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To cite this article: Élise Marsollier , Christiane Trottier & William R. Falcão (2020) Development and transfer of life skills in figure skating: Experiences of athletes and their coaches, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 12:5, 664-682, DOI: [10.1080/2159676X.2019.1659392](https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1659392)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1659392>



Published online: 19 Sep 2019.



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Development and transfer of life skills in figure skating: Experiences of athletes and their coaches

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ABSTRACT

Sport coaches play an influential role in facilitating the development and transfer of life skills of their athletes. In individual sports this influence may be particularly prevalent given the frequency and nature of coach-athlete interactions, which are central to the development of life skills. Yet, studies examining the development of life skills have mainly focused on team sports in school settings and with male participants. Thus, examining individual sports in community settings with female coaches and athletes can provide a unique understanding of the development and transfer of life skills within a little explored setting. The purpose of the present study was to examine the experiences of figure skating coaches and their skaters regarding the development and transfer of life skills. A multiple-case study design was used with four cases, each composed of one coach and two of their athletes. The coaches averaged more than 30 years of coaching experience and skaters competed at the provincial or national level, practicing their sport for an average of 12 years. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. A content analysis revealed that skaters learned a wide range of life skills, including perseverance, goal setting, emotional regulation, and respect mostly because of their sports' demands. The transfer of these life skills occurred implicitly through changes in skaters' personality reinforced by explicit discussions with coaches, parents, and sport psychologists. These findings suggest that the complexity of life skills development and transfer requires an integrative approach between the key actors in the athlete's sport setting.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 October 2018
Accepted 20 August 2019

KEYWORDS

Figure skating; life skill; transfer; community sport; multiple-case study

Sport is considered an ideal context for personal and human development (Holt 2016). More specifically, research in sport psychology has shown that different sport settings, such as physical education, school sports, and community sports can develop or refine young people's skills that enable them to succeed in the different contexts of life. In particular, life skills have been defined as '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 are transferred for use in non-sport settings' (Gould and Carson 2008, 60). Understanding life skill transfer is critical because research indicates that life skills transfer does not always occur automatically and the coach plays an important role enabling this process (Martinek, Schilling, and Johnson 2001; McCallister, Blinde, and Weiss 2000). Based on an analysis of the emerging literature in sport sciences, educational psychology, and business training, Pierce, Gould, and Camiré (2017) defined life skills transfer 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

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personal change through the application of the asset in one or more life domains beyond the context where it was originally learned (p. 194).

Based on their review of the transfer literature and their definition, Pierce, Gould, and Camiré (2017) proposed a model that outlines the possible explanations for how the individual learner experiences transfer. This model allows the examination of the experiences of coaches and their athletes in the development and transfer of life skills. The model focuses specifically on sport as the original context for life skills development and outlines four main factors influencing the process of life skills transfer. First, according to this model, each athlete has a number of internal and external assets (e.g., age, gender, parents, previous coaches), as well as experiences that constantly influence the acquisition of life skills and their transfer to non-sporting settings. Second, the athletes are exposed to a number of contextual factors that may implicitly or explicitly influence the development of life skills. These factors include the design of the programme, the characteristics of the coach, the teaching strategies used by the coach, the demands of the sport, etc. Third, once the skill is internalised, the athlete has the potential to transfer it to other non-sporting settings (Pierce, Gould, and Camiré 2017). Finally, some conditions such as similarity of context and support for transfer facilitate or hinder the application of life skills outside of sport. Taken together, this model places the athlete at the heart of the process of developing and transferring life skills while considering the influence of the coaches, their characteristics, and the strategies they use to foster life skills development. To date, studies have explored the development and transfer of life skills by interviewing coaches and athletes.

Coaches teaching and transferring life skills

Researchers have described the life skills taught by coaches to athletes, and the strategies used to foster their development and transfer (Gould et al. 2007; Trottier and Robitaille 2014; Vella, Oades, and Crowe 2011). For example, Vella, Oades, and Crowe (2011) conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 female and male team sports coaches (i.e., soccer, netball, softball, cricket, basketball) to examine their interest in developing their athletes holistically, that is, as an athlete and a person. Their findings indicated that while preparing their athletes to perform in the field, the coaches also taught them life skills, such as self-confidence and communication. Trottier and Robitaille (2014) sought to understand the perceptions of coaches working in school and community sports about their role developing life skills in youth athletes. Findings indicated that coaches in both settings taught a diversity of life skills to the adolescent athletes. Participants reported teaching self-confidence and respect by using strategies such as discussions, establishing rules, setting goals, and modelling. In addition, teaching life skills was part of coaches' values and reflected the needs expressed by their athletes. Taken together, these aforementioned studies suggest that coaches teach life skills in both the school and community sport settings by taking explicit action towards ensuring athletes' holistic development.

Researchers found that youth holistic development is facilitated by coaches' attitudes and behaviours. Those attitudes and behaviours can be organised in two main approaches for life skills transfer: implicit and explicit transfer (Turnnidge, Côté, and Hancock 2014). The explicit approach implies that coaches must systematically teach life skills. It is associated with sport programmes designed to intentionally provide instruction about the transferability of life skills, in which life skills sessions are often taught in non-competitive settings before, during or after practices. The implicit approach suggests that life skills learning can take place in sport programmes that focus on teaching sport-specific skills. It is based on the assumption that although athletes are acquiring sport-specific skills, they can also implicitly learn skills that are beneficial in other areas of life. Implicit transfer is not an automatic part of merely being involved in sport and certain conditions must be in place within the sporting environment that allows athletes to learn life skills and transfer it to other life contexts (Turnnidge, Côté, and Hancock 2014). Bean et al. (2018) recently described six implicit/explicit levels where coaches can intervene to foster life skills development and transfer: (a) structuring the sport

context, (b) facilitating a positive climate, (c) discussing life skills, (d) practicing life skills, (e) discussing transfer, and (f) practicing transfer. For example, coaches can implicitly foster life skills structuring the sport context by setting rules or recognising the inherent demands of sport and facilitating a positive climate. To foster the development and the transfer more explicitly, coaches must work towards clearly targeting life skills development and transfer through discussion and practice. As a result, it was necessary to know more about the implicit and explicit strategies that allowed athletes to develop and transfer life skills, as well as identify which life skills they learned in sport and transferred into other life settings.

Athletes learning and transferring life skills

An important part of the life skill research aimed to identify which life skills athletes learn in sport and transfer to other contexts. Hayden et al. (2015) examined life skills developed through school-based participation at three international high schools respectively located in Malaysia, China, and Panama. Data were collected from 29 male and female student-athletes through semi-structured interviews. Results indicated that communication, supporting others, and leadership were developed through sport participation and then transferred mostly implicitly by the student-athletes. Although most participants indicated that their coaches did not explicitly facilitate life skills transfer, the coaches who did were described as discussing how focus and self-regulation could be used outside of sport. These results highlighted how the transfer can occur implicitly and explicitly.

In addition, Hayball and Jones (2016) interviewed eight secondary school student-athletes from different schools who had been engaged in a sport (e.g., karate, field hockey, gymnastics) both competitively and in physical education classes for a minimum of five years and had withdrawn from competitive sport. The participants believed they transferred life skills learned in sport or physical education to school, and these life skills included conflict resolution, positive attitude, mental toughness, self-esteem, and confidence. The way participants described the way they transferred these life skills in other life settings was more about implicit transfer. In fact, they mentioned transferring these skills through a refinement of their personality that occurred by practicing their sport, an awareness of the usefulness of the life skills, and an awareness of the similarities between a sport situation and other life situations. These results taught us more about the transfer of life skills learned in the context of sport and physical education, but we would benefit from examining these two contexts separately.

Finally, Pierce et al. (2016) used a grounded theory methodology to explore the development and transfer of life skills in an intensive summer wrestling camp. Among other participants, the researchers interviewed 10 participants (nine males and one female) aged 14 to 18 years old. The participants believed they learned life skills such as the ability to relax and stay calm, dedication and responsibility, leadership, hard work, and personal empowerment. According to the athletes, they transferred these life skills and used them in other sport contexts, such as high school sports, but also in school and work. The transfer occurred implicitly through the athletes' experiences within the sport environment, and when attempting to apply skills in other life domains. The athletes mentioned facilitators that promoted the transfer process including their openness to learning and psychological readiness. Lastly, time and opportunities to use the skills allowed athletes to be fully aware and confident that some skills were transferrable. Therefore, athletes described some life skills acquired in the sport context and their transfer in several other life contexts (Pierce et al. 2016). Although coaches played a role in the development of life skills, their transfer appeared to be largely dependent on the athletes and the context. Furthermore, it is important to consider that athletes' perspectives may be limited by their awareness of efforts made by coaches to implement life skills transfer strategies. Thus, the experiences of the athletes and the coaches need to be addressed together.

Experiences of coaches and their athletes

Despite the strong body of literature investigating coaches' or athletes' experiences with life skills development and transfer, few studies have focused on both (e.g., Camiré, Trudel, and Forneris 2012; Harrist and Witt 2012; Weiss et al. 2013). For example, Harrist and Witt (2012) interviewed three female and male basketball coaches and 31 athletes to better understand how basketball in the community setting allowed the development of life skills. Data from individual interviews with coaches and group interviews with athletes revealed that developing life skills was important from the perspectives of all participants, and coaches were particularly driven to teach positive qualities that influenced athletes' lives. The results described the experiences of coaches and athletes in the community setting which appears to allow athletes to develop and transfer life skills to settings beyond sports (Harrist and Witt 2012). However, the findings did not inform what coaches taught in relation to what athletes developed and transferred, or how this development and transfer occurred.

Moreover, to our knowledge, no study specifically explored the experiences of female coaches and female athletes regarding the development and the transfer of life skills. Studies of the role of the coach in the life skills development and transfer process have been mainly conducted with male coaches in sports such as football (Gould et al. 2007), softball and baseball (McCallister, Blinde, and Weiss 2000), as well as soccer, netball, and basketball (Vella, Oades, and Crowe 2011). One of the few studies investigating female coaches showed they demonstrated higher levels of help and support when compared to male coaches (Werthner, Culver, and Mercier 2010), which in turn can lead them to develop more positive relationships that foster the development of life skills for their athletes. Similarly, very few studies have addressed the perceptions of female athletes. Gould and Carson (2011) conducted one of the few studies to explore the influence of the gender of athletes in the development of life skills. Their findings indicate that female athletes reported more identity development, initiative taking, social skills, and teamwork than male athletes. Thus, the specificity of the attributes attributed to female coaches and athletes suggests their ability to teach and develop life skills may be gender specific, and thus it is worthy of consideration.

In summary, a significant body of literature supports the notion that life skills development can occur in a variety of sport settings, yet examining community and individual sports would provide a unique understanding of the development and transfer of life skills within a little explored setting. Although several studies have investigated the life skills development and transfer from the perspective of athletes and coaches, to our knowledge few studies have examined these perspectives together. In addition, female coaches and athletes have not been a common target of investigation regarding the development and transfer of life skills. As such, the purpose of the present study was to examine the experiences of figure skaters and their coaches regarding the development and transfer of life skills. The following questions guided the study: (a) What are the life skills that figure skating coaches teach? (b) What strategies do they use to foster the development and transfer of life skills for figure skaters? (c) What are the life skills that figure skaters develop and transfer? (d) In what way have they developed and transferred life skills to other life settings?

Methods

Paradigm and research design

The present study followed a constructivist paradigm that aligned with its descriptive and exploratory objectives (Creswell 2013). This paradigm considers that individuals develop a subjective meaning of their experience that is dependent on setting, history, and cultural norms (Creswell 2013). The research used a multiple-case study design to discover convergences between several cases, while contributing to the analysis of the peculiarities of each one of them (Yin 2014). This design allowed the researchers to describe the development and transfer of life skills focusing on specific settings with targeted participants and answer research questions that address both the

how and why of their experiences (Yin 2014). The present study examined four cases, where a coach and two of her skaters composed each case.

The setting of the study

The participants were selected within the context of Quebec figure skating, which comprises 260 clubs and schools across 18 regions, for a total of 35 000 skaters. The participants were part of sport-study type structures that included several female skaters at the provincial and national levels. Within each structure, a director is responsible for the operation, and each coach trains 4 to 5 skaters. The community figure skating setting was chosen for four reasons. First, figure skating in Quebec is a setting that is conducive to personal development. Its mission is to focus not only on high performance but also on values that promote the development of people who contribute to the development and prosperity of figure skating. Second, figure skating is a sport with many coach-athlete interactions, which are central to the development of life skills (Gould and Carson 2011). Third, figure skating is an individual sport practiced in clubs that have been little explored in sport psychology research. Finally, figure skating is a sport in which there are many female coaches and athletes whose experiences with the development and transfer of life skills in sport have rarely been studied.

Participants

Four female coaches and eight of their figure skaters agreed to participate in this study. The coaches were on average 54 years old ($R = 51\text{--}59$) and had an average 37 years of experience ($R = 30\text{--}43$). They all have level-three certification from the National Coaching Certification Program in Canada. The figure skaters were on average 16 years old ($R = 14\text{--}18$) and practiced their sport at the national or provincial level for 12 years on average ($R = 9\text{--}15$). Based on the fact that coaches who promote the development and transfer of life skills are generally trained and experienced (Jenkins 2010; Nash, Sproule, and Horton 2008), a reputational sampling procedure was used where in order to participate in the study, female coaches had to (a) be a figure skating coach at the national or provincial level, (b) be recognised by the provincial coach coordinator for using a holistic approach, and (c) have a university education or coaching certification. In turn, the selection criteria for skaters were to (a) be an athlete in figure skating in the national or provincial level, (b) be at least 13 years old, and (c) have a coach who agrees to participate in the study.

Procedures

Once the Human Research Ethics Committee of the authors' University accepted the research project, the first author called the Skate Quebec Coach Coordinator to explain the selection criteria for the study. The coordinator was familiar with all figure skating coaches in Quebec, thus was able to help in the recruitment process. First, the coordinator provided the description of the study to coaches who met the selection criteria. Next, the first author contacted the potential candidates by email with a description of the study and an invitation to participate. This first contact also made it possible to verify that each participant met the selection criteria and was voluntarily willing to participate. Once coaches agreed to participate in the study, they were asked to identify all national and provincial level skaters they train and provide their contact information in order to contact them by email. To maintain confidentiality, coaches were told that they would not be informed about skaters participating in the study, they would not be present during the interviews with the skaters, and that they would not have access to the content of the interviews with the skaters.

Instruments

Two methods of data collection were used with both coaches and skaters during the skating season: two reflection grids and two semi-structured interviews. In particular, each participant completed the reflection grid before the interviews. To test the procedure, a pilot interview was conducted with two female coaches and two female skaters who met most study criteria except they competed at the regional level as opposed to national or provincial. The pilot interviews confirmed that the reflection grid and the interview guide addressed the study questions adequately, yet they were not included in the present study because they did not meet all criteria.

Reflection grid

Before each interview, a reflection grid was presented to the participants (see [Appendix A](#)). The reflection grid allowed participants to take a time of reflection regarding the notion of life skills in order to express more clearly their perceptions about which life skills were taught, developed, transferred and how this process occurred (cf. [Trottier and Robitaille 2014](#)). The grid included a definition and an example of life skill ([Gould and Carson 2008](#)) to ensure participants had a clear understanding of the term. After its definition was clearly understood, coaches were asked to list the life skills they taught in the previous year, indicate the strategies used to teach them, and the strategies used to ensure their transfer. In turn, skaters were asked to indicate what life skills they developed throughout the previous year and list which ones they transferred to non-sport settings. They were also asked to describe how they learned these life skills and how they transferred them to other non-sport settings. The semi-structured interviews started once the grid was completed.

Semi-structured interviews

The first interview took place at the participants' training facility, in a quiet and private space. Its purpose was to understand the background of each participant and obtain a rich description of their figure skating context, which provided the foundation for the case study approach. The interview also allowed the investigation of participants' experiences developing and transferring life skills. In particular, this first interview with the coaches addressed their individual and professional characteristics (e.g. What words would you use to describe yourself?) as well as their coaching experience (e.g., What made you want to become a coach?). The interview also enquired about the relationship between coaches and their skaters (e.g., What word would you use to describe the way you interact with your skaters?) and the coaches' approach (e.g., How do you describe your values as a coach?). Finally, participants were asked to elaborate on the life skills listed in the reflection grid (e.g., Why do you teach these life skills?) and how they taught these life skills (e.g., Please give an example on how you teach these life skills during practice). Regarding the life skills transfer, coaches were asked to explain how they thought the life skills were transferred in other life settings (e.g., Please give me an example on how you teach skaters to transfer these skills).

Regarding the skaters, the first interview addressed their individual characteristics (e.g., What words would you use to describe yourself?) as well as their athletic experience (e.g., How long have you been practicing figure skating?). The interview also enquired about the relationship between skaters and their coaches (e.g., What word would you use to describe the way you interact with your coach?). Finally, skaters were asked to elaborate on the life skills listed in the reflection grid (e.g., How do you use these life skills in figure skating?) and how they acquired these skills (e.g., Please give an example of how you learned these life skills in sport). Skaters were asked to explain how the life skills were transferred to other life settings (e.g., Please give me an example of how you learned to apply these life skills outside of sport) and to provide examples of how they applied the life skills in other life settings. The first interview with coaches lasted on average 70 minutes, while the initial interview with skaters lasted on average 53 minutes.

The second interview gave participants an opportunity to further elaborate on their experiences. Prior to the interview, a summary of the preliminary analyses was sent to each participant, allowing them to review and reflect upon the data, and modify its content in case they felt their perceptions had not been appropriately expressed. As such, the second interview allowed the researcher to enquire about specific information provided in the earlier phase of the data collection, but was unclear or ambiguous for the researchers during the preliminary data analysis process. The second interview was done virtually using Skype or FaceTime at the convenience of each participant. The second interview lasted on average 38 minutes with coaches and 28 minutes with skaters. All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and with the consent of the participants.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using the qualitative data analysis method of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2013) and the principles of multiple-case study described by Yin (2014), which appears complementary. Following the recommendations of Miles et al. (2013), the interviews were first transcribed verbatim by one research assistant and were read several times by the first author and the research assistant to familiarise themselves with their content. For each participant, a pseudonym was used to maintain confidentiality. The first author and the research assistant then subjected the data to deductive analysis based on the life skills literature followed by an inductive analysis to allow crucial themes to emerge from the interviews. Both student researchers had experience in qualitative data analysis from previously collaborating on other qualitative research projects. The two student researchers carried out all the steps of the analysis under the supervision of the second author, who was the supervisor of the project. The second author partook in all stages of the process up to the interpretation of the data. Throughout the data analysis, emphasis was placed on identifying life skills taught by coaches and how they fostered their development and transfer as well as those developed and transferred by skaters and the way they did it. More specifically, the intra-case analysis was performed independently by the first author and the research assistant and the content of each transcript was analysed deductively and inductively (Yin 2014). On the one hand, the deductive analysis used four categories based on the research questions, the Pierce, Gould, and Camiré (2017) model, as well as the life skills in sport and positive youth development literature. In particular, the five categories were: (a) participant profile, (b) life skills developed, (c) life skills transferred, (d) explaining the development of life skills, and (e) explaining the transfer of life skills. In addition, an inductive analysis of each transcription was conducted to allow alternative explanations and interpretations to be identified and derived by the researchers. In particular, the data from the inductive analysis emphasised three themes that were named by several participants in the development and transfer of life skills: the requirements of the setting in developing and transferring life skills, the support of the parents, and the role of the sport psychologist. Third, an inter-case analysis was conducted to find similarities and differences between the four cases regarding the research questions. Taken together, analyses were carried out with the data collected from the coaches, from the skaters, as well as for each case.

Quality standards

This study followed quality standards for qualitative research advocated by Smith and McGannon (2018), namely: member reflection, rich rigour, and critical friends. First, member reflection was employed during the second interview. As explained before, participants received preliminary analyses of the first interview and were given time to reflect upon their answers before participating in the second interview, which allowed them to clarify misinterpretations and modify the grid if necessary. Second, utilising various and sufficient theoretical constructs, and collecting multiple sources of data led to the rich rigour in the present study. Collecting data twice from coaches and two of their athletes provided abundant data and rich explanations to the constructs being investigated. Third, the second authors of the study acted as a critical friend by scrutinising the data analysis process and challenging the first author's assumptions, encouraging reflexivity, and facilitating

exploration of alternative interpretations of the data. Therefore, several tables and figures were thought through and proposed in order to organise the data and then were discussed critically in light of the purpose of the study and the research questions. Thus, similarities and differences between the cases were identified and discussed. Finally, the well-established coherence between the study's paradigm, research question, data collection and data analysis illustrated the relativist approach recommended by Smith and McGannon (2018).

In addition to quality principles advocated by Smith and McGannon (2018), a last quality criterion was the experience of the interviewer. In particular the first author of the study, who had nine years of experience as a mental performance consultant, conducted the interviews. She had 15 years of experience as a coach in acrobatic sports and level-three certification from the National Coaching Certification Program in Canada. The first author's experience and academic background led her to develop a holistic coaching philosophy and consider sport as a tool for personal development. Thus, the first author was able to ask relevant and appropriate questions obtaining quality answers related to the research questions. Being aware of these experiences through the data collection and analysis phases was critical to minimise internal partiality on the topic. As such, the first author kept personal notes throughout the research process, which helped her maintain awareness of her personal experiences. In addition, as a critical friend, the second author made the first author aware of her experiences, values, and beliefs encouraging reflexivity and challenging assumption about that data that may have been influenced by these experiences. Finally, the second author organised meetings in her research lab so the first author could discuss the analysis with the research team, which encouraged reflexivity and offered different perspectives to the interpretation of the data.

Results

In this section, the experiences of skaters and their coaches regarding the development and transfer of life skills within and between cases are presented. First, a brief individual case description of the participants' profiles is presented for each case, followed by a description of teaching, learning, and transferring life skills. Second, a cross-case synthesis is presented. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants in order to maintain their anonymity.

Individual cases results

Case 1

Coach's profile. Mary was 52 years old and had been a full-time coach for approximately 36 years. She decided she wanted to be a coach at 16 years old. She described herself as a straightforward coach, demanding and perfectionist while also being human, empathetic, and attentive. These approaches may seem contradicting, but can be explained by the fact that Mary used the high demands of figure skating to teach her skaters life skills that will be useful to them in managing the demands of their future adult lives and be in good health.

Skaters' profile. Anna was 17 years old and had been skating for more than 10 years. She was ranked 8th in Quebec and 11th in Canada at the time of the study and her long-term goal was to compete at the international level. She described herself as hard-working, competitive, and shy. In turn, Bianca was 18 years old and had been skating from 10 years at the provincial level. She was ranked among the top 20 skaters in Quebec. Her long-term goal was to compete in the Senior Canadian Championship. Bianca described herself as persevering, hardworking, determined, and organised.

Teaching and transferring life skills from the coach's perspective. Mary mentioned teaching 10 life skills to her skaters: emotion or stress regulation, concentration, visualisation, discipline, respect, goal setting, independence, relaxation, self-esteem, and social skills. According to her, self-esteem and self-reliance were the most important because they equipped her skaters for their future lives

as women. Mary facilitated the acquisition of these life skills by simulating competition situations during her practices. Regarding the transfer, Mary considered it to come automatically: 'The transfer is done by itself, it is not something that must be taught by the coach. I do not think I have this ability to help them, to make them do this transfer. I think it happens by itself.' Thus, although she considered figure skating as a 'school of life', Mary mentioned not using any specific strategies that ensured the transfer of life skills that she taught.

Learning and transferring life skills from the skaters' perspective. Of the life skills that coach Mary said she taught, Anna and Bianca only mentioned learning emotion or stress regulation. Thus, few life skills taught by Mary were believed to have been developed by her skaters. In particular, Anna described the demands of figure skating and the discussions with a psychologist as having led her to develop emotion regulation. Both skaters described how experience helped them to develop self-assertion and the ability to manage their emotions. Regarding self-assertion, Anna said 'You must perform alone on the ice in front of an audience and a jury to whom you must convey an emotion with choreographies that are sometimes happy, sometimes moving. All of this forces you to become less shy.' Bianca mentioned how the demands of figure skating led her to learn to manage her emotions on the ice: 'When you fall during a solo, you have to deal with your frustration so you have to learn to control your emotions in order to keep smiling and play the role you have to play for the judges.' Bianca stated that her mother has supported the development of emotion management: 'My mother often tells me: "Go! You know when your head is like that, it does not work. Change something!"' Perseverance was another skill that both skaters claimed to have developed through figure skating and taught by their coach. For example, Bianca explains:

One must accept failure to be able to persevere. For example, if you do not accept to fall when you are skating, you will be chocked at a competition where you may think things will go well, but you fall. After that, you have to get up to be able to do the next competition. So I think you have to learn to accept failure, to continue, to persevere.

In addition, Anna mentioned:

In this sport you fall from the very beginning. So you do not have another choice but to get up and continue. At some point, you can't dwell over your fall, you must get up. If you have to complete your jump three times in a row, you keep starting over until you've done three. So you have to persevere for a long time.

Bianca said she learned four other life skills from her coach: concentration, respect, visualisation, and discipline. Bianca also mentioned the demands of figure skating helped her develop these four life skills. For example, Bianca said she had to learn concentration because:

In our programme we have 11 jumps and if you fall or cheat on the first you must be able to refocus to land the others and complete the rest of the programme well. However, I never landed my first jump so when I got to a competition and landed it, I had to control my excitement so I wouldn't lose concentration and make a mistake.

Anna mentioned transferring discipline by herself and voluntarily:

I got used to doing things that way on skates, now it's part of me. I like when things are well done, and I do them when it's time to. If I work a little bit on everything, it doesn't work. If you don't work well, your results won't be so good. So I told myself 'I'm going to work hard at everything, and do each thing when it has to be done.'

Similarly, Bianca explained:

I think it had become something of an asset in me, and it was done on my own. The things I learned in skating have been a part of my life for so long that they have become a part of me too. I have been learning them since I was 3 years old.

Some of the life skills that skaters say they have learned are similar to those taught by the coach (e.g., emotion of stress regulation, concentration, visualisation, discipline, respect), but some of the life skills that skaters reported learning are different (e.g., perseverance, perfectionism).

Case 2

Coach's profile. Nicole was 51 years old and had been coaching for 30 years. As an athlete at the Canadian provincial level, she did not feel she was pushed by her coaches to get better and thus, she strived to push her skaters to develop their full potential. As a demanding coach, she had little interest in life outside of skating, yet emphasised the human aspect in her training. However, she described herself as being able to adapt to each skater's needs and using sense of humour in her interventions. She also described herself as a positive, cheerful, and democratic coach. Nicole considers figure skating as a way to develop people through sport, and according to her everything is possible through hard work. This appears to be in contradiction with her lack of interest for what happens outside of skating.

Skaters' profile. Chloe was a 16-year-old skater who has been skating for 10 years. She was ranked 20th in Quebec at the time of the study. Her long-term goal was to participate in the Canadian Championships. She described herself as being punctual, disciplined, reserved, and always smiling. In turn, Denise was 18 years old and had been skating for 14 years. She was ranked 2nd in the province and 12th in the country. Her short-term goal was to finish in the top 10 at the Canadian championships and compete at international senior level for many years. She describes herself as organised, persevering, perfectionist, sensitive, and stressed.

Teaching and transferring life skills from the coach's perspective. Nicole mentioned teaching perseverance, goal setting, determination, and self-confidence because she believed these life skills were necessary to perform well in figure skating. Nicole taught perseverance in her discussions with her athletes and by setting good examples:

As a coach I think I missed practice maybe 5 days in 30 years and because I was sick. The skaters don't realize that they do it, but they still come to practice even when they are sick. In my opinion, when coaches show they are always present, in a good mood, finishes their day regardless of what happens instead of leaving in the middle of the day because they are sick ... it leads the athletes to do the same.

Regarding the transfer of perseverance, Nicole said that it is automatic:

[Perseverance] is transmitted by itself, to everyday life or to an exam, even if you fall after you gave everything you had. So when [the skaters] see that the effort and perseverance and the result at the end, they will transfer it to other aspects of their life.

To justify the automatic aspect of the transfer, Nicole added: 'I do not speak much about school, but I think they are certainly using it. I am sure that they transfer what they learn in skating to school.' Just as the first coach, Nicole appeared to not ensure the transfer of life skills she has taught, even if she considered figure skating as being 'a school of life'.

Learning and transferring life skills from the skaters' perspective. Of the life skills that coach Nicole said she taught, her skater Chloe mentioned developing perseverance because figure skating required it from her. So even though her coach described teaching her perseverance, it was the demands of the sport that led Chloe to develop this life skill. Chloe mentioned transferring perseverance to the school setting by herself because she was having difficulties in school. This transfer was supported by her parents:

I know that if I want to go to college and continue studying, I should have good grades for that. I continue to study hard, because my grades are not very good these days, and I know that adding a little more study would be useful ... [My parents] often helped me in the evenings doing my homework, and let me go to tutoring sessions with the teacher, or even pushed to tell my teacher that I did not understand, and not to feel embarrassed by asking questions.

In addition, although Nicole described teaching self-assertion, both skaters said they developed this life skill through the demands of figure skating. For example, Denise mentioned: 'When you do

your artistic presentation, you cannot be shy, so skating helped me become more extroverted.' In the same vein, Chloe mentioned:

When you're on the ice, you have a way of expressing yourself that you would not have if you did not do figure skating. When I skate, it seems like I forget everything. I do it for myself because I like it. I do not feel more reserved, it's like a way to escape.

A last explanation of the development of self-assertion by Chloe concerns the role of her parents: 'My parents saw me being very shy so they pointed that out to me and they kept telling me to keep going, and that people were not going to hurt me.' Denise said she transferred this ability to self-assertion to her social settings: 'Skating is a really big part of my life, whether I like it or not I spend a lot of time at the arena and this changed my way of behaving with others.' Chloe said she transferred this ability to assert herself on the ice to her circle of friends in skating: 'Before, I did not speak much, nobody would say hi to me. Now I stand my ground and say what I need to say.' Chloe explained that the transfer of this life skill occurred thanks to the role figure skating has played in her life:

It is certain that affirming myself on the ice has helped me in my everyday life because, whether you like it or not, skating takes up a lot of space in my life. So I ended up asserting myself even more outside of figure skating.

Thus, the demands of figure skating and the role that it plays in the lives of these two skaters influenced the life skills they developed and the way in which development and transfer took place. Both skaters described their parents as having strengthened the development and transfer of these life skills.

Case 3

Coach's profile. Rachel was a 43-year-old full-time coach who founded a figure skating school where she was the head coach. Rachel practiced figure skating at the provincial level for 14 years. She described herself as demanding and frank, as well as passionate and emotional. Just like the other coaches, and despite not having practiced high-level figure skating, Rachel described herself as being demanding. Also, Rachel believed that skaters should honour their parents by working hard. Finally, like the other coaches, she saw figure skating as a way to build character that enabled people to cope with the challenges one encounters in life.

Skaters' profile. Isabelle was 18 years old and had been skating for 15 years. She was ranked 3rd in Quebec and 9th in Canada. Her goal was to make the national team. Isabelle described herself as stubborn, dynamic, sensitive, and insecure. In turn, Jessica was 14 years old and had been skating for 10 years. She was ranked 2nd in Quebec and 2nd in Canada. Her goal was to compete in the Canadian Championship and be part of the Quebec team. Jessica described herself as a perfectionist, committed, persevering, and authentic skater. She also loved running and raced for the fun of challenging herself.

Teaching and transferring life skills from the coach's perspective. Rachel said she taught respect, perseverance, goal setting, self-improvement, and the ability to perform under pressure because it's necessary to perform in figure skating. Rachel set team rules as a way to encourage the development of respect and discussion to foster the development of goal-setting skills. According to her, it is the demands of figure skating that help the development of perseverance and self-improvement. For example, she explained:

There are so many hours spent every day on just a little movement or just a little detail that you have no choice but to persevere to get it done, to do it right, and to give it your best.

Like the other coaches, Rachel did not describe any strategy for the transfer of perseverance because she believed skaters were responsible for the transfer. More specifically, she talked about how she believed figure skating changes the personality of skaters. According to her:

In figure skating, anyway, to succeed, you have to start young, around 4 or 5 years old. So after many years of practice, after learning how to be persistent, hard working, you can not be lazy in another sphere of your life. If you're working, persevering, if you make the effort to get to something, it's sure that you'll get into another situation and that what will come first, will be to try to get there, to work and persevere.

Learning and transferring life skill from the skaters' perspective. Of the life skills that coach Rachel mentioned teaching, Isabelle said she developed respect and Jessica perseverance. Isabelle described that her coach's behaviours taught her to respect and listen to others: 'Making me get off the ice again and again, because I was stubborn, made me understand that I have to listen to my coaches and respect the rules. This respect for others was then transferred to other life settings: 'Since I learned to skate, my personality started to change. I am the same person on and off the ice, so changing on the ice also makes me change outside.' Jessica says she developed perseverance by herself:

When things went wrong in a competition and I was disappointed for a week, I learned to say, 'ok, I had a bad performance, but 30 minutes later, ok I'm frustrated, but after I move on, my life goes on, I will not stop at that.'

Regarding the transfer of perseverance, Jessica described transferring perseverance to another sport setting:

When I'm running and my seventh kilometer is harder, I'm able to talk to myself and tell myself 'don't give up', 'you can do it', as if there was another person in my head motivating me.

The two skaters mentioned how they developed self-assertiveness and concentration that were not mentioned by their coach. Self-assertiveness was described by the skaters as a part of the figure skating experience. According to Isabelle: 'I spend most of my time skating so the people I interact with most are my skating friends. And by spending time with them, I am more and more comfortable asserting myself, being me.' Isabelle also said her parents and coaches supported this learning:

During my years of practice, I learned how to handle injustice. When I'd mention an injustice to my mother, I tended to downplay it. But she told me 'There is an injustice: Are you happy? No? Well, go and say it!' The same for my coaches who said to me: 'On your score sheet it is written that you fell three times when you only had two falls? Go see the judge and ask for an explanation!'

Similarly, Jessica described her mother as having helped her become aware of her shyness and due to the skating practice and the time spent at the arena with other skaters, she learned to assert herself:

Last year, I trained with people who were very extroverted and by spending time with them, I had no choice, otherwise I was going to be the timid girl who is not cool. So I grew up and said to myself, 'It's okay to be shy, but it's fun to be someone who takes part in conversations and talks to everyone'.

Regarding concentration, the two skaters described the need to focus during practice. According to Isabelle: 'Figure skating requires a lot of focus, there are precise movements that I need to work on to improve my jumps.' Isabelle explained that focus was transferred both automatically and through an awareness of its utility in other life settings:

I think that being focused on figure skating led me to be so in my life as well, it goes together. I did it by myself, I understood the usefulness of being focused while skating and it transferred to school and in my life.

Case 4

Coach's profile. Sandra was a 56-year-old coach who had been coaching for over 40 years. Having practiced figure skating at the recreational level, she believed she had an important role in supporting athletes through the difficulties of adolescence. Seeing herself more as a teacher of life lessons than as a coach, she described herself as humane and intense. According to her, in figure skating athletes are alone on the ice, which requires a lot of hard work and investment for only a few skaters to reach the high-level. This vision of figure skating is in line with that of the other coaches, who see the sport as a way to support skaters in their athletic and personal development.

Skaters' profile. Katherine was 14 years old and had been skating for nine years. She was ranked among the 30 best skaters in Quebec. She described herself as being intrinsically motivated, stubborn, and persistent. Her long-term goal was to participate in the Canadian Championship. Lisa was 15 years old and had been skating for 11 years. She formerly competed pairs skater at the national level, but decided to start skating solo. She was ranked among the 40 best skaters in Quebec. She described herself as competitive, persevering, joyful, and always in a good mood.

Teaching and transferring of life skills from the coach's perspective. Sandra said she taught perseverance, planning, stress management, commitment, and organisation. She taught these life skills by communicating with her athletes: 'I try to tell them to continue to work, and that one day it will all pay off. It may not pay off with skating, but it will pay off in other areas of their lives.' Sandra mentioned meeting athletes individually as a way to help develop goal setting. Like the other coaches, the transfer was not taught by Sandra as she believed that transferring life skills is the responsibility of the skaters: 'It's hard because I'm less involved in other areas of their lives ... It's hard to see if they really use it, but I think they do.' In fact, Sandra said: 'It's up to them to work and take those things and apply them, but the more we can make the connections, the more they will be able to become aware.' Sandra also mentioned the responsibility of parents in transferring life skills:

The moral part for example, I can do a little bit, but there is little I can do if they do not work when they are at the arena. I won't remove their cellphones. It is up to the parents to take away privileges or to set up the punishment if necessary.

Learning and transferring life skill from the skaters' perspective. Perseverance was the only life skills taught by Sandra that was learned by Lisa and Katherine. Lisa mentioned: 'To perform in skate will not happen by itself, you must work, work, work. And even if a competition is not going well, you should not come back to training discouraged.' Because of the demands of the sport, and despite their different aspirations, these two skaters needed to develop the ability to persevere. The skaters also spoke about internalising what their coaches discussed with them. Lisa said:

My coaches helped me for sure; they were there to support me, telling me to not give up. At first, it was Sandra who spoke to me, and gradually I began to persevere by myself. I told myself: 'I'm not going to spend this practice doing the same mistake again and again.' So I'm really talking to myself as if I was my own coach in order to persevere.

Both skaters described being themselves responsible for transferring life skills. Katherine mentioned:

We started to learn algebra in math and in my school programme the teacher went faster with the content and I struggled. It was hard all year, but at the end I finished with a very good grade because I did not give up and did my exercises again and again. For me it was like a double axel I had to land by the end of the year, I just work hard and practiced.

In turn, Lisa mentioned:

I think in life if you want to succeed, you have to work. So, if you want to become a doctor, you have to work hard and persevere because otherwise you will not succeed.

Lisa described transferring perseverance by herself:

I think it's easier when you give yourself a goal. I think it makes it easier to work. If I do not set goals, I will have difficulty, but if I give myself a goal, it will encourage me to work hard and persevere. There are skating goals that I have achieved thanks to my perseverance and I told myself that if it works with skating, it can work in school.

Cross-case synthesis

Coaches from all cases reported teaching four main life skills: perseverance, goal setting, stress and emotion regulation, and respect. In four cases (1, 2, 3 and 4), perseverance was also developed and transferred by at least one skater. In addition, in three cases (1, 3 and 4) respect and stress management were developed and transferred by at least one skater. Finally, in only one case (1) discipline was taught by the coach as well as learned and transferred by at least one skater. All the coaches described themselves as demanding coaches in a certain way. Indeed, even Sandra who had been a recreational figure skater talked about the importance of working hard, which can be associated with being demanding. In all four cases, coaches reported fostering the development of perseverance and stress management because of the inherent demands of figure skating.

All coaches reported using direct strategies (i.e., speeches, discussion, individual encounters, rules of conduct) to foster life skill development. In turn, skaters in all cases described developing life skills as a result of the inherent demands of figure skating. Regarding life skills transfer, coaches did not explicitly facilitate transfer because they believed it happened automatically and that skaters or parents were responsible for it. In turn, skaters from all cases described transferring life skills on their own, either because the life skill was useful for another setting of their lives, or by personality changing.

Finally, only two skaters reported not transferring the life skills learned in figure skating. Denise and Chloe mentioned not transferring mental strength, assertiveness, and getting out of their comfort zone because it was too difficult or because the life skill was not useful in other settings.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the experiences of figure skaters and their coaches regarding the development and transfer of life skills. Overall, results revealed that coaches taught skaters a wide range of life skills using explicit strategies, while the transfer of these life skills occurred implicitly. The most common life skills taught by coaches were: perseverance, goal setting, stress and emotion regulation, and respect. Furthermore, coaches were described as being demanding and supportive, and the skaters highlighted the role of parents and the sport psychologists in supporting the life skill transfer process. These findings emphasise the impact of the sport setting and the coaches' characteristics on the experiences of skaters in developing and transferring life skills.

Coaches and athletes reported teaching and learning various life skills. These findings support previous literature describing life skills as a broad construct encompassing multiple forms of personal change (Holt et al. 2017; Pierce, Gould, and Camiré 2017). The present study also adds to the current literature providing insight into the specific life skills that can be taught in the figure skating setting. This information can impact coaches of individual female athletes, particularly figure skaters, in their pursuit of promoting personal development through sport. In fact, it is possible to use the demands of a competitive sport to equip athletes with life skills that will be useful in the field but also at school, at home and in their circle of friends. In addition, the present findings can also inform researchers interested in investigating this understudied setting in the life skills literature.

Both coaches and athletes described life skills as being transferred automatically. Although coaches believed this was due to the inherent demands of the sport, skaters believed the sport context caused personal changes and life skills were useful in other settings. Previous studies described similar findings suggesting that most coaches did not have explicit strategies to transfer life skills, instead relied on implicit approaches (Bean and Forneris 2017; Super, Verkooijen, and Koelen 2018). In parallel, the way skaters in the present study explained the transfer was very similar to the description of the athletes interviewed by Hayden et al. (2015), who described transfer as a refinement of one's personality traits through practicing sport and through the awareness of the similarities between situations in sport and in other life settings. Researchers also claim that the sport setting can itself support people to 'become through learning and learn through becoming whether they wish to do so or not, and whether they are aware of the process or not' (Hager and Hodkinson 2009, 633). However, recent publications have advocated the idea that explicit transfer is more efficient in fostering life skills (Pierce et al. 2018). The present study supports the earlier findings showing that implicit transfer strategies are the most commonly used among figure skating coaches. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that participants were selected from a population of expert coaches (provincial or national coaches) known in their domain as being holistic coaches. This emphasises the importance of training programmes addressing the role of coaches in teaching life skills transfer, and more specifically using explicit strategies to optimise the transfer of life skills from sport to other life domains (Bean et al. 2018). In particular, coaches would benefit from being offered moments of information, reflection and education about how they could foster not only the development of life skills in sport, but also their transfer to other life settings.

The participants in the present study – both coaches and athletes – described coaches as demanding while also being promoters of skaters' personal development. First, previous research in this topic suggested that female coaches were more helpful and supportive in training and kinder in their communications (Werthner, Culver, and Mercier 2010). The findings of the present study differ from previous research suggesting there may be a lesser gender gap within this sport setting. This may be due to the coaching culture in figure skating as well as the elite level in which participants competed, which may require more authoritarian coaching styles (Mayer et al. 2018). Additional research focusing on the interplay between many different variables in a given sport context (e.g., gender, coaching style, level of play, intensity of participation) might be useful in understanding the reasons why life skills are taught to greater or lesser degrees of implicitness or explicitness. Second, similar results have been found by other researchers examining coaches' experiences and athletes perceptions, showing that while athletes benefited from supportive and holistic approaches when learning skills, they also welcomed authoritarian coaching styles when rules had to be reinforced (Falcão 2018; Preston and Fraser-Thomas 2018). These findings can impact coaches' practices encouraging them to balance supportive and disciplinary coaching styles to meet athletes' needs. It also contributes to the literature by providing evidence for additional investigation on coaching strategies that can foster life skills through a balanced coaching approach.

Some of the life skills described by the participants lead us to question their positive aspects. For example, one coach and one skater talked about how it is necessary to be very precise in figure skating and how having the perfect move is part of the sport. According to some participants, this can lead some skaters to become too precise and perfectionistic both on and off the ice, causing them to be anxious and sometimes depressed (Flett et al. 2016). In parallel, one coach described the way she could feel sick or exhausted and be so committed that she did not allow herself to rest for recovery, which can harm her well-being and health. As specified by the World Health Organisation (WHO 1999), life skills allow people to manage their lives in a healthy and productive way. Future research should consider the culture of high-level sport but also the specific culture of each sport that influences the development and the transfer of specific life skills for the purpose of performance and, eventually, at the expense of coaches and athletes well-being.

In line with the use of the reflection grid, it not only allowed the reporting of life skills that were taught, developed, and transferred in the previous year, but it also led participants to describe their experiences beyond the last year. Indeed, coaches and their skaters have been able to offer concrete and precise examples from their practice over several years. On the one hand, this tool is relevant to use in qualitative research to examine life skills learned and transferred during or after a sporting career. On the other hand, from an applied point of view, this tool may impact the practice of sport psychologists and mental performance consultants who, by using this reflection grid, would allow other athletes to become aware of the positive results of their sport participation.

Finally, participants emphasised the role of other stakeholders in the development and transfer of life skills, namely parents and the sport psychologist. Previous studies have highlighted the important role of parents facilitating youth sport participation (Grenfell and Rinehart 2003). The same is true in figure skating, which commonly entails early morning or late night practices, as well as a greater financial investment than other sports (Cummins 2007). In turn, the present findings are unique in demonstrating that the sport psychologist also has an important role in fostering life skills transfer, especially at the elite level. These findings have the potential to impact youth athletes experiences by enabling multiple adult stakeholders within the youth sport setting to foster life skills transfer. In addition, it reveals a new topic for research in the area of applied sport psychology addressing the role of the sport psychologist in the well-being of athletes outside of sport performance.

Limitations and future recommendations

Although the present study offered insights into the development and transfer of life skills, some limitations must to be addressed. First, the study investigated a very specific niche in youth sport, particularly elite female figure skating. Although it provided insight into this unexplored setting, future researchers should investigate life skill development and transfer in other competitive sports. Second, the present study only collected data from coaches and athletes, and did not examine the experiences of other significant adults. Future research should investigate the influence of the different stakeholders involved in the youth sport setting (e.g., parents, teachers, peers, sport psychologists) to better understand the process by which athletes develop and transfer life skills. Third, although this study revealed interesting information regarding female coaches behaviours, all participants were women, which did not allow for a contrast between the experiences of coaches and athletes of different genders. Future studies can address this by using individual or focus group interviews with different gender participants in order to better understand the impact it has on life skill development and transfer. Finally, the data in the present study were collected retrospectively, which allowed for a broader perspective of the impact sport had in developing life skills that were applicable to other settings, yet it can impact participants' perceptions of the coach-athlete relationship and the process by which athletes learn and transfer skills. As such, future research can use different methods of data collection, such as interviews during the season or stimulated recall interviewing using verbal cues, pictures, or video of practices to prompt participants' memories.

Conclusion

In sum, the unique demands of competitive figure skating combined with the personal characteristics of the coaches and their athletes revealed the complexity of the process of development and transfer of life skills, which required the implicit and explicit intervention of multiple stakeholders, such as the coach, parents, and sport psychologists. The present study provides an important contribution to explaining the development and transfer of life skills that occurred through changes in skaters' personality, the demands of the sport, and the learning climate established by the coaches, the parents, and the sport psychologist. In sum, life skill transfer seems to occur primarily implicitly but reinforced by discussions with coaches, parents and the sport psychologist.

This complexity of the transfer requires an integrative approach based on the involvement of these key actors revolving around the athlete.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A. Reflection grids

Coaches

Life skills are 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 are transferred for use in non-sport settings (Gould and Carson 2008, 60).

Life skills you taught in the last year	Strategies you used to foster life skills development	Strategies you used to foster life skills transfer to non-sport settings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Example: Goal setting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The goal staircase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask skaters to use the goal staircase at school to plan their academic success

Skaters

Life skills are 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 are transferred for use in non-sport settings (Gould and Carson 2008, 60).

Life skills you developed in the last year	How you learned these life skills?	Life skills you transferred to other non-sporting settings	How did you transfer these life skills to other non-sporting settings?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Example: Goal setting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The goal staircase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal setting in school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My coach asked me to use the goal staircase at school to plan my academic success