

Reimagining Positive Youth Development and Life Skills in Sport through a Social Justice Lens



JUST SIX
QUESTIONS
RESEARCH
SUMMARY

“...reimagining [positive youth development] and life skills may spur opportunities for youth sport to better serve as a backdrop for teaching youth about social justice issues. Youth sport research must be at the service of youth sport stakeholders, meaning that researchers should create knowledge that stakeholders can use to foster models of social participation allowing them to exhibit meaningful agency in instigating change” (p. 4).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

The **positive youth development framework** – a strength-based and intentional approach that promotes positive outcomes and engages youth in the contexts of their families and communities – is well-established and has been proven successful in preparing youth for adversity by developing their personal strengths and assets. This framework is prominent within youth sport, as it has been found to support the development of a wide range of life skills, including, for example, teamwork, goal-setting, and emotional regulation.

With an increase in the general public’s awareness of, and response to, social justice issues – such as spikes in anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic and the activism of the Black Lives Matter movement in response to police brutality – youth sport practitioners need to change how they approach teaching life skills to ensure that the needs and concerns of diverse youth are considered. Given that sport plays a vital role in shaping youth, a social justice lens must be applied to understanding ‘life skills’, one that addresses the meanings and impacts of cultural and political issues in the context of sport.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

This research took place in Canada.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about diverse and/or socially vulnerable youth who engage in sport, and the various practitioners (e.g., coaches, sport programmers, youth workers, researchers) who can reimagine the positive youth development framework to include the teaching of life skills through a social justice lens.

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

This research was done by **narrative review**, which involves the authors critically analyzing and summarizing findings from **empirical evidence** – gathered directly or indirectly through observation or experimentation – published in several research papers.

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

Four overarching themes emerged to guide practitioners:

i. Adopt an approach to positive youth development that centres the experiences and needs of youth.

- Understand the unique needs of youth participants. Implement a community and cultural lens to positive youth development to increase wellbeing by supporting youth to understand their role – and impact – in transforming social conditions.
- Encourage youth to develop **critical consciousness** – an in-depth understanding of the world and its social and political intersections. This can encourage the development of skills, attitudes, and knowledge necessary for engaging in community and politics.

ii. Acknowledge positionality.

- Reflect on how one's social identities (e.g., race, gender, ability) impact their understanding and engagement with the world. Analyze the systems of power, privilege, and oppression that currently exist in coaching practices to empower youth and reimagine positive youth development to reflect diverse lived experiences.

iii. Expand the meanings of 'life skills'.

- Transform understandings of life skills to include social justice themes and issues, which can facilitate positive change for youth and the broader community.

For example, *leadership* is a life skill that has been defined by an ability to relate to others and model positive behaviour. The definition can be expanded to include advocating for change and engaging in community initiatives. Social justice leadership in sport can include coaches, captains, or other informal leaders participating in peaceful protests or encouraging youth to stand up for a teammate being harassed for their race or gender.

iv. Ensure that life skills development is culturally relevant and addresses the social realities and intersectional identities of youth.

- Avoid teaching life skills uniformly, as they can be interpreted differently by diverse youth depending on their lived experiences.

For example, *emotional regulation*, the ability to control emotions, can be learned and applied differently for youth with diverse familial backgrounds. In golf, *meeting and greeting* is an important life skill, but eye contact as a form of communication can hold different meanings for East Asian youth compared to white youth.

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

Incorporating social justice themes and issues into life skills development in a youth sport context can encourage young people to embrace culture, accept various identities and lived experiences, and understand how to engage in ways that strive to be socially just.

Reimagining the positive youth development framework in sport, however, requires the following considerations for practitioners:

- i. More work needs to be done to determine which aspects make sport a favourable environment for teaching social justice life skills.
- ii. Coaches must assess whether the strategies used to teach traditional life skills will also be effective for coaching social justice life skills (e.g., implicit/unintentional, explicit/intentional).
- iii. If coaches are to incorporate social justice life skills into their practices, they must be provided with education on how to do so in culturally sensitive ways.
- iv. Coaches should reflect on their positionality/privilege and discuss social justice issues by having open and safe discussions, rather than coming across as authoritarian.
- v. Sport organizations should support coaches' efforts to teach social justice life skills at all levels of sport.

While the youth sport context does have its limits and is simply one of several environments that can shape the lives of youth, applying a social justice lens to youth sport programming can advance many positive outcomes at the individual, community, and societal levels.

- 🔍 Camiré, M., Newman, T. J., Bean, C., & Strachan, L. (2022). Reimagining positive youth development and life skills in sport through a social justice lens. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 34(6), 1058–1076.