

Professionalism & Leadership Development in Ice Hockey: Understanding Social Emotional Learning Experiences of Coaches in Atlantic Canada

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Abstract. This qualitative research study investigated the Social Emotional Learning training experiences of ice hockey coaches in Atlantic Canada. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and leadership in sport is an emergent field which has been gaining attention on a national level. The purpose of this study was to examine various aspects of SEL within coaching leadership training of Canadian ice hockey coaches in Atlantic Canada. Minor hockey coaches (n=8) were recruited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Five questions pertaining to hockey coaching background, leadership training, communication, and SEL training experiences were posed to participants. Interviews were offered both in-person or virtually as an option for convenience. Analysis of data suggested that clear expectations and effective communication with players and guardians were valuable aspects for relationship building. Limited professional development opportunities surrounding aspects of SEL were noted by participants, training provided was outdated in certain aspects, and current topics of inclusion, diversity, and culture. Future recommendations for continued study within the field of SEL within ice hockey are offered.

Keywords: Social Emotional Learning, ice hockey, coaching, professional development, leadership in sport, training

1 Introduction

Hockey in Canada has been conceptualized as a cultural truism and a way of life, with a connection so powerful and strong that it has united a vast nation from coast to coast [1]. The sport of hockey is embedded in Canada's national culture. Players, coaches, managers, and officials are key participants for the overall

success and sustainability of this popular sport. To compare within a global perspective, there are approximately 1.8 million people who are registered hockey players, of which over one-third, or 631,295, live in Canada. There are 555,935 registered hockey players in the United States, 113,425 in the Czech Republic, 105,059 in Russia, 76,387 in Finland, and 63,901 in Sweden, rounding up the top six ranked countries [2]. The field of sport leadership has also emerged as a notable area of research and covers an increasingly diverse range of topics relevant to success in coaching youth athletes. The sport of ice hockey has grown to include many diverse populations and promotes diversity and inclusivity. While such perceptions of inclusivity have remained prevalent in many sports, recent critical events such as abuse scandals, racism, and bullying have negatively impacted the sport of ice hockey. The sport of ice hockey has witnessed growth within inclusivity and diversity aspects. In Canada, for example, the growth in female hockey has been substantial. Adams and Leavitt [3] reported that “the initiatives of women’s sport leaders have led to greater recognition within the local, provincial and national governance structures and increased participation numbers”. Exploring the 1980s, Canada saw an expansion of programs across the country to include opportunities for girls and women, and in 1982 a national championship was established [3]. As Hockey Canada [4] posited, within the 2009-2010 season, there were 85,624 girls and women registered as ice hockey participants, an exponential increase from the 8,146 participants reported two decades earlier in 1990.

Preparing to meet the coaching needs of diverse populations in the sport and essential training development through leadership is warranted. The International Ice Hockey Federation [2] explained that there are approximately 5,000 outdoor rinks and 3,300 indoor hockey arenas in Canada, and the only other country that has more than one thousand indoor arenas is the United States with 1,535. It can be determined that the sport of hockey has its greatest presence in Canada in terms of diversity growth, places, and facilities designated for ice hockey.

Urquhart et al. [5] explained that many definitions of coaching effectiveness mentioned winning in the professional context, while placing a greater emphasis on coaches developing athletes’ confidence, competence, connection, and character. Lara-Bercial and Mallett [6] investigated characteristics of coaches and relationship to leadership. The findings of their study revealed coaches were characterized by a common set of personal characteristics, which included an exceptional work ethic, strong communication skills, a quest for continuous improvement, and effective leadership behaviors that inspired their athletes. This research study will explore the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) training experiences of ice hockey coaches from the Atlantic Hockey Group (AHG). Within the past decade, the attention of SEL has broadened within society. As described by Liew and McTigue [7], educating the “whole child” became more prominent, thus enhancing teaching and coaching skills of professionals who work directly with youth. Within the expansive growth and popularity of diversity in Canadian hockey, leadership and SEL training to address this growth is imperative.

1.1 Impact of Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) can be explained as methods in which youth and children tend to learn, recognize, and manage emotions, develop positive relationships, behave ethically and responsibly care about others, make good decisions, and avoid negative behaviors [8]. It involves “teaching children to be self-aware, socially cognizant, able to make responsible decisions, and competent in self-management and relationship skills” [9]. In Figure 1, SEL general competencies are presented. These include self-awareness (e.g., identifying and recognizing emotions), social awareness (e.g., respect for others), responsible decision making (e.g., problem identification and situation analysis), self-management (e.g., self-motivation and discipline), and relationship management (e.g., communication, social engagement). These competencies parallel much of the sport-based research on life skills and psychosocial development of children and youth yet have largely remained isolated from the sport-based life skills development literature. SEL is critical for children and youth long-term success in and out of school [10]. Examining the intrapersonal characteristics for success, in-depth personal reflection, emotional intelligence, and a quest for continuous improvement have been instrumental within SEL research [11].

Furthermore, Elias [12] discussed SEL in sport and athletics, specifically investigating how SEL can be used to promote character development among athletes. The term “Educational Athletics” is used by the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association to express how athletics and competition can be used as an extension of the classroom and an educational activity within itself to teach life lessons and prepare young people with values for lifelong learning [12].

SEL and behaviour in youth sport was recently investigated in academic literature. Research syntheses, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses support the development of SEL skills for promoting positive youth outcomes and reducing behavioral health challenges [14]. Youth who develop SEL skills can apply the “knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” [15]. CASEL cites many benefits of SEL skills, including improved attitudes, prosocial behavior, positive relationships, and academic performance [15].

This qualitative research study investigates the SEL training experiences of ice hockey coaches in Atlantic Canada. Professionalism and leadership in sport is an emergent field, which has been gaining attention on a National level [16]. Within the past decade, the attention and importance of SEL has broadened within society. As described by Liew et al. [17], educating the “whole child” became a more prominent approach within education pedagogy, and thus enhanced teaching and coaching skills of individuals who work directly in supporting youth in sport. Framed on the theory based upon Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, which explains that environmental and contextual factors are necessary for understanding human development [18], this research project recognizes the potential and critical role that hockey coaches may play within the lives of youth.



Fig. 1: SEL framework by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [13]

Education research aligns with this theory, as it points to the importance of community, teacher, parent, guardian recreation, schooling, and extra-curricular activities. These are the underpinnings for a holistic approach to education in which the interrelationships at all levels of the educational ecosystem prioritize human development alongside traditional education [19].

Recent research also suggests that ...the synergy between the practice of physical-sport activity together with physical and psychological health is a gradually growing interest area for education researchers [20]. Concepts that are characterized as constructs that are not identified with traditional indicators of cognitive capability or intellectual functioning and are often described under such terms as 21st-century skills, socio-emotional skills, character, or personality. Creating awareness of those skills can be beneficial for youth and coaches alike [20]. Participation in sports has also been related to a variety of social and emotional competencies and related skills that are correlated from extensive research and are essential to general success and well-being in school, work, and relationships [17]. Evidence suggests that youth with strong social and emotional skills are more likely to have positive work and family relationships, enter and graduate college, succeed in their careers, and have better mental and physical health outcomes [21]. Previous research has determined that when enhancing youth social and emotional learning, one important factor is the ability and experiences of educators and coaches to engage and support learners [21]. Anderson-Butcher et al. [14] explained that behavioral and social skill development among youth is a growing concern. Training youth sport workers and community leaders within

SEL has the potential to positively engage youth [14]. Thus, this proposed research project will understand and determine existing levels and types of SEL training minor hockey coaches have received within their coaching training and explore potential need for future specific training.

2 Methodology

Data was collected for this study during the period of November 2022 to March 2023. Participants were recruited via an email sent from the project partner The Atlantic Hockey Group (AHG). The AHG was founded in 1989 by former NHL hockey player Charlie Bourgeois. It has become one of the most successful hockey training programs in Atlantic Canada. Through its many different hockey schools and leagues, the AHG works with over 10,000 hockey players each year. The team of experienced coaches come from the ranks of university, junior, high school, and minor hockey teams. The AHG is based in Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada, with programming offered in three Atlantic Canada provinces (Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick). John Sim, a former NHL player with the Dallas Stars and New York Islanders, is the Director of Operations in Nova Scotia. They provide programming for both male and female hockey players and include speciality programs such as power skating, goaltending, and high-performance player development [22].

The participant sample (n=8) was comprised of minor hockey-level coaches who coach with the AHG and instruct youth aged 4-18 years. The participants were positioned in a head or leading coach role and had main responsibilities to coordinate team rosters, select assistant coaches, schedule practices, book ice times, and coordinate communications with both players and parents/guardians. Within the AHG organization, approximately 95% of head coaches instruct the co-ed and/or male teams, and approximately 75% of male coaches instruct the female teams [23].

This research used purposive sampling, as ice hockey coaches, both male and female, were invited to participate. Recruitment also involved notices through social media and direct email within the AHG organization. This qualitative research study utilized open-ended, semi-structured interview questions to collect data specifically regarding SEL training experiences of hockey coaches. There were small inducements of a coffee card available for participation. Participation was voluntary, and coaches were invited to complete an interview with a member from the research team. The interviews took place in person and/or online via Zoom, depending upon location and availability of each participant. The in-person interviews were conducted primarily within public places. Within the introduction segment of the interview, the researchers read a scripted informed consent, project purpose, and ethics brief from Cape Breton University. This informed the participants of the process and contacts for the CBU research ethics department should they have any questions. Informed consent was obtained prior to the start of each interview. The researchers also explained to participants that they were free to stop the interview at any time should they feel uncomfortable.

Participants were also invited to share their age and number of years coaching. Interview questions were not provided to participants in advance.

Regarding the participant demographic characteristics, 8 (100%) were male participants, and the age range was between 23 and 48 years. The average years of coaching was 9.6 years.

The qualitative interviews were comprised of 5 questions, which were developed to understand the SEL leadership training experiences of hockey coaches in Atlantic Canada.

Interview questions included the following:

1. Can you describe your position with the organization and what are your roles and responsibilities?
2. Can you briefly describe your ice hockey coaching training background? When and what types of training, the length and the content included?
3. Social Emotional Learning includes aspects of enhanced leadership, empathy, understanding, self-regulation, behavior support, trust, honesty, inclusivity, etc. What is your experience with these specific components, were they taught explicitly or included within your coaching training? If yes, what types or when?
4. In your coaching career, how often are you provided with leadership training? What types of training did you receive as Professional Development?
5. When coaching young ice hockey players, what is the most challenging aspect, in terms of connections and relationship building with your players and/or families? Are there other barriers or challenges with your players? What types of training do you feel would be beneficial for coaches?

Field notes were taken by the researchers at the end of sessions to ensure key messages were highlighted, and sessions were also recorded with permission for transcription purposes. Ethics approval was obtained from Cape Breton University. Within the ethics approval, all data was collected and stored within the researchers' personal computers. Raw data was not accessible for public view.

3 Findings

Two main themes emerged from the analysis. Data were organized and analyzed using codes and a thematic approach. The emerging themes were larger and abstract, while the codes were one-word adjectives. Participants referred to a broad range of experiences to describe SEL and coaching training. Inductive content analysis was employed as this project included non-complex research, and the sample size (n=8) was small [24]. As noted by Williams and Moser [25], coding in qualitative research is comprised of processes that enable collected data to be assembled, categorized, and thematically sorted, providing an organized platform for the construction and development of meaning. Interviews were recorded (n=5) and notes were transcribed (n=3) for remaining interviews. The researchers reviewed the collected data which was shared with the team through MS Office Teams. The data analysis was based on word frequency and

included verbs and adjectives. As an inductive process, the researchers became familiar with the data, generated initial codes, searched, and developed themes from the data and defined those main categories. Using an Excel spreadsheet, themes and codes were documented by the Primary Investigator. In this article, two main themes will be presented.

3.1 Theme 1: Training Requirements for Coaching Adolescents/Youth

Coaches reported (n=8) that they were head or lead coaches within the AHG organization. Ice hockey coaching training was received through a provincial/national entity. The analysis of data yielded a theme specific to importance of knowledge specific to adolescent behavior and youth development within a coaching context. 75% (6/8) of respondents noted they did not recall receiving training relating to this topic but would find this to be beneficial. Most of the training received was technical based, such as hockey drills and skills relating to shooting or positions. As Participant #4 explained:

sometimes it can get it can get overwhelming when you're dealing with 17, 14, 15-year-olds that are just going through puberty, just starting to hit that. And then you have other kids that are already there and have hit it. The hormones are just flying.

Participant #2 stated that he utilized youth player development and positive psychology-based training, and it was self-initiated through online research web-based applications. Results also revealed that online training programming was limited or outdated and didn't match the current landscape of hockey players and coaches. Participant #1 explained that "the training is really old, and it really wasn't exciting. . . it's just online modules and. . . some old videos, but a lot of the materials are really, really old and really not interesting for anybody that's going to participate".

Table 1 describes codes and themes which were identified during the analysis. Coach training adolescents and youth was one theme which was evident. The need for current and relevant training to meet the needs of coaches who are coaching youth with diverse abilities and needs. 100% of coaches reported they did not receive specific SEL training. It was noted, however, that coaches (n=6) described receiving information about respect in hockey topics, diversity, and inclusive practice. Including SEL within a training and development practice is beneficial for children and youth to understand personal and social responsibility [26]. Engaging hockey coaches who spend countless hours coaching and mentoring children and youth with SEL skills could be a powerful addition to any hockey coaching training regime.

3.2 Theme 2: Effective Communication Practices and Processes

Communication was discussed by 100% of respondents during the interviews. Participants described the impact of coaching children and the importance of

Table 1: Coding and emerging themes

Codes	Emerging Themes
Course Content, Behaviour, Scheduling, Stress Management, Team Building, Children, Delivery of Training, Barriers, Format of Training	Training Coaching Adolescents and Youth
Relationships, Expectations, Comprehension, Listening, Inquiring, Providing Information, Happy, Encouraging, Discussions, Meetings	Effective Communication Practices and Processes

relationship building and expectations as it related to both coaching youth, but also communicating with parents.

Participant #5 explained: You know, they’re getting into this teenage age . . . they don’t want to listen to adults. They do, but they don’t. And they always respect the coaches and love to promote. But finding that that way to bridge that gap between these preteens that don’t want to listen to adults”.

Additionally, another response clearly outlined: “Some of the things they say they might make you mad or might just annoy you to shreds” (Participant #4).

Addressing specific communication needs was also highlighted (n=3). Question #5 asked participants to discuss any additional or specific training. Understanding appropriate communication responses for players and parents is important. As an example, the following excerpt defines concerns from a coach: “She [child] did not play center, which then came to I’ll call it almost came to blows with the parents getting in my face”.

Communicating with guardians or parents is valuable and important. As described by Participant #6:

setting expectations with the parents.. would be the parents, relationship, you get all, the all the issues with complaints and the blame so that’s a huge part of minor hockey, to develop and trying to maintain that relationship... You know having parent meetings up front ongoing discussions with parents through the years and that gets a little bit easier the more you’ve coached.

The various types of communication were expressed during the interviews. Results indicated coaches utilized team meetings, individual and group emails, social media, and “Coffee with the Coach” panels for a general Q/A period. Open communication was noted as being extremely important to build trust but can also be a challenge without any professional development training. As Participant #7 explained:

I have to talk to him [player] more than the others, but generally that’s probably the biggest challenge how to how to chat and make those relationships without focusing on the game all the time.

The method in which coaches and players exhibit communication can be both verbal and non-verbal. Outbursts of aggression or demonstration of discontent can often result in challenges for the team. Coaches in this study acknowledged that derailing game plans or miscommunication can be difficult at times. Actions and reactions to situations on the ice may impact the team.

In summary, effective practices and processes for communication are an integral part of the coaching role. Guidelines and expectations contribute to this process. The following response identifies this challenge for coaches:

we have to be prepared ...and parents sometimes are causing a barrier with playing and there's a lot of emotions and you really have to be honest with the kids you know be encouraging and how do you relate to the parents and how do you diffuse a situation... sometimes I'm getting a text in the middle of the night saying my son needs you and you know I'm the coach and trying to understand what does this mean?

4 Discussion

This study highlights the professional development and leadership training experiences of minor ice hockey coaches. Participants were members of the Atlantic Hockey Group organization in Atlantic Canada. Components of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) aspects were identified and explored. The data revealed that hockey training with aspects of SEL were limited and not specific or explicit to Social Emotional Learning. Unlike practitioners in many other fields of teaching or education, coaches in youth sport environments often have limited formal training or financial compensation for their work [27].

Within the analysis, training content for ice hockey coaches was described as primarily focused upon health and physical safety. Concussion protocol, dressing room safety, and physical environment of dressing room areas were reported. Hockey Canada and the Respect in Sport program was noted as an inclusive or diversity training program offered through coach training [28]. When asked about content of this module, participants could not recall specific modules that addressed diversity, inclusion, or communication. Participants did not recall receiving professional development (PD) training relating to SEL practices. Professional development can be defined as:

Gaining new skills through continuing education and career training after entering the workforce. It can include taking classes or workshops, attending professional or industry conferences, or earning a certificate to expand your knowledge in your chosen field. [29]

As well, PD training was self-initiated and occurred in both online training and in-person formats. In terms of process, the overall findings of this study suggest that additional PD in areas relating to Social Emotional Learning would be beneficial, specifically with aspects of communication, diversity, inclusion, relationship building, and adolescent development. It has been argued that sport

organizations do not seem to have systematic programs to teach life and sport skills [30, 31]. This study emphasized the important connections and impact within SEL, sport, and youth development. SEL has become a staple of positive youth development approaches within many educational settings [32]. SEL programming and awareness prepares students to move successfully through life transitions and is an equitable approach to supporting students of diverse backgrounds, including those of minority race or from disadvantaged families [33].

The findings of this study emphasize the importance of current professional development training required for the changing landscape of ice hockey in Canada. Providing youth hockey coaches with specific training relating to SEL may have the power to impact personal growth and leadership. Fostering effective relationships and mentoring youth may be impactful on coaches' abilities to bring additional success to the ice.

This study may align within hockey analytics and coaches' ability to motivate players to become successful leaders both on and off the ice. Building confidence through social skill development, improved communication practice, and leadership may equate in a hockey team's ability to improve upon their drills, scoring, and game planning.

Communication, adolescent development, parent and player expectations, and inclusion were focal points addressed by participants. Our study reported that coaches received technical training in ice hockey skill development, however limited or no training within aspects relating to SEL. Supplementing ice hockey training with PD sessions focused on SEL can not only educate hockey coaches about social skill development, but it can empower them to meet the diverse needs of youth and children whom they support. It is essential to foster relationship skills, self-management, and responsible decision-making in that it will engage managing emotions and exploring possible solutions through equity-focused conversations [13].

Another suggestion for future research involves parent communication and referees. Previous reports have suggested that these aspects can be beneficial in sport coaching [26].

Expanding on this study, the role of parents/guardians in relation to respecting communication with referees was often noted by researchers. Additionally, a future recommendation is for a study that explores the development for coaching various ability levels of players. Team building, social development skills, and using sport to build positive social relationships could be beneficial. Coaches also witnessed the pressure that some players experienced from parents to excel in the sport of hockey and the challenges that are associated with this process. Maintaining an atmosphere where youth could enjoy hockey and enhance social skill development was also highlighted by coaches as being an important area for development.

Limitations noted within the study included sampling of one hockey organization. All participants had coached hockey for the AHG in Atlantic Canada.

In summary, key findings from this study revealed that participant coaches were head or lead coaches within the AHG organization, received ice hockey

coaching training from provincial minor hockey organizations, training format delivery included both online and in-person, explicit training specific to SEL was limited, effective communication was stated by all coaches as being an important aspect relating to coaching, and many coaches suggested the need for additional training within SEL, diversity, and inclusion.

5 Conclusion

The current study explored leadership and professional development training experiences of hockey coaches in Atlantic Canada. Results suggest that the majority of coaching training is received through both national and provincial associations. This training is specific to technical drills and skills for hockey development. Limited social skills or leadership training was received. Requirements and additional training that focus on inclusion, diversity, adolescent development, and communication within a hockey realm are noted. Using the tenets and foundations of SEL may provide an important benefit for professional development and leadership training for hockey coaches in Atlantic Canada.

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