

Ronkainen, N., Aggerholm, K., Ryba, T. V., Allen-Collinson, J. (2021).
Learning in sport: from life skills to existential learning. *Sport, Education
and Society*, 26(2), 214-227.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2020.1712655>

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2020.1712655>

Learning in Sport: from Life Skills to Existential Learning

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Full reference:

Ronkainen, N. J. , Aggerholm, K., Ryba, T. V., & Allen-Collinson, J. (in press). Learning in sport: From life skills to existential learning. *Sport, Education and Society*.
doi:10.1080/13573322.2020.1712655

Manuscript accepted Jan 4, 2020.

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Abstract

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

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

Learning in Sport: from Life Skills to Existential Learning

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

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

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

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

Life Skills in Sport: A Compelling Narrative?

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

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

What is Being Learned: The Positive, Useful and Functional

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

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.

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

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

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

Ways of Learning: Taught (versus Caught)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why focus on life skills?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Existential Learning

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

What is being learned?

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

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

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

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

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

How is it being learned?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why focus on existential learning?

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

Is not instrumental in nature, is not *for* something, be that employment, family life, or social activity. Bollnow's discontinuous forms of education educate *in* something.

The outcome is not an instrument for achievement; rather, the outcome changes the self. (p. 126)

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

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

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

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

Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusions

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

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

Funding

This work was supported by H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions: [Grant Number 792172].

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