be human.

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