

EXPLORATORY STUDY OF ESSENTIAL LIFE SKILLS FOR ADOLESCENT ELITE ATHLETES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

In their pursuit of athletic excellence, many athletes neglect to plan for life after sport. The aim of this study was to explore and identify life skills appropriate for inclusion in the development of a life skills programme focusing on South African elite adolescent athletes. The study employed an exploratory qualitative approach. Nine elite adolescent South African athletes on the MacSteel Maestros Programme (MMP) were purposefully selected to take part. Data were analysed, applying the principles of inductive reasoning to generate themes. These themes were then linked with the concepts of the Positive Youth Development (PYD) theory that guided the interpretation of the data. The findings from the study contribute to the current literature in two ways. First, they offered a South African perspective on the life skills needed by elite adolescent athletes. Secondly, they identified the life skills that the South African adolescent elite athletes themselves deemed important for their holistic development. The development of skills relating to time management and self-esteem/self-confidence were identified as crucial. The athletes benefitted from being on the MMP, exhibiting qualities of competence, confidence, character, connection and caring/compassion, both in and out of sport.

Keywords: Life skills; Adolescents; Athletes; Elite sport; Positive Youth Development (PYD); South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Athletes who possess effective life skills are better able to cope with the challenges of a career outside of sport, compared to those who lack such skills (Price, 2007). The pressure placed on Olympic and professional athletes to achieve sporting success is such that they need to dedicate most of their time and energy to practice and competition (Aquilina, 2013). For the majority of athletes, this dedication to achieving athletic excellence is to the detriment of their education, work and career planning (Hawkins *et al.*, 1994). To help athletes with issues of participation, education, development and lifestyle, many countries have developed athlete assistance programmes. These provide an environment in which athletes can develop a range of life skills which can be applied both within and outside professional sport (Price, 2007). Examples of elite athlete assistance programmes include the Challenging Athletes' Minds for Personal Success (CHAMPS)/Life Skills programme for student-athletes in America, the Athlete Career Education (ACE) programme in Australia, and the High Performance Sport New Zealand (HPSNZ) athlete life programme in New Zealand.

In South Africa, apart from the MacSteel Maestros Programme (MMP), there are no accredited life skills programmes to assist elite adolescent athletes. This situation is set to change, however, as Sport and Recreation South Africa (SRSA) has proposed a national academy system, which will also include life skills training as one of its services. South Africa's academy system is currently run by the South African Sports Confederation and Olympic Committee (SASCOC). SASCOC's mandate and responsibility are to provide strategic direction and guidelines on various matters, including the life skills and career opportunities needed by both athletes and officials (SASCOC, 2012). There is no clarity at present regarding the existence of a national plan, policy guidelines or standardised policy for the provision of life skills programmes for elite athlete.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature revealed a paucity of research on the life skills needs of elite adolescent athletes. This can be attributed to the fact that research into athlete termination and transition, which could be seen as the precursor to career assistance programmes, of which life skills training is a small component, has only gained the attention of researchers over the last thirty years (Price, 2007). As a result, this literature review concentrates on two sectors which are relevant to the research topic, sport-in-development and athlete assistance. The sport-in-development sector operates at grassroots level, while athlete assistance programmes are aimed at those taking part in elite sport. In addition, both of these sectors offer life skills training to their participants.

Sport-in-development

Sport-in-development programmes are used by government and community organisations around the world to address a range of social issues, including drug and alcohol abuse, crime prevention, combating HIV/AIDS, the empowerment of women and the development of life skills. According to Coalter (2007), these programmes can be divided into two broad approaches: Sport Plus, which emphasises increased participation and the development of sporting skills, and Plus Sport, which gives primacy to social, educational and health programmes above the development of sport.

Plus Sport aims to increase participation in social and health programmes using sport as a means to this end (Coalter, 2013). The sporting environment is seen as a training ground for adolescent development, primarily because of its potential as a vehicle for enhancing such development (Brunelle *et al.*, 2007). As a result, sport-based intervention programmes have been created, based on the belief that sport participation provides fertile ground for young athletes to develop life skills and attitudes, which will continue to have value in adult life (Petitpas *et al.*, 2005).

Two of the most commonly used life skill intervention programmes found in the literature are 'Going for the Goal' (GOAL) and 'Sport United to Promote Education and Recreation' (SUPER). These have been applied by various organisations around the world to an array of sports (football, golf, rugby and volleyball) in order to develop or enhance the life skills of adolescents. Several studies evaluating the effectiveness of 'Plus Sport' programmes (Papacharisis *et al.*, 2005; Goudas *et al.*, 2006; Brunelle *et al.*, 2007; Goudas & Giannoudis, 2008) concluded that such programmes can develop important skills, such as problem-solving, communication and goal-setting to promote positive youth development.

Athlete assistance

Career assistance programmes were developed to help athletes with issues relating to their participation, development, lifestyle, education and vocational development. According to Wylleman *et al.* (1999), these programmes were designed to help athletes resolve the conflicts they faced in having to choose between pursuing sporting or post-athletic career goals. For example, in Australia, programmes like the Athlete Career Education (ACE) Programme, the Life Skills for Elite Athletes Programme (SportsLEAP) and the Olympic Job Opportunities Programme (OJOP) were developed for elite-amateur athletes (Lavalley *et al.*, 1997).

Career assistance programmes for athletes comprise a combination of workshops, seminars, educational modules, individual counselling, and/or a referral network. They offer both individual and group-oriented support services to athletes, specifically relating both to their issues of participation, development and lifestyle, and to their educational and vocational development (Wylleman *et al.*, 2004). According to Wylleman *et al.* (1999), such programmes should provide athletes with clinical guidance or counselling. This is mainly in the form of educational modules, which are preventive in nature, that is, they aim to optimise the athletes' skills and resources in order to help them cope with transitions. They also offer skills and coping resources for transitions specific to an athletic career, for example retirement from competitive sports, as well as those transitions in non-athletic spheres of life that can affect the development of an athletic career, such as in the scholastic/academic sphere.

Theoretical framework

The 5C's model of Positive Youth Development (PYD) theory offers a lens through which to explore and identify the life skills that elite adolescent South African athletes deem to be important. According to Turnridge *et al.* (2014), the PYD perspective is a theoretical framework that can enhance understanding of the sport experiences of youth.

The theory of PYD takes a positive approach to young people's development during adolescence, focusing on the talents, strengths and potential of the individual (Armour *et al.*, 2013). It is a way of viewing development, rather than a specific construct, and is a generic term referring to ways in which children and adolescents can accrue developmental experiences through their involvement in organised activities (Holt & Neely, 2011). PYD offers a set of principles to be integrated into support programmes for adolescents. These enable them to grow up as competent, healthy adults and reach their full potential. The principles are (Dotterweich, 2006):

- (1) Emphasis on positive and healthy outcomes,
- (2) Strategies aimed at including all youth,
- (3) Long-term commitment to youth development strategies,
- (4) Involvement of the greater community,
- (5) Collaboration between agencies and community groups and
- (6) Inclusion of young people as active participants and equal partners in any youth development initiative.

The 5C's model of PYD proposes five core indicators of positive youth development, namely competence, confidence, connection, character and caring (Jones *et al.*, 2011). According to Lerner *et al.* (2005), these indicators can be defined as follows. **Competence** is the positive view of one's ability to function and act effectively in specific areas, including social, academic, cognitive and vocational competence. **Confidence** refers to a sense of self-worth.

Connection means having positive bonds with people and social institutions. **Character** denotes a respect for societal and cultural rules, maintaining standards of correct behaviour and values, as well as morals and integrity, while **Caring** reflects an individual's sense of sympathy and empathy for others.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The aim of this study was not to evaluate or assess the MMP but to explore and identify life skills appropriate for inclusion in the development of a life skills programme focusing on elite adolescent South African athletes. The Cs of the 5C's model of PYD sum up the developmental characteristics that young people need to become successful and contribute to society (Lerner *et al.*, 2011). As such, the 5C's model was deemed appropriate for exploring and identifying the effects of a life skills programme on the participants in this study.

METHODOLOGY

Research method

The study adopted a purely qualitative research method using the exploratory design, following a social constructivist approach in seeking an understanding of elite adolescent athletes' life skill needs for inclusion in a life skills programme for these athletes (Creswell, 2009).

Population and sampling

The study population was elite adolescent South African athletes, and was limited to elite athletes taking part in the MacSteel Maestros Life Skills programme. As the only accredited life skills service provider for elite adolescent athletes in South Africa, it provided the researchers with access to elite adolescent athletes. The participants were purposively selected on the basis of their age, gender, race and the length of time they had been on the programme. Given their inclusion in a life skills programme, they were thought to be most suitable to provide rich data based on their experiences. However, this might also act as a limitation to the study, with the risk that their participation in the MMP programme might influence their responses.

Purposive sampling allows for the identification of specific individuals who have information relating to the research question (Blankenship, 2010). Twelve athletes from three of the eight regional centres were identified to form the sample of the study. However, while it was intended to select twelve athletes, only nine (four males and five females) between 16 and 19 years of age from the three regional centres agreed to participate in the study. Some were still at school and were therefore only available after school hours, others had to practice after school or after university classes, while others were unavailable as they had to travel to national or international competition/tournaments. Further, it should be noted that no white athletes met the selection criteria.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

A condition for inclusion was that the athletes had to have been on the programme for one year, giving them experience of a life skills programme and as a consequence a better understanding of the concept of life skills. Furthermore, to ensure that a variety of sporting codes and diverse backgrounds were represented in the study, the MMP Athlete Service Manager identified those regional centres where there would be enough athletes who met the criteria. As a result, three

out of eight possible regional centres were identified. In addition, athletes from a variety of sporting codes were chosen to ensure that more than one sporting code was covered. Finally, the study included elite athletes who were from financially disadvantaged families.

Research setting

The respondents were based in three cities, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban. The Cape Town interviews took place in the MMP head office at the Sport Science Institute in Newlands, where the room designated for the MacSteel Maestros athletes was made available. In Johannesburg, the athletes were interviewed at the MacSteel Maestros regional office based at the University of Johannesburg. Here too the room designated for use by MacSteel Maestros was made available for the interviews. The Durban-based athletes were interviewed at two different locations. The first interview was held in an office provided by the sports agency whose venue doubles as the MMP regional office, while the second was conducted at the gymnasium where the athletes train.

Research instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to facilitate the interview process (see Appendix). Semi-structured interviews have a predetermined list of questions to be covered. However, the sequence or manner in which the questions are asked is not specified but arises from a natural conversational style (Sanders, 2010). Literature relating to life skills and positive youth development was consulted to inform the interview guide. The questions were designed to avoid pre-determined responses, instead of acting as a guideline to ensure that the information obtained from the participants was relevant to the focus of the study.

The interview guide was comprised of open-ended questions about the athletes' experiences of the current life skills programme and about the life skills they perceived to be included in such a programme. The opening questions were of a demographic nature, covering age, sporting code, and a number of years on the programme. Further questions introduced the general topic of discussion, giving the participants the chance to reflect on their experience of the life skills programme. These included questions about what they understood life skills to be, which aspects of the programme they found beneficial, which aspects they felt could be improved upon, and which life skills should be added to or deleted from the programme.

Further key questions, derived from life skill and PYD literature, aimed to identify those skills which are essential to a life skills programme for elite adolescent athletes. The types of questions asked here included which life skills adolescent athletes needed for sport, which they needed outside sport, which they needed to prepare them for retirement from the sport, and which they thought were the most important for their current sporting career and in their personal lives. Closing questions ended the discussion, ensuring that the participants had adequate opportunity to talk about the issues they felt were relevant. All the interviews were conducted in English, and while it was not the home language for some of the participants it did not prove to be a limitation as all of them understood and spoke English.

Data collection procedure

The MacSteel Maestro mentors initially identified potential respondents and explained the aims and objectives of the study. The mentors then informed the athletes' parents and/or guardians of the study and asked their consent for the athletes to participate. Once they had agreed, the mentors approached the athletes themselves. The mentors gave the researcher the names and

contact details of the athletes who had agreed to take part. The researcher and the athletes then liaised to arrange a suitable date to conduct the interviews.

Before commencing the interviews, each of the participants was again briefed about the study, informed of its aims and objectives and the procedures that would be followed. They were also reminded that their participation was completely voluntary. After agreeing to take part, they were invited to sign a consent form. They were then engaged in informal conversation to establish a rapport and encourage a relaxed mood. During the interview, the researcher attempted to ask each question in the same order to ensure consistency, but the order of the introductory and key questions was changed at times to reflect the direction or flow of the interview. Prior to concluding the interview, the participants were asked if they wished to add any further information or details relevant to the topic, which they felt had not been covered during the interview. The interviews were conducted between August and November 2014 and required the researcher to travel to different venues. All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis of data

The study applied the principles of inductive reasoning while also exploring the predetermined codes, the 5C's model of the PYD theory, to guide the analysis and interpretation of the data (Bradley *et al.*, 2007). The predefined codes included the 5C model indicators of PYD, namely Confidence, Competence, Character, Connection and Caring. During the process, sub-themes emerged in support of the existing themes (5C's), allowing the researcher to organise and describe the data in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Table 1 (see next page) shows the emerging themes in relation to the 5C model indicators, which aided the researcher in evaluating the data collected from the interviews.

Validity and trustworthiness

The validity of the study was ensured through member checking, the participation of the researcher throughout the whole research process, as well as the provision of rich, thick and detailed descriptions of the findings (Creswell, 2009). Applying the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, along with an individual range of strategies, it can ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research (Guba, 1981; Shosha, 2012). This study, therefore, adopted the following criteria and range of strategies.

- *Credibility*: This calls for the development of an early familiarity with the culture of participating organisations, adoption of well-established research methods, tactics to help ensure honesty in informants when contributing data, as well as iterative questioning, frequent debriefing sessions, peer examination/scrutiny of the research project, and examination of previous research findings.
- *Transferability*: This study included an audit trail which incorporated thick, rich descriptions of the setting, the participants, the context within which the data was collected, and the reasoning behind the decisions made regarding data collection or analysis.
- *Dependability*: An in-depth description was given of the research methodology used for data collection and analysis.

Table 1. 5C'S OF PYD DEFINITIONS AND CORRESPONDING MMP LIFE SKILLS TOPICS*

5 C's of PYD and Definitions	Associated MMP Life Skill	
<p><u>Competence:</u> Positive view of one's actions in domain specific areas including social, academic, cognitive and vocational. Social competence pertains to interpersonal skills (conflict resolution). Cognitive competence pertains to cognitive abilities (decision-making). School grades, attendance, and test scores are part of academic competence. Vocational competence involves work habits and career choice explorations, including entrepreneurship.</p>	<p>Assertiveness Career guidance Conflict management Communication Contracts and agents Decision-making Employment skills Etiquette Financial skills Goal-setting Leadership and followership Media training</p>	<p>Mental skills Nutrition Presentation skills Problem-solving Sexual health Servicing sponsors Social networking Social skills Taxation Teamwork Time management Touring skills Using technology</p>
<p><u>Confidence:</u> An internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy; one's global self-regard, as opposed to domain specific beliefs.</p>	<p>Self-confidence Self-esteem</p>	
<p><u>Connection:</u> Positive bonds with people and institutions that are reflected in bi-directional exchanges between the individual and peers, family, school and community in which both parties contribute to the relationship.</p>	<p>Forming relationships Social responsibility</p>	
<p><u>Character:</u> Respect for societal and cultural rules, possession of standards for correct behaviours, a sense of right and wrong (morality), and integrity.</p>	<p>Corruption in sport Doping in sport Harassment Respecting differences</p>	<p>Substance abuse Taking responsibility Values and ethics</p>
<p><u>Caring:</u> Sense of sympathy and empathy for others.</p>	<p>Social responsibility</p>	

* Lerner *et al.* (2005) and Taylor (2015)

Ethical clearance

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Senate Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Western Cape, while permission to conduct the research study was obtained from MacSteel Maestros. The participants, along with their parents and/or guardians, were briefed both verbally and in writing on the goals and purpose of the study, the reason why they were nominated and the potential value of their input. They were reassured that all information provided would remain confidential and that they would be given pseudonyms to conceal their identities. It was also explained that participation was voluntary and that they would be free to withdraw from

the study at any time without negative consequences. The participants were asked to read and sign informed consent forms, while their parents and/or guardians read and signed informed consent forms to give their legal consent.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research was underpinned by the 5C's model of PYD. The findings are discussed under the five core indicators of the model: (1) Competence, (2) Confidence, (3) Character, (4) Connection and (5) Caring/Compassion.

Competence

Lerner *et al.* (2005) define competence as a positive view of one's actions in domain-specific areas, including social competence (interpersonal skills), cognitive competence (cognitive abilities), academic competence (school grades, attendance, and test scores) and vocational competence (work habits, career choice explorations and entrepreneurship). Interpersonal skills within this domain include conflict management, communication, teamwork, assertiveness and social skills.

The participants felt that being able to manage conflict was a necessary skill. For example, Riana said that she had had issues in the past with her coach, but that "before I would not have challenged." After speaking with her mentor, however, she now found it easier "to challenge what he is saying and... like if I see something working that he doesn't, I go to him and explain to him how I see it working."

Effective communication skills can help athletes to get their views across to teammates, coaches, parents and friends. The participants felt that teamwork skills were important since as athletes, they could not succeed on their own. To be successful, they needed to function in a team environment. Assertiveness was a further useful quality, especially when they needed or wanted to get their views or opinions across to their coach or to their teammates. Lastly, social skills were thought to be important, as they also needed to be able to interact with people off the field.

Cognitive competence refers to thought processes and includes strategies for problem-solving, abstract and deductive reasoning, and verbal ability (Jimerson *et al.*, 2002). Within the cognitive competence domain, the requisite competencies were time management, financial planning, goal setting and nutrition.

Given their busy schedules, time management emerged from the interviews as one of the crucial cognitive abilities. For instance, Aisha stated that:

"With school as well, you need to have a balance so you need to have management of what times training, when are you going to have your study time and if it's over to show you are just going to be lost."

The importance of being able to manage time effectively is demonstrated by this quote from Kim, who described her daily routine.

"I have to leave the house at quarter to six, then....I...go to school. After school, I have to walk down to the station, where I catch a train to go to the track, and after the track, I have to come home."

Once home, she still has to eat, shower and do her homework.

The value of planning also extended to a career after sport. The respondents were aware that an athlete's career is finite, and that they needed to plan financially for the future. Khaya recorded that:

"I have to...have a career that is OK after school, what I am going to do...I can't swim for the rest of my life."

Mandisi indicated that he has already begun planning for his retirement from swimming:

"If I do end up making it big in sport, then that's like a big bonus, but then I know as soon as I'm done with sport, I've got something to fall back on."

Manzini (2012) believes that financial management skills were important for football players, especially since they started playing football from an early age and often did not think about saving for the future.

The respondents indicated that setting both short- and long-term goals was also a vital part of planning. Khaya felt that goal-setting helped one to focus. He noted that he personally had broken five South African swimming records and that each time:

"I planned it, sir...I planned it in twenty-eleven, then twenty (inaudible) I broke it and I was happy."

His next goal was "to go to Rio" to represent South Africa at the Olympic Games in 2016.

The respondents also spoke about the value of proper nutrition and adjusting their food intake to complement their athletic lifestyle. This was confirmed by Manzini (2012), who said that footballers felt it was important for them to receive advice on nutrition. Rania stated that:

"If you are going to be in sport then...it's important. Well, also if you are not going to be in sport it's still important but...with sports...with all the extra strain that you putting your body through you need to have a balanced diet that's...fitting."

In Janet's opinion, "If you gonna be drinking and smoking and doing the wrong things... it's gonna affect you in your games." The other participants had similar mindsets about the importance of an appropriate, well-balanced diet.

Confidence

Confidence implies that the individual possesses a sense of positive self-worth, self-efficacy and global self-regard (Lerner *et al.*, 2005). Self-confidence emerged as an important quality for elite athletes. In reference to a workshop she attended, Nelisiwe said:

"What I learnt the most was...positivity, and I have been using that especially with, when it comes to my schoolwork and training because sometimes I can be a negative person... so after that workshop I... learnt quite a lot and I have changed... so I must say I'm... kind of a positive person now."

The participants reflected that they performed better when they felt confident. In addition, they also felt more comfortable about challenging their coaches when they did not agree with tactics or felt that they or a teammate or teammates were being treated unfairly. Off the field, they felt that self-confidence benefitted them both academically and socially. They were not shy to ask questions in class when they did not understand and interact with people more easily in social situations. It should be noted that they had not undergone self-confidence or self-esteem training. It could be concluded that their increase in self-confidence and self-esteem was due to them being selected to be part of a prominent life skills programme for elite adolescent athletes or to the talks or encouragement they received from their mentors or coaches.

Character

A person with character respects societal and cultural rules, possesses standards for correct behaviour, and has a sense of right and wrong (morality) and integrity (Lerner *et al.*, 2005). The athletes felt that this showed incorrect behaviour both on and off the field, in responsibility, in strong values and ethics, and in teamwork.

Responsibility

For an athlete, this means a sense of responsible citizenship in sport, accepting that as an athlete their role and responsibilities go beyond just competing and training (Carter 2009). Janet felt that as an athlete you “can’t depend on your parent’s the whole time”. The participants felt that they had a responsibility to give back to their communities and also to help the younger players. For example, Rania said that “there’s no way you can make it out of the community without some help from someone”.

They also spoke about having to take responsibility and work hard to reach their goals. Kim believed that “you must make sacrifices, to like, become the best athlete”. This meant not going out with her friends during the week, because she had to be up early the next day to practice. The participants also spoke about taking responsibility when it came to family matters. Aisha’s father was the main breadwinner in the family, and she pointed out that she tried to help out where she could. She added:

“All I do is train and do what I’m supposed to do but where I can help, as in little side jobs and getting money, I give it. I just hand it all to them.”

Correct behaviour (values and ethics)

Moral behaviour in the context of sport can be defined as a refusal to be involved in negative social behaviours (Kavussanu *et al.*, 2006). The participants spoke about the importance of making time for family and friends, being humble, setting an example, being a role model, and having respect for all people and their religions. Aisha, for example, believed that:

“If you have respect for yourself, other people will have respect for you”.

On the field, elite athletes show respect to their teammates, their coach and their opponents. Off the field, they choose friends who have the same values and ethics as they have. They find people who will encourage them, will not steer them in wrong directions or be jealous of their achievements. Finding people with these qualities can be difficult and may be why the participants only socialised with other elite athletes. From the evidence of the interviews, it was clear that athletes who are devoid of life skills do not join a life skills programme. Such a programme should, therefore, begin by identifying the skills the athletes already possess and work on developing those which are lacking.

Teamwork

Teamwork is a multi-faceted type of cohesion, associated with a group who share and understand all aspects of their team identity, team philosophy, individual rules and performance outcome goals (Hoffman 2013). The participants spoke about the importance of teamwork and working hard for the team. They felt it was crucial to motivate, encourage and support their teammates during a game, even when they made mistakes. Those who were involved in individual sport also highlighted the significance of teamwork.

Connection

These findings, as they relate to the connection with other athletes and family, share similarities with those of Jones and Lavalley (2009). The participants spoke about the importance of appreciating family (family interaction), as well as respecting teammates (teamwork). Data analysis revealed that they exhibited characteristics of connection, which manifested principally in relationships with their coaches, fellow athletes, their families and their mentors.

Connection with coach

The participants spoke about having a healthy and trusting relationship with their coaches. Some even went so far as to say that they saw their coach as a father figure. For example, Aisha said that she and her coach did not just have “*a coach relationship but...he’s also like a father figure*”. They also indicated that they trusted their coach implicitly. When talking about taking the performance supplements given by her coach, Nelisiwe said: “*Well, if he says take this and it will be beneficial, then I will*”. It was evident that the trust between the athletes and their coaches had been built up over time.

Connection with other athletes

According to Iso-Ahola (1995), athletes depend on the support and friendship of other athletes when injuries or personal problems occur. The participants had developed strong bonds with their team mates and fellow competitors. For instance, Rania stated that her friends were mostly “*people who I grew up with in school who all played the same sports as me so we were always together over weekends*”. They felt that only other athletes could understand what it took to be an elite athlete and what they went through in terms of the time spent training and competing, as well as the sacrifices that they had to make. Kim remarked:

“I don’t have friends at home like... in the road, because the things they do and the things we do... is different... if we talk about something then our friends will know what we are talking about.”

Her views were echoed by Aisha, who said she socialised with other athletes because they were goal-driven and “*know what it’s about*”.

In contrast, relationships with ‘non-athletes’ were generally non-existent. This may have been due to their busy schedules. A typical day for Aisha saw her,

“... getting done and getting out of the house by let’s say, latest six, six-thirty, getting to campus, go to all lectures, after which it’s training, home, studying, gym, home before getting to sleep at a reasonable time, because we need to get up early the next day.”

However, this did not mean that they did not make an effort to maintain friendships with ‘non-athlete’ friends. Nelisiwe tried to keep in contact with her ‘non-athlete’ friends through social media, while Aisha said that she always made time for them, even if it meant that she had to adjust her training schedule.

Connection with family

Teenagers value their relationships with their parents and tend to incorporate their parents’ core values into their own (Lerner *et al.*, 2005). Family members give athletes support in many ways, not only by attending their sporting events. They also provide financial and moral support, as well as advice. Almost all the athletes in the study spoke about the importance of family support. Mandisi said:

“The support of your family is very important... because, I mean, at the end of the day they are like your backbone.”

They also spoke about the importance of spending time with family. According to Rania,

“Finding time to spend with family because I think that would be an important... life skill for me... you have to spend time with your family and friends and...not neglect them.”

Connection with life skills mentor

For the athletes, their mentor played a significant role, as someone who was readily available, in whom they could confide, and who was there to look after their interests. They spoke about the connection they had developed with their life skills mentor. For example, Mandisi felt comfortable speaking to his mentor about issues or problems that he had. Likewise, Thami felt that he could approach his mentor at any time and that he would assist him: *“If you have a question you can just pop in and ask them about what you wanna know.”* This relationship, however, did not happen overnight. Mandisi explained that *“at the beginning, you’ll be very like conservative of what you say”*. Moreover, not all of the participants had this type of relationship with their mentor. Janet said that she would prefer to speak to the psychologist, rather than her new mentor *“because I don’t trust him yet. I don’t know him that long.”*

Caring/Compassion

Caring/compassion reflects a sense of sympathy and empathy for others (Lerner *et al.*, 2005). The responses of the participants were analysed to determine if they exhibited any evidence of the skills relating to caring/compassion. More specifically, this included their responses to their involvement in charity work. They identified charity work (giving back) and assisting young athletes in need of a break in life was important.

Athletes and charity work

The athletes felt that it was essential to give back to those less fortunate than themselves. Janet noted that: *“There’s a lot of people that struggle...so if you have a lot, go out to the community. Do something with it.”* Some of the athletes organised and participated in charity events, some gave their sponsored clothes to athletes or friends in their community, while others donated money to worthy causes. However, as they had not been involved in many life skills training sessions, it was not clear whether these qualities had been developed while on the current programme or if they had already possessed them prior to joining.

Compassion for other athletes

The athletes felt that it was incumbent on them to assist other athletes who found themselves in a similar position to their own, namely athletes who needed a sports organisation or an individual involved in sport to recognise their talent and give them an opportunity to showcase it. Their general views were captured by Thami who said:

As a sport person, it’s important to look back, you know, where you come from, who you know...and you know how it was difficult for you too... to make it as a professional player so... you have to look for the people that you may work with, to change people’s lives to be easier...to make it in future, in sport.”

They understood how difficult the journey was to become a professional athlete and wanted to pass on what they had learnt. These findings compare with those of Ramey and Rose-Krasnor (2012), who indicated that youth who exhibited PYD characteristics, such as caring

promoted positive development in their communities and in the activities in which they were engaged. Once again, however, it was unclear whether these qualities were developed through their involvement in a life skills programme or if they had possessed them prior to joining the programme.

OVERALL SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In general, it can be concluded that athletes, both on and off the field, can benefit from participation in a life skills programme. The athletes in this study exhibited qualities of competence, confidence, character, connection and caring/compassion, both in and out of sport. They were aware of the need to plan for a career after sport, spoke about wanting to give back to the community, were more confident both on and off the field, and had developed positive bonds with their families, coaches, and other athletes, as well as with their mentors. However, there were limitations to the study that should be noted. Although the athletes were involved in a life skills programme for at least nine months, which Catalano *et al.* (2002) suggest is a characteristic of high-quality PYD programmes, they had varying degrees of exposure to life skills training. Furthermore, each regional centre managed the process differently, and the modules were not taught in a systematic manner. Finally, while the majority of the participants were exposed to life skills sessions in one form or the other, whether in a workshop, a group or a one-on-one session with a mentor, there were those who had not received any life skills training.

CONCLUSION

This study was the first of its kind to be conducted in South Africa and the findings contribute to the current literature as it relates to the life skills needs of elite adolescent athletes. Time management and self-esteem/self-confidence were identified as crucial life skills to be developed by such a programme. This was followed by respecting differences, avoiding substance abuse and taking responsibility. Teamwork, nutrition, social networking skills and social responsibility were also important factors. The respondents believed that being involved in a life skills programme positively affects an athlete's development, both on and off the field. Furthermore, they felt that, in order for such a programme to be successful, it needed to include access to a mentor, allow athletes to meet and share experiences, focus on academic as well as sporting achievements, and encourage athletes to think about a career after sport.

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APPENDIX: Interview questions

1. How old are you?
Which sporting code you are involved in?
How long have you been involved in your sport? (Tell me about your achievements in sport so far./ How does training and competing affect your schoolwork / studies?)
2. How long have you been on the Macsteel Maestro's programme?
3. What is your definition of the term "life skills"/What do you understand life skills to be?
4. Do you feel that being on the programme is good for you? Which aspects of the programme did you find beneficial? (What do you like about the programme? /Is there anything about the programme that you would improve?)
5. Which life skills modules have you completed while you've been on the programme? (Either as an individual or in a group)
6. The aim of the programme is to develop athletes holistically (helping participants to become better people and athletes).
Do you feel that being on the programme has made you a better person? Why do you say so? Can you give me examples? Do you use what you learnt at home/ school/family and friends?
Do you feel that being on the programme has helped you become a better athlete? Why do you say so? Can you give me examples? Do you use what you learnt in when you practice or compete? Has it helped you with your performance, relationship with your coach, relationship with team members and your relationship with competitors?
7. Which life skills do you think adolescent athletes need outside sport - to have to manage their personal lives? (**refer to life skills list**) Why do you say so?
8. Which life skills do you think adolescent athletes need for sport - to be successful in sport? (**refer to life skills list**) Why do you say so?
9. Do you think that adolescent athletes need to plan for life after sport? (**If "no"**, why do you say so?) (**If "yes"**, why do you say so?).
When do you think they should start planning? Why do you say so?
Which life skills do you think adolescent athletes need to prepare them for life after sport? (**refer to life skills list**) Why do you say so?
Have you thought about your retirement from sport?
Do you have any short or long term plans in place? (If "yes", what are they?) (If "no", why?)
10. Are there life skills, not on the current list, that you would like to see included?
Are there any life skills on the current list that you feel you don't need? (Not necessary?) What are they and why?
Are you involved in any community projects or charity work? (If "yes", what is it and why did you choose to get involved?)