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

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13

14 **Abstract**

15 Youth sport is habitually promoted as an important context for learning that contributes to a

16 person's broader development beyond sport-specific skills. A growing body of research in

17 this area has operated within a life skills discourse that focuses on useful, positive and

18 decontextualised skills in the production of successful and adaptive citizens. In this paper, we

19 argue that the ideological discourse of life skills, underpinned by ideas about sport-based

20 positive youth development, has unduly narrowed the research on learning in sport to only

21 what is deemed functional, teachable, and economically productive. After considering the

22 problems associated with the currently dominant life skills approach, we explore existential

23 learning as an alternative perspective on conceptualising and studying learning in sport. An

24 existential approach provides a non-instrumental theory of learning with an emphasis on

25 discontinuity, relational self and 'becoming', opening an avenue for exploring various forms

26 of informal learning under-explored in sport. We discuss the applications of this alternative

27 approach for future research and practice in learning in youth sport.

28

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

Learning in Sport: from Life Skills to Existential Learning

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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

4

79   development (PYD)[1] 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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[1] 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 centrism (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, Nietzche 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

Socialisation to dominant norms	Critical awareness
Adaptation	Authenticity

427

Discussion

429   The aim of this paper has been to challenge the burgeoning life skills discourse and to

430   discuss existential learning as one alternative way of theorising and studying learning in

431   sport. In our critical review of literature on life skills, we have contested these on conceptual,

432   theoretical and ideological levels. We have argued that many 'skills' discussed in the life skill

433   literature are not really skills at all, and should not be conceptualised as such because such

434   categorical error also gives a wrong impression about how the so-called skills might be

435   developed or transferred. Furthermore, reducing learning in sport solely to life skills that are

436   (supposedly) useful, teachable, measurable and possible to standardise, may generate a false

437   sense of control that obscures the inherent uncertainty of human learning. While life skills

438   increasingly focus on teacher-led processes, scholarship on informal learning in work

439   reminds us that 70-90% of organisational learning inevitably occurs outside formal training

440   situations and is not always aligned with managers' intent (Cerasoli et al., 2018). Therefore, it

441   is plausible to assume that athletes learn various things in sport besides formalised life skills,

442   whether we recognise it or not. Moreover, the critiques of 'skill-talk' and associated notions

443   of transfer in educational literature warn us that we should not assume that developing and

444   transferring skills is easy; that we are far from understanding the transfer process, and some

445   scholars challenge whether it exists at all; and that there is cultural variation in what skills are

446   recognised as such or valued in workplaces or life in general.

447   Setting aside technical difficulties with the concepts of skill and transfer, our more

448   fundamental objection to the life skills programme is its reductionist and shallow ideology

20

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.

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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532 <div align="center">**References**</div>

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