Looking for boundary spanners: An exploratory study of critical experiences of coaches in sport-for-development programs

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Abstract

Given that sport-for-development (SfD) requires the intentional use of sport as a tool to realize developmental goals in complex contexts, there is a need for reflexive SfD coaches who can successfully contribute to the delivery of programs. In this study we explore the lived experiences of SfD coaches in a selection of programs in Flanders, Belgium. We look at their responsibilities, perceived competencies and the conditions that need to be in place in order to realize SfD goals. Qualitative data spanning a four-year research project were analysed in order to understand how, why and in what contexts coaches contribute to SfD programs. The analysis unearthed a boundary-spanning coach profile, establishing emotional connectivity, working in a transprofessional manner, and occupying professional hybridity that adapts to context continuously. These results provide an important contribution for SfD practice and policy, nourishing reflection on the 'ideal' SfD coach profile, and how it could be generated within the most complex times.

Introduction

Participation in sports is increasingly seen as an effective manner of reaching youngsters (and adults) in socially vulnerable situations, hence the organization of local sport activities targeting specific, often suburban, quarters (Haudenhuyse et al., 2018). These practices aim to make sports and its related benefits accessible to those who could benefit (mentally, physically and socially) most of sports participation. They come in different forms and have different names, depending on whether sport is the ultimate goal, or rather a tool to realize 'developmental objectives', such as personal development, crime reduction, peace building, etc. (Haudenhuyse et al., 2018). Among the most commonly used terms are sport-plus, sport-for-change, and sport-for-development (SfD). Lyras and Welty Peachey (2011, p.311) define SfD as "the use of sport to exert a positive influence on public health, the socialization of children, youth and adults, the social inclusion of the disadvantaged, the economic development of regions and states, and on fostering intercultural exchange and conflict resolution". Following this definition, we could project SfD as a true intersectoral and transdisciplinary (Haudenhuyse et al., 2020) social lab in which social workers, sport coaches, youth workers, researchers, job coaches, and many more profiles collaborate in finding an effective 'treatment' for social vulnerability.

At the centre stage of the realization of SfD programs are the program deliverers. Whether they are called '(sport) coaches' (Schulenkorf, 2017), 'educators' (Spaaij et al., 2016), 'practitioners' (Debognies et al., 2018), 'instructors' (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011), 'boundary spanners' (Jeanes et al., 2019) or 'peer leaders' (Lindsey & Grattan, 2011), their position is crucial in view of the effectiveness of the practices and projects (Cronin & Armour, 2015). Being reflexive, adaptable to different contexts and able to see beneath the surface of how participants reason against the resources they provide in their coaching (Dalkin et al., 2015) seem to be important characteristics of successful coaches. It is interesting to note that coaches with diverse educational and experiential backgrounds deliver SfD practices. Some have grown up and experienced the many issues that the programme they are working in is trying to prevent, thus occupying the cultural intermediary role (Crabbe, 2009). Others possess educational backgrounds spanning higher education based courses in coaching and sport-for-development, and there are those who complete formal national governing body qualifications associated with their main sport. More specifically, and what remains an issue, is that specific training of what SfD coaches

need to do to be able to fulfil their role is not formalized. This is even more an issue in the current context of COVID19 where the underlying issues at play within SfD programs are at their zenith.

Despite these different profiles, there are also a number of communalities that can be observed in terms of how these coaches fulfil their coaching roles. All these different profiles are engaged in boundary-spanning activities, processes and tasks. 'Boundary spanners' – a concept derived from organizational and policy theory – are critical actors in multi-sector collaboration tackling complex social issues. They link individuals, organizations and groups with different interests through liaising and gatekeeping (Jeanes et al., 2019; Williams, 2013). Boundary spanning is an umbrella term that may incorporate many different skills, capabilities, roles, and responsibilities. SfD coaches have also been referred to as 'cultural intermediaries' (Crabbe, 2009), who "construct value, by framing how others (…) engage with goods (including services, ideas and behaviours), affecting and effecting others' orientations towards those goods as legitimate" (Maguire & Matthews, 2012, p.552).

Engagement into SFD is not easily attained and drop-out is quite apparant. One of the reasons is that sport participation is not an easy choice for hard-to-reach groups having other priorities and concerns to deal with. Also, engagement is impeded with structural boundaries (Curran, Drust, Murphy et al., 2016). Insight into the workings of SfD has revealed that a multitude of interacting mechanisms, both on an individual level and structural-environmental level, might explain the uptake, maintenance and effectiveness of those practices, hence the importance of understanding of context (Oatley and Harris, 2020), the development of sound program theories (Coalter, 2012) and attention for sustainability (Lindsey, 2008). Given the social issues agenda that permeates sport, and particularly SfD, there is a need to capture the tasks, responsibilities and required skills of the SfD coaches involved and to conceptualize this profile more.

It is not possible in this paper to extensively review the literature that already exists surrounding coaches in SfD. However, we recognize the contributions the likes of Jeanes et al (2019), Crabbe (2009), Taylor and McEwan (2012), and most recently Crisp (2020) have made to understanding and making sense of the roles of coaches in SfD. We intend to build on these excellent contributions by offering a more unique insight of how and why coaches operate in the SfD space. In this article we focus on a selection of established SfD programs in Flanders (Belgium).

More specifically we explore the lived experiences of coaching in SfD, and in particular the responsibilities, tasks, perceived competencies, but also the needs and structural conditions that need to be put in place in order to realize coaching. The SfD programs were studied over the course of a four-years lasting research project, called CATCH (*Community Sports for AT-risk youth: innovating strategies for promoting personal development, health and social CoHesion*). Extensive data has been collected to understand how and why SfD programs work.

Methods

Because SfD practices embody complex interventions, many scholars have suggested approaches differing from the traditional ones when studying SfD programs (Coalter, 2010; Jeanes & Lindsey, 2014; Kay, 2009; Spaaij et al., 2018), e.g. participatory approaches, leading to better learning, understanding and utilization of findings (Oatley & Harris, 2020). In this study, the qualitative data of different SfD studies were analysed for the key ingredients of successful SfD coaching. Stakeholders participated in both the data collection (semi-structured interviews, participatory observations) and data analysis. For example, in focus group discussions, at the one hand more qualitative data were collected while at the other hand earlier collected (anonymous) data and preliminary theories were thoroughly discussed with key stakeholders, who as such contributed to their analysis. Also later analyses were always fed back to stakeholders, in order to verify whether their perceptions and impressions were well translated. The SfD coach and the context in which he or she works, was studied through a realist lens (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). This implies that the study starts from the visible outcome (e.g. a SfD coach succeeding in motivating socially vulnerable individuals to engage through SfD activities) and works its way back to the invisible, underlying mechanisms (e.g. creation of a safe and trustworthy environment) that may have caused this outcome. The realist ontology also implies taking into account a maximum of contextual factors and the reactions of participants/actors involved in the intervention on the resources deployed by the intervention (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Dalkin et al. 2015).

Study setting and data collection

For this explorative study, a secondary analysis was done of data collected within the CATCH research project (2016-2019, Flanders, Belgium), studying the mechanisms responsible for a

positive impact of SfD initiatives on social inclusion of socially vulnerable youth. Transdisciplinary in both design and implementation, CATCH gathers researchers from different fields, policy makers and practitioners in an action research. Its central research question is realist in nature, aiming at identifying underlying mechanisms and the circumstances in which these mechanisms are 'activated' (Dalkin et al., 2015). Within the CATCH project, and more precisely with regards to the question on how sport could be used as a health-promoting tool, three cases were studied. Case A contained multiple units of analyses, including three local 'football-for-development' teams (located in three Belgian cities of different sizes), their stakeholders (public social services, youth services, NGOs,) and partnering SfD initiatives (Van der Veken et al., 2020a). Case B concerned the transdisciplinary development of a training trajectory for community sport coaches in the medium-sized city of Bruges (Lauwerier et al., 2020; Van der Veken et al., 2019). Six to eight community sport coaches employed in a social (re)integration contract (i.e. following a combined on-the-spot training and employment trajectory) animate sport activities in the four most deprived neighbourhoods of Bruges, under the supervision of one sportive and one pedagogical coordinator. The community sport coaches' profile is characterized by several vulnerabilities, such as long-term unemployment, poverty, psychosocial problems, substance use (e.g., alcohol, drugs), etc. As such, these coaches can be considered to be experts-by-experience (EbE) with limited access to a formal coach training. Case C is about a single SfD practice, KAA Gent Foundation, aiming to improve the employability of socially vulnerable individuals via a process of personal development generated by social-sportive activities in which participants gradually take more engagement (Van der Veken et al., 2020b). Among others, they run a soccer team with and for people in precarious socio-economic situations (Gantoise Plantrekkers), a soccer team with and for persons with psychosocial difficulties (Geestige Buffalo's), low-threshold sport and citizenship-building activities for children in a disadvantaged neighbourhood (Buffalo League) and a dance academy in the same neighbourhood.

In all three cases, data were collected gradually (starting with the least 'intrusive' collection method, such as document analysis and observation, and then building further towards in-depth interviews) and iteratively (information from previous data collection was taken into consideration and used to guide further data collection). Data sources included field notes from (participatory) observation, document analysis, meeting minutes, interviews and focus group discussions (see Appendix 1). Interviewees in cases A & C were purposively selected in

collaboration with project coordinators to ensure respondents of different age, gender, ethnic background, occupation and type of partner organizations. In case B all trainees and both coordinators were asked to participate in an interview. All interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, using an interview guide based on the observations and discussed and revised by peer researchers, in order to reveal more easily key mechanisms and facilitating context factors within SfD practices. Focus group discussions (two in Case A, one in Case B) were organized at the end of the case study, allowing validation or adaption of theoretical assumptions derived from analysis of observations and interviews. The data collection methods used in this study allowed the researchers to look under the surface of the visible outcome, and to identify key mechanisms with regard to why and how SfD coaches may contribute to SfD's inner workings.

Data analysis

The current study is the result of a secondary data analysis carried out in order to deepen primary data analyses, as we felt there were some overarching insights across data and contexts. While primary data analysis served theory-building purposes in Case A and theory testing purposes in Cases B and C, examining why, how and in which circumstances SfD could improve health of socially vulnerable populations, the secondary data analysis as done in this study aims at retroductively uncovering what is going on beneath the surface of SfD coaching practices (Jagosh, 2020). Scanning the data on information concerning contextual factors making SfD coaches successful in their mandate, we first explored how SfD coaches, participants and stakeholders defined the essential roles of SfD coaches, and then what competences and behaviours are needed to fulfil these roles. The qualitative data collected within the CATCH research project were reanalyzed through a realist-inspired thematic analysis. Although a classical thematic analysis (familiarization with the data, coding, generating initial themes reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, writing up – cf. Braun & Clarke, 2006) was already done for earlier CATCH studies, we now looked at the data from a different perspective. The analysis now focused on the following sub-questions: What are the responsibilities and tasks of SfD coaches? What are their perceived competencies and necessary characteristics? Which structural conditions need to be put in place for SfD coaches to be successful in their role?

Thematic analysis can be used for both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) analyses, and to capture both manifest (explicit) and latent (underlying) meaning (Clarke & Braun, 2017). In the light of the realist ontology underpinning the CATCH research, the interest of this study is focused on the latent meaning (Braun, Clarke & Weate, 2016) and more specifically on the underlying mechanisms of SfD, and the role of the SfD coach in declining these mechanisms. This study's analysis thus relies on a mix of inductive, deductive and retroductive techniques (Jagosh, 2020).

Findings & discussion

Study data suggest that, for SfD coaches to take on a role of boundary spanner, an emotional connection with SfD participants needs to be established, allowing opportunities to accompany participants on their personal growth trajectory. To realize this connection, SfD coaches should work in a modus operandi characterized by three components: professional hybridity, transprofessionalism and adaptation to context. These modi come with specific competencies.

Emotional connectivity

Personal development is key in SfD, requiring coaches to possess skills for creating and facilitating steps towards personal development, using a mentoring approach (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007). SfD coaches play a crucial role in fostering and sustaining effective inter-personal relationships mediated through trust (Debognies et al., 2018; Taylor & McEwan, 2012;), as such creating a sense of psychological safety in the participants (Van der Veken et al., 2020a, 2020b). Carey et al. (2018) advice concrete steps: first listen, then ask questions, approach with humility, value diversity and follow through. Skills in communication, listening, empathy, negotiation, consensus building and conflict resolution are therefore appreciated (Williams, 2013) and emerged from our data as key in activating the mechanism of emotional connectivity, as supported by the following quote:

I mainly sat in between the supporters at the sideline, having chats. It sounds arbitrary but isn't. I also ran some activities afterwards, e.g. cooking with supporters and eating with the players. It's all part of the reinforcement process. Many more came because they knew there was someone sitting at the side willing to listen. (Koen, social worker)

Psychological safe space is facilitated by accessible, unconditional and fun SfD activities (Coalter, 2013), and a regular presence of SfD coaches in the familiar environment of the participants. This trustworthy environment then becomes the soil in which the boundary-spanning role of SfD coaches can grow:

You're standing on a square for months in a row every week on the same day, so you create a relationship of trust with these people. (...) Someday you get questions that should not necessarily be addressed to you – but they are because you have this relationship of trust. (Kris, job coach)

Also facilitating emotional connectivity is the use of experts-by-experience such as former participants of SFD activities with a similar socially vulnerable background. They tend to bond more easily with the target group and participants more easily adopt a behaviour that is modelled by a peer in whom they are able to recognize themselves (Bandura, 1998). EbE may be recruited as (assistant) SfD coach, as Nic was:

It suits me. I can use my experience in it, what I've been through myself. I understand these boys and I can just talk to them and it is a lot easier to build something like that. (Nic, assistant coach)

These findings are important because they support pre-existing literature on the cultural intermediary (Crabbe, 2009) and place significance on the background of coaches following similar paths.

Transprofessionalism

An essential task of SfD coaches is to build positive relationships with the participants (Crisp, 2020) whilst also maintaining strong links with the partners and stakeholders from various organizations and administrations. These are complex tasks that transcend multiple professions and cohere with Taylor and McEwan's (2012) transprofessional analysis of coaches who often found themselves taking on different responsibilities they would not expect as traditional coaches. E.g., the welfare landscape in Flanders being densely populated and rather bureaucratic, those in need of support face challenges accessing these services. Study data showed how SfD coaches characterize these transprofessional aspects by acting as an entry point to a whole

network of professional caretakers signposting participants to key contacts and organizations. SfD coaches observe, pick up information and impressions, identify needs in the participants, and either discuss these with other (health, education, employment…) professionals or directly with the participant in order to refer and bridge the gap between the participant and the professionals. In this, SfD coaches work in a transprofessional manner (Taylor & McEwan, 2012):

A community sport worker is actually mainly a bridging person. (…) We're the listening ears in the different neighbourhoods. We hear about the different needs, and we try to respond to them. Our goal is actually to be able to guide people towards the regular offer. (Moha, community sport worker)

Necessary conditions to succeed in connecting the participants to the professionals are that SfD coaches are well informed about the local welfare stakeholders and that (some of) the professionals with whom SfD coaches are making the link, are physically present during SFD activities. If not, barriers for participants to effectively seek help with the right person might not be overcome:

Participants often come to me to talk about their personal problems. (…) But I'm not a social worker and sometimes I say: "Look that's A and B [street social workers] sitting over there; if I were you, I would go and talk with them (…) for they are two fantastic people who certainly will want to help you. And if that [message] comes from me, the coach to whom they look up to, to whom they listen, who they respect, that step is more easily taken. (Sam, coach)

The Social Welfare Council often having difficult relationships with these guys, it is very enriching that one of them is nowadays present at the trainings and comes along to have a cup of soup. (Michael, social worker)

Study data suggest that some coaches focus on sportive aspects and others focus on social coaching from the sideline. While clearly a positive element within the resources provided in the programme, set up and cost of such resources raises questions about sustaining this in the future (Crisp, 2020), especially in times of austerity. Moreover, many SfD coaches mentioned the fact that they have blurring roles anyway, even when assigned only one:

I can follow the idea that there are two different roles [sportive versus social coach]. (...) On the field, the sportive aspect takes the overhand until something goes wrong, a little conflict or something, and then the other role takes over. (...) I think within our projects both roles are often situated within one person, and it blurs a little. (Sofie, coordinator)

Whether SfD coaches are successful in establishing the connection between participants and professionals depends on various factors, such as the educational and professional background of coaches, their personality and interests, their will and ability to network, etc. All this influences coaches' ability to get to know the participants' background, establish a relationship of trust and create a solid network of caregivers around the participant. Thus to some extent there is no guarantee that coaches will embody these transprofessional skills as supported by the following example:

You notice that some coaches lack the necessary social (...) capacity to deal with certain behaviour. And then they themselves behave in a way that is difficult to understand [for participants]. (Samir, youth worker)

As long as there is no formalized training to embody the SfD profile, these various backgrounds and experiences will continue to create variable program results. There are also more structural factors at play in the realization of the boundary-spanning role of SfD coaches. Several respondents mentioned the need for collaboration and networking between all professionals in contact with the target group, to enable an easily realizable objective if working in the same neighbourhood.

It makes it easier to reach people, to reach the target group. Because if you have to do everything yourself, or start from zero, that requires a lot of time. (Yasser, coordinator)

SfD coaches are frontline professionals and can, as such, be considered "street-level bureaucrats" (Lipsky, 1980) delivering services at the interface between agencies and service users – a role often coming with conflicting interests. SfD coaches have to deal with fellow professionals from other agencies delivering services to the same clients (Williams, 2013). From a positive point of view, this can be seen as an opportunity for cost-effective collaboration, increasing the realization of common objectives by stakeholders from different though strongly related sectors, such as

welfare, health, education and employment. To facilitate and lead such collaborative partnerships, SfD coaches need to have cross-sector knowledge, a proactive attitude and political skills such as the ability to network, influence and lobby (Petchey et al., 2007). For even when the boundary-spanning role of SfD coaches ensures that ideas are effectively picked up from the community, once politics enter the policy process this on-going dialogue and collaboration may be at risk of being sidelined (Williams, 2013; Rossi & Jeanes, 2016).

Professional hybridity

Whilst we have highlighted that the lack of professional recognition of SfD coaches may be an issue, the fact that they are not always recognized as professionals comes with advantages as well. SfD coaching is about being professional and not professional in the same time. It requires a certain freedom of filling in the job on the spot, in interaction with, and according to the needs of the target group (Crisp, 2020; Crabbe, 2009). Well-developed job descriptions come with procedures, conventions and possibly a system of sanctions. Evidence from this research suggests that in an improvising way, SfD coaches are 'inventing the job' on the spot (see also Sabbe, Bradt, Spaaij & Roose, 2020), aligning their delivery to the context and needs of the participants as shown here:

How a street social worker deals with participants… There's a sort of link of trust between them. With the Social Welfare Council, it's more … I would not say 'structured', but there're more data that need to be collected, e.g. with regards to their presence, their age, family situation (…) Street workers do things the other way around: they first build a relationship of trust without collecting data and then (...) They start from care for the participant. (Hans, coach)

A rather unconditional approach provides SfD coaches an indirect way to reach the participants, in contrast to the often more complicated roads that professional social workers need to take:

I told them: 'Look, (…) a whole lot of people are aware of what is happening on the field here and just the fact that I come here and do stuff with you makes that the police is not patrolling here on a daily basis. (…) So I ask you to not smoke drugs here around the football field.' (…) And after a while, when they start to respect you, it works: 'Ok, for you I'll do that'. (Tony, youth worker)

It's an open training; we expect no engagement. (…) If you don't come then you don't come. And if we didn't see someone for a while, then we take contact: 'are you ok? We did not see you, is there something wrong?' It's not like [in a sports club]: 'Two more absences and you can go' (Brahim, youth worker)

Our data demonstrate that the role of SfD coaches is about much more than being technical. Coaches constantly need to adapt to context displaying the professional hybridity suitable to the environments they are working within – which is hard to maintain as shows the quote below:

To work in an unconditional manner is a lot more difficult and harder work for the coaches then when setting conditions from the start. That's easy: you work only with who falls within that category of conditions, and that's an easy target group. But if you try to give a place to all things that go wrong, or addictions, and if you work around that, yes, that is very hard work. (…) But I do think it is our job to do that. (Tony, youth worker)

Social work professionals follow certain rules and standards; they act in accordance with what they have been taught during trainings that serve to increase and standardize the quality of the caretakers' duties. However, what represents quality (for example, respectful interaction) for a caretaker might differ from what a participant considers important. It is important that SfD coaches experience the freedom to be influenced by the target group and to be 'taught' other perspectives as part of this professional hybridity. This allows a kind of 'authenticity' appreciated by participants and increasing the probability for creating relationships of trust:

Through being oneself – people feel that – not wanting to come with all the solutions but just offering a listening ear, giving attention and showing interest in who they are and what they're capable of – instead of asking why they were not on their appointment the week before –, (…) one becomes a trust's person more rapidly. Then you can reach much more with them. (Michael, social worker)

I always tell [X]: 'if you feel bad, try to go and take a 20-minutes-walk instead of smoking a cigarette. I do that too, you know'. And then [X] reacts: 'Wow, my trainer does so too, he's a human being too, experiencing difficult times sometime.' (Sam, coach)

While authenticity seems a condition for bonding with participants (Debognies et al., 2018), coaches' personal vulnerabilities might represent both a facilitating and hindering factor in making emotional connection. One EbE expressed the ambiguity of being a role model while struggling oneself with social and psychological vulnerabilities as follows:

At the one hand, I don't want to be a role model because I made mistakes myself in my life; at the other hand I do want to be a role model because I want to show that… it is possible in life and that in the end you can get there. (Nic, assistant coach)

Among the positive effects we witnessed that, whenever an EbE still actively struggled with certain vulnerabilities, other participants dealing with similar difficulties more easily connect with the EbE. Also, for participants it has great meaning to be able to 'switch roles' and to be the ones supporting another instead of being supported:

Yes, that is meaning (…) To be granted a role and to mean something to someone else. (Barbara, SfD participant)

Learning and adapting to context

In Flanders, SfD coaches have very different educational backgrounds, ranging from the traditional sport club coach with an official degree from the Flemish School of Coach Education (Vangrunderbeek & Ponnet, 2020) and/or a bachelor/master degree in (Movement Sciences and) Physical Education, over the (sportive) graduate in Social Work and/or Pedagogy, to the EbE who has or has not received an informal coaching training within the SfD project he/she works in. Currently, SfD coaches lack a clear and formal job description and have little professional recognition (Nols, 2018; Smets, 2019). This issue was brought to life as follows:

We are somehow in the grey zone between social-cultural work, youth work and the sport world. Actually we should profile ourselves: "Look, we are a sector!" And not only stating: "We're strong in this and that", while all those are things we can't implement because of a lack of means, because community sport is still somewhat too vague in Belgium. (Kris, job coach)

Consequently, SfD stakeholders spend a lot of time searching for funds, or run their projects without the means to create the necessary conditions for SfD to have an added value, reducing SfD to just another accessible sports initiative.

I think we from our city are still mainly investing in sports as a goal because it is just not feasible in terms of human resources to invest in sports as a means, making that you accord no specific attention on these goals. (...) If I were allowed to dream then there would be a community sport worker in every neighbourhood. Someone who is there every day, to whom they can tell their personal story outside of the sport session, and with whom they can bond. (An, coordinator)

Because of the combat for recognition, and funds, SfD stakeholders may be reluctant to create partnerships and networks – an important condition for SfD to realize its objectives:

If I could decide upon it, I would want to make a call to end this fragmentation and all these separate little NGOs that receive funding everywhere (...). (Sam, coach)

Data showed that possibilities for SfD coaches to learn and develop varied according to the profile of the SfD actor (e.g. NGO, Social Welfare Council (a local public service, and politically coloured), Foundation…) and the means made available for training:

We invest a whole lot in our volunteers. E.g. they all took an animation course in the Flemish Trainer School and will soon receive a training about dealing with radicalization and drugs policy. So we are really conscious about the added value we have. (Moha, community sport worker)

Since coaches are considered to be great factors of influence in realizing SfD goals, differences in quality and efficacy of SfD projects could be reduced by setting minimum standards to the SfD coach profile through continuous training and development. This may impact positively on both the realization of social objectives through sports and the employability of SfD coaches, being trained to serve as an all-rounder in various projects aiming for social added value. Within the CATCH-project, insufficient evidence was collected to make claims concerning the modalities of SfD coach training (e.g. a uniform SfD coach training course versus a modular training package with topics of interest to choose from; on-site training versus formal training or even online

training; and so forth). With regards to SfD coach training contents, project coordinators, coaches, stakeholders and participants from SfD projects seem to agree on the necessity for SfD coaches to acquire pedagogic skills including positive coaching techniques, conflict resolution and competences with regards to teamwork and networking.

In the beginning I made some mistakes or I was focused too much on the football-technical aspect, while actually I needed to focus a bit more (…) to the group dynamics, the wellbeing of the players. (Jan, coach)

It really is trial and error with every conflict, how are we're going to deal with that. (Senna, street social worker)

One of the interviewees explained how important group dynamics are in SfD, thus how important the ability of SfD coaches to make use of them in favour of the participants' personal development:

In competitive football, the individual serves the group, and if the individual isn't able to follow, he or she is pushed aside. While in SfD, it is the group who serves the individual: the group is there to make the individual stronger (Hans, coach).

Through processes of recognition and role modelling, EbE may function as community champions or catalysts (Skinner et al., 2008), making them strong assets in realizing SfD goals. In several SfD practices, EbE are trained to become an assistant 'community sport coach', however, this is object of criticism among local SfD stakeholders for two reasons. Firstly, the social integration contract in which their training takes place does not offer serious professional perspectives, as illustrated by the following quote:

Opportunities to grow further are lacking and means are limited. (Kris, job coach)

Secondly, there is a lot of discussion on the potential professionalization of EbE. Their experience allows them to easily connect with SfD participants, yet keeping one foot in situations of social vulnerability may impede on their personal growth, and in any case EbE need significant accompaniment when involved in coaching – as mentioned by several SfD project coordinators. Moreover, not only the coaching practice, but also the coaching training can be

hampered by personal, cultural and structural factors (such as personal vulnerabilities, perceived helplessness and poor future work prospects, few educational opportunities, etc.) (Lauwerier et al. 2020).

Regardless the profile they opt for, sport clubs, federations and other providers of coaches need to recognize the holistic needs of SfD coaches and provide educational support to facilitate that process. Such educational support is challenging and requires different sub-steps to be accomplished among coaches (e.g., knowing oneself before being able to know one another, learning to reflect and discuss, etc.) (Lauwerier et al., 2020). In Flanders, where SfD is increasingly considered an effective means to realize social added value, discussion on the 'professionalization' of SfD coaches is on going. While there is a fair consensus among sport and social stakeholders on the need for setting minimum quality requirements (e.g. training all sport coaches in positive coaching and group dynamics), discussion remains on whether it is desirable – if at all possible – to create 'standard' SfD coaches. After all, the SfD field needs flexible coaches who continuously adapt to context and whose tasks and mission are co-defined by the target community and local stakeholders. Besides skills and knowledge, these roles require specific behaviours, suggesting considering a shift in SfD coach training from competency-oriented to identity-oriented, as done in medical education (Arnold, 2020; Ginsberg et al., 2009). Identity-oriented education may be more sustainable, forming professionals who not only act, but also 'feel' like a hybrid, authentic transprofessional. The training trajectory in Case B (cf. methods) was a first step toward identity-oriented training, continuously stimulating trainees to self-reflect on their roles as SfD coach, and how these roles may interact or interfere with their personality, beliefs and experiences.

Reflecting on the 'third space' in SfD

Understanding the role that SfD coaches play within the added value of SfD programs is fundamental if the SfD field is to continue to progress and learn in a reflexive way (Harris, 2018). For whilst we have learnt that in SfD the role of sport is considered a secondary aspect, quite often the premise and immediacy of sport places coaches within the context of sport, making them subsequently a sport coach. However, within an SfD program the role of a sport coach is more than simply delivering coaching sessions, organizing risk assessments and mobilizing

session plans. Yet, quite often coaches find themselves in SfD programs with limited capability to navigate the complexity of what is before them (Spaaij et al., 2018). As a result, they need to culturally immerse themselves and span boundaries, by being an organizer, a persuader and a cultural intermediary (Jeanes et al., 2019).

From our findings emerges the profile of a contemporary new type of coach. Perhaps this profile has been here for some time but it has not been explicitly recognized it as such. It just blends into programs. SfD coaches are not formally social workers or traditional sport coaches. They use the window of opportunity created when spanning boundaries between both worlds and occupying the professional hybridity.

We consider this window of opportunity a 'third space' that is, unlike the first (social welfare sector) and the second (sports sector), rather unconditioned, fostering the possibility of establishing trustworthy relations and a safe experiential environment for growth and personal development. It was critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha who introduced the term 'Third Space', to indicate the metaphoric space where new (hybrid) cultural forms emerge from multiculturalism (Sterrett, 2015). The 'Third Space', the "cutting edge of translation and negotiation" (Bhabha, 2004, p.38.), is a place where we construct our identities in relation to varied and often contradictory systems of meaning (Sterrett, 2015). SfD coaches, as boundary spanners (Jeanes et al., 2019; Williams, 2013), find themselves continuously at the cutting edge of translation and negotiation. This role requires a vast set of skills, such as problem-solving skills, coordination and networking skills, brokering skills. It also requires a deep knowledge of the system, flexibility and a willingness to undertake the emotional labour associated with relational working (Carey et al., 2018).

Above all, SfD coaches are change makers, catalysts, using every window of opportunity to connect with SfD participants, discuss with them their personal goals and assist them in finding ways to realize these goals. Yet, this 'third space coaching' is not easily established and the necessity of the different roles and ability for role-taking requires the building of 'a different mind-set' and the need of accomplishing specific competencies that are probably not captured, or at least only minimally, within current coaching training. More specifically, while different profiles may very well still be needed in SfD practice, every profile would probably require the

training of sensitiveness for working in SfD. A highly educated trainer may need the adoption of a cultural sensitivity and professional hybridity, while EbE may need to familiarize themselves with skills for professional continuation and transprofessionalism. In what follows, some recommendations are made regarding this role taking, competency building, and the shape of the (professional) context that will allow for coaching in the third space.

Recommendations for practice and future research

From the findings appear that organizations mobilizing SfD programs need to recognize more clearly what these programs actually are, and understand the crucial role of SfD coaches in it. Following this understanding, they need to create the conditions for people from the professional space (social workers, sport coaches) and the academic space to enter the third space, where, in continuous dialogue with targeted communities, the desired outcomes, process and progress measures are discussed. Among these conditions may be to ensure that SfD coaches are given training that enables them to work in the modi operandi coming with a boundary-spanning role. Such training does not necessarily need to come in the form of a separate 'SfD coach' education program. SfD scholars argue that development by SfD is best realized when the project is substantiated by a critical pedagogy (Nols, 2018; Spaaij & Jeanes, 2013), in which many social workers are skilled. Whilst it is impossible to turn all social workers into sport coaches, with minimal efforts the classical sport coach training could be adapted to include attention for the boundary-spanning role of coaches. There are different possibilities, and more reflection and stakeholder discussion is needed, to chose the option most fit to the context. A first possibility is to provide more SfD knowledge in classic sport education. This is actually happening in Flanders, where the Flemish School of Coach Education is adapting its courses to the needs of the field, in transdisciplinary collaboration with traditional sports federations, SfD actors and scholars. Secondly, the potential involvement of EbE could be considered, for they are often great boundary spanners, and proven change makers. However, they need to be supported before, and during their uptake of a role as coach. Whether this means that they go through a potential parallel training trajectory, or that they are offered the opportunity to participate in a classic sport coach training via a stepping stone (e.g. accelerated advanced training, adjustment of the conditions for admission…) is to be discussed. A third possibility is to create advanced training that is accessible to both classic sport coaches and social workers with an interest in, or already

working in SfD, and in which the knowledge and competences of both profiles can be shared, and harmonized. Interesting here is that these, sometimes very different profiles, can learn from each other and from each other's professional competences.

Among future research opportunities in the field of SfD is the comparative evaluation of SfD coaches and coaches in other fields, in order to define a generic or transferable coaching profile capable of guiding and accompanying people in socially vulnerable situations to set and pursue personal health goals. Also, while we only briefly alluded to the Third Space theory in the discussion, its strong metaphorical value makes it a potentially interesting theoretic framework for theory-drive SfD research, such as realist evaluations.

Conclusion

Given the increasing use of SfD, it makes sense to ensure that all SfD coaches are provided a 'backpack' with tools for effectively contributing to personal and social development through sport. An essential task of SfD coaches is, before all, to establish an emotional connection with the participants. Only then, SfD coaches can take on a boundary-spanning role, operating in specific modi that we described as transprofessionalism, authenticity and context adaptation. While many social workers have learnt to work in these modi, and acquired important competences through experience in working with the target group, traditional sport coaches, however, work in different modi operandi, given that many have followed a classic sports education and ended up in a mainstream sports club. This makes them less exposed to diversity and social vulnerability, and to the underlying mechanisms of SfD, such as creating a trustworthy environment that allows building positive experiences, trial and error without being punished, taking responsibility, and so forth. Training for SfD coaches should be focused on the modi operandi needed to successfully fill a role of boundary spanner. The modalities of such training have yet to be reflected upon among stakeholders, for SfD coach profiles are varied, thus training needs as well. Just like SfD coaches, training for SfD coaches should be adapted to context and be transprofessional. A flexible and module-based approach may be most effective here.

beliefs in making a positive change. Thanks as well for having granted us some moments of your (rarely spare) time and as such having offered us the opportunity to gain insight and understanding of how SfD works.

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