

Missed Opportunities for Critical Consciousness in Canadian High School Coaching: An Exploratory Case Study

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High school sport coaches are important non-parental sources of influence who can help adolescent athletes develop in and beyond sport. In light of recent social movements that have led citizens to organize in the name of social change, there is a need to examine how coaches can leverage high school sport to foster athlete development in manners that address social inequity and promote social justice. In the present exploratory case study, one coach's attitudes on social justice in Canadian high school sport are explored. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with the coach participant and subjected to a reflexive thematic analysis. Findings highlight how the coach was in the process of further developing critical consciousness surrounding his coaching yet relied mainly on a reactive approach when addressing social justice issues, resulting in missed opportunities for displaying and/or developing critical consciousness. Using a critical positive youth development framework (CPYD; Gonzalez et al., 2020), practical considerations and reflections are offered in terms of how youth sport coaches can be better trained to proactively address social justice issues through sport. Future directions for research in the Canadian high school sport context related to social justice are also discussed.

Keywords: critical positive youth development, youth sport, coach education, privilege

Sport occupies an important role in Canadian high schools, as participation allows over 750,000 adolescents from across the country to develop not only from a physical standpoint but also acquire a wide range of psychosocial skills that can promote positive youth development (PYD; Camiré & Kendellen, 2016; Gould & Carson, 2008; School Sport Canada, 2021). The PYD framework (Lerner et al., 2005), a strengths-based approach in which adolescents are viewed as individuals with potential rather than as problems to be fixed, has been a popular approach in the 21st century to study the psychosocial development of adolescents through sport (Holt, 2016). Past research has shown how adolescent high school sport participants can experience more PYD outcomes when their coaches are competent and

caring, and when coach-created learning environments are structured appropriately (see Camiré, 2014 for a review). In light of recent social movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter, #MeToo) that have spurred collective social awareness and change (Greene et al., 2019), it has become increasingly warranted to examine how coaches can leverage high school sport as a platform for addressing social justice issues. Despite the positive influence coaches can have on adolescents through sport participation, scholars have cautioned that many coaches fail to take advantage of opportunities to address social justice issues with their athletes (Newman et al., 2021). Moving forward, research that allows for the examination of the interplay between coaching, adolescent development, and social justice is needed. Accordingly, through the present study, we utilize the Gonzalez et al. (2020) critical positive youth development (CPYD) framework to explore one coach's attitudes toward social justice. The study represents an important step in determining future directions for expanding research in the areas of social justice and coaching within the Canadian high school sport context.

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Social Justice and Sport

Social justice is a complex and multifaceted construct to which it is difficult to attach a single comprehensive definition (Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2018). Bell (2007) explained that social justice is both a process and a goal, and Newman et al. (2019) stated that social justice includes, but is not limited to, “raising awareness about oppression and diversity, striving for equal opportunities for all people by ensuring access to resources, services, and information, and opening spaces so all groups can participate in decision making at different levels of citizenship” (p. 167). Through several recently published position statements (e.g., Bredemeier & Shields, 2019; Darnell & Millington, 2019; Love et al., 2019; Schinke et al., 2019), scholars have argued the need for more attention and resources to be given to the role of social justice in sport, and, more specifically, youth sport coaching (e.g., Camiré et al., 2021). An increased awareness, leading to skills and knowledge to effect positive social justice activism and advocacy in high school sport is needed, as adolescents stand to benefit developmentally from coaches who are proactive in implementing social justice initiatives (e.g., supporting a boycott of an oppressive organization), given that coach support has been shown to be central in shaping adolescents’ attitudes and behaviors surrounding activism (Fuller & Agyemang, 2018).

Athlete activism has been well-studied, though much of the extant literature has focused on Olympic, professional, and more recently, collegiate athletes (Fuller & Agyemang, 2018). Kaufman and Wolff (2010) suggested that sport is an ideal vehicle for studying social justice activism due to several characteristics often attached to sport such as responsible citizenship, social consciousness, meritocracy, and interdependence. A typology of African American athlete activism in professional sport differentiated between symbolic activism, scholarly activism, grassroots activism, sport-based activism, and economic activism, showing the many ways athletes can contribute to positive social justice activism (Cooper et al., 2019). Within collegiate sports, research has shown American student-athletes define an athlete-activist as someone who uses their social power and privilege to affect everyday change through positive social justice action, mentorship, authenticity, intervention, and public acts of resistance (Kluch, 2020). An emerging line of research has explored collegiate student-athletes’ perceptions of social justice in relation to behavior change and activism. Findings showed how participants’ attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and subjective norms were significant predictors of their intention and willingness to engage

in social justice activism (Mac Intosh et al., 2020). More recently, this line of research was extended through an exploration of collegiate athletes’ perceptions of social justice causes and social support. Findings showed how compared to non-activists, activist athletes perceived a higher degree of approval for engaging in social justice activism from various social agents, including friends, teammates, and parents (Martin et al., 2022). Taken together, the research on athlete activism suggests that sport can be utilized as a vehicle for promoting positive social change, specifically through student-athlete activism efforts that are supported by culturally-competent and caring coaches. However, this type of support is not always present.

Despite having been identified as an important setting for promoting social justice (e.g., Cunningham et al., 2019; Kaufman & Wolff, 2010), it is important to acknowledge that in many cases, sport remains a context where the status quo is maintained through the discursive practices of administrators and coaches who resist social change (Spaaij et al., 2020). For instance, in 2017, four football players at a high school in Mississippi knelt during a game to protest violence and systemic racism against Black Americans. These students were subsequently suspended indefinitely from school, with the suspension being supported by coaches, administrators, and district officials who claimed the students had disrespected their country by kneeling in protest (Eppes, 2017). This is merely one example of many illustrating how sport can serve as a site of resistance, whereby athletes’ efforts to engage in activism are thwarted and punished by those in positions of power (i.e., coaches and administrators). Regarding youth sport coaches’ perception of various social justice issues, Newman et al. (2021) surveyed American youth sport coaches (80% male, 88% White) and found that few deemed topics of mental health (6.5%), race/diversity (1.9%), disabilities (1%), and 2SLGBTQIA+ (0%) as key priorities that impact youth sport. Such findings demonstrate how the dominant perspectives in sport (e.g., White, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, men) continue to contribute to normative coaching practices known to marginalize certain groups of adolescents (e.g., racially minoritized groups, 2SLGBTQIA+ community), making them feel unsafe or even unwilling to participate in sport (Kulick et al., 2019). In consideration of the important role of coaches, as well as sport’s often-untapped potential for fostering adolescent development, the present study focuses on critically exploring the attitudes of one Canadian high school coach as it relates to social justice.

The Critical Positive Youth Development Framework

Although the PYD framework has been a popular and widely utilized approach to studying the psychosocial development of adolescents through sport (Holt, 2016), it has recently been critiqued by several researchers. Gonzalez et al. (2020) discussed how the PYD framework fails to address how social injustices, marginalization, and discrimination continue to affect the experiences and development of youth and adolescents. Coakley (2016) argued that the way the PYD framework is currently situated in sport-based programs aligns with a neoliberal ideology, whereby the psychosocial skills coaches teach their athletes through sport are heavily influenced by the values of Western, capitalistic society (e.g., emphasize individual growth and success). Similarly, Ronkainen et al. (2021) critiqued the narrow view of the PYD approach to sport, driven by a focus on coaches who teach psychosocial skills geared towards economic productivity (e.g., developing a strong work ethic) at the expense of considering non-instrumental forms of experiential learning. Kochanek and Erickson (2020, 2021) highlighted the dominant influence of Eurocentrism in adolescent sport research and situated the PYD framework as functionalist due to “views [that] uphold prevailing structures/norms and interpersonal dynamics that can (dis)advantage individuals based on minoritized social identity categories” (Kochanek & Erickson, 2021, p. 2). Therefore, there are growing concerns in terms of how coaches who implement PYD-based sport programming may not “provide youth with the knowledge and skills necessary to competently challenge systemic oppression so that they may contribute to the well-being of all people in their communities” (Gonzalez et al., 2020, p. 27). These are crucial considerations for educators and coaches operating at the high school level given the complex plethora of challenges faced by adolescents today at school, in sport, and in wider society.

In attempts to address the critiques, Gonzalez et al. (2020) created the CPYD framework, which integrates the Freirean (1973, 2000) concept of critical consciousness into the traditional strengths-based PYD framework as a means of addressing social justice in youth settings, including sport. The CPYD framework builds on Lerner et al.’s (2005) Five Cs of PYD model (i.e., competence, confidence, connection, caring, and character). In the Lerner et al. (2005) model, when competence, confidence, connection, caring, and character are properly fostered in developmental settings, youth and adolescents are said to develop a sixth C: contribution.

For the most part, contribution within the Lerner et al. (2005) model relates to being a productive, contributing member of society. However, this conceptualization fails to address societal systemic inequities, which shape youth and adolescent development. Within the CPYD framework, scholars suggest the addition of a seventh C, *critical consciousness*. Critical consciousness was initially conceptualized by Brazilian educator and activist Paulo Freire (1973, 2000), in which reflection and action work together in a cyclical and iterative manner to effect positive social change. Per Gonzalez et al. (2020), critical consciousness consists of three interconnected components: *critical reflection*, *political efficacy*, and *critical action*. Critical reflection refers to acknowledging and understanding the ways in which oppressive systems of social power impact individuals and groups, political efficacy refers to an individual’s belief in their ability to act to bring about positive social change, and critical action refers to activism and advocacy-related efforts related to social oppression and marginalization (Gonzalez et al., 2020). When these three components come together, a person is said to exhibit critical consciousness by engaging in an iterative process whereby they not only recognize social injustices, but they also feel competent in their ability to act and affect positive social change. This action in turn reinforces and strengthens the individual’s critical reflections about social justice and increases their belief in their ability to affect further positive change. The addition of critical consciousness as a seventh C in the model merges PYD with critical theory, creating a framework that can be used in youth settings, including sport, to directly address social justice issues.

Critical Consciousness in Sport

Although the CPYD framework (Gonzalez et al., 2020) has yet to be used in empirical research in sport (i.e., at the time of writing the current paper), several studies have explored the use of critical pedagogies, including critical consciousness, in youth sport coaching contexts. Spaaij et al. (2016) explored the integration of critical pedagogies for coaches into various sport for development and peace programs in Kenya and Cameroon. Findings pointed to the complex nature of designing and implementing critical pedagogies in sport for development contexts but also reinforced the role of the coach as being central in the delivery of these curricula (Spaaij et al., 2016). Similarly, Wright et al. (2016) explored the experiences of Belizean youth sport coaches after they received training in the United States centered on critical consciousness and the teaching of physical and social responsibility (TPSR) through

sport model. Results suggested that coach participants attempted to reflect critically and felt empowered during their training, which appeared to lead to transformative learning to varying degrees amongst participants (Wright et al., 2016). Related to critical consciousness, Kochanek and Erickson (2019) interviewed 12 high school head coaches from the United States on their critical praxis (i.e., the combination of awareness and action related to oppression and social injustice), finding that critical praxis may exist on a continuum and that “the extent to which coaches demonstrated a truly critical praxis that challenged the dominant coaching discourse varied not only by coach (given their positionality), but by content (issue) and context (sport)” (Kochanek & Erickson, 2019, p. 8). As a result, if coaches make even minor changes towards developing a more robust critical praxis, it may help them create more inclusive and welcoming spaces for youth athletes, where all participants can experience positive developmental outcomes (Kochanek & Erickson, 2019). Meir (2020) conducted a qualitative systematic review of critical pedagogy in physical education and sport for development, with findings suggesting that social transformation outcomes are more likely to take place when shifts in curriculum and professional development occur within broader organizational cultures of social justice. Taken together, these findings point to the need for coaches to adopt critical pedagogies across various youth sport programs (e.g., high school sport, sport for development), while being supported by coach professional development opportunities.

The Present Study

The CPYD framework is used in the present study to explore one coach participant’s attitudes on social justice through an examination of his critical consciousness to better understand how high school coaches can best support their athletes’ development through sport. The research question that guided the study was: how does a coach’s attitudes on/understanding of social justice inform their critical consciousness? Findings from this research can provide suggestions for future directions related to social justice research and critical consciousness interventions in coaching within the Canadian high school sport context.

Method

A single exploratory case study approach (Mills et al., 2012) was used to explore one coach’s attitudes on social justice issues in Canadian high school sport through a critical consciousness lens. Although research does exist on critical consciousness and social justice

efforts in youth sport, studies have yet to explore critical consciousness in coaching within Canadian high school sport. The justification for selecting a single exploratory case study approach lies in the research team’s desire to generate topics of discussion and potential directions for future research in this specific context.

The study was guided by a relativist ontology, in which reality is considered subjective (Smith & Sparkes, 2016), and a constructivist epistemology, in which individuals construct meaning through interactions with the world around them (Creswell, 2013). From a relativist and constructivist lens, the research team co-interpreted the coach participant’s attitudes on social justice in high school sport in an effort to construct shared meaning. One reason for utilizing this epistemological and ontological perspective was to attempt to understand some of the reasons why the participant may or may not have been supportive or engaged with social justice activism at his school. Through the use of the CPYD framework, a critical methodological approach was adopted, as the researchers focused on analyzing the coach’s attitudes on matters of social justice through the concepts of critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action.

Participant and Procedure

The participant recruited for the present study coached in the Canadian high school sport system and resided in a large city in the province of Québec. High school sport is defined as extracurricular sport where adolescents represent their schools and are part of teams that compete in leagues and championships. In this sense, high school sport is distinguished from physical education classes and intramural sports offered in high schools because of its competitive and interscholastic nature (Camiré et al., 2019). In Québec, adolescents spend five years in high school (i.e., *secondaire 1-5*) between the ages of 12-17 years.

A coach who identified as a white man was recruited to be interviewed for this study. As per recommendations from Gearity et al. (2019), although it is of the highest importance to explore the perspectives of marginalized and oppressed individuals, there is also merit in exploring the perspectives of those in privileged positions (i.e., white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, men) for understanding their perceived responsibility in promoting social justice. Accordingly, purposive sampling was used to recruit Stephen (pseudonym), a high school physical education teacher and coach with 16 years of experience working at the high school level. Stephen was born and raised in the province of Québec and self-identified as an English-speaking, white, heterosexual man. He was

41-years-old at the time of the study. Although Stephen was not actively coaching at the time of data collection due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions that forced the cancellation of high school sports in 2020-2021, he had actively coached up until the 2019-2020 school year. Over the course of his career, Stephen has acted as a head and assistant coach for a variety of boys' and girls' teams in the sports of soccer, basketball, and badminton.

Data Collection and Analysis

Ethics approval was obtained from the authors' university research ethics board before conducting the study. The first author obtained informed verbal consent from Stephen (which he opted for over written consent) before conducting and recording the two interviews over Zoom. To build rapport with the participant, the interviewer (first author) spent a few minutes making casual conversation before beginning the interview, discussing shared experiences relating to high school sport and physical education. The first interview (February 2021) included questions related to demographics, conceptions of social justice, comfort in addressing social justice issues, and perceived challenges and recommendations for addressing social justice issues in the Canadian high school sport context. Upon completion of the first interview, which lasted 33 minutes, the authors met to discuss the interview transcript, focusing their attention on what Stephen said and did not say during the interview. From the discussion, the authors identified several topics that required further elaboration from Stephen surrounding social justice issues. A second interview guide was then created, enabling Stephen to elaborate on his previous responses. The second interview (May 2021) lasted 42 minutes.

A reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2019) was conducted and led by the first author. The RTA process (Braun & Clarke, 2021) began with the first author transcribing the interviews verbatim, reading the transcripts attentively, and then rereading the transcripts while listening to the recordings. After familiarizing himself with the data, the first author began to code inductively through semantic codes (i.e., low inference interpretations of the participant's answers grounded in the research team's theoretical and paradigmatic assumptions; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Then, the first author analyzed the data deductively through latent codes based on the Gonzalez et al. (2020) CPYD framework and Freire's (1973, 2000) concept of critical consciousness. Coding occurred by making notes in the margins of the transcripts, followed by the creation of

a preliminary concept map. Following the initial code development, the first author began to group codes into themes, informed by the CPYD framework. At this point, the three authors worked together to refine, define, and name the themes, in addition to refining the concept map. Here, the second and third authors acted as critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2018), providing critical feedback, reflections, and insights to the first author's coding and interpretation of the data (e.g., posing reflective questions to help determine if the themes aligned with the concepts of the CPYD framework). The authors then selected quotes from Stephen that best represented the different themes and sub-themes, which were then embedded within a textured analytic narrative (i.e., surrounding the participant's quotes with rich, layered interpretations). The first author led the writing of the results section, and multiple drafts were reviewed by the co-authors. As the RTA process is iterative, the analysis was an ongoing process that continued throughout the writing and re-writing of the manuscript.

Positionality

Scholars working in the area of cultural sport psychology (CSP) have highlighted the importance of critical self-awareness and reflexivity, stressing the need for researchers to acknowledge how their positionality (i.e., social position, values, biases) may influence various stages of the research process (Ryba et al., 2013). In the present study, all three authors have past experiences as athletes and coaches in the Canadian high school sport system and are familiar with the various features of this setting. Furthermore, the authors (one woman, two men), acknowledge their identities as white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, and educated Canadians, recognizing that their positionality impacted their shared assumption that social justice issues should be addressed in the context of high school sport. The authors acknowledge that their position as three socially privileged academics may limit, or at the very least, influence their scope of interpretation of the data. For instance, by interviewing a coach who shared many aspects of a privileged intersectional identity (i.e., white, cis-gender, man), the first author had to be cautious to maintain a critical perspective and to not overly sympathize with the participants' reasons for not engaging in social justice activism and advocacy. At the same time, conducting research from a perspective of supporting social justice activism efforts, the first author also had to make concerted efforts to understand the participant's reasons for not engaging in social justice activism and advocacy without making

negative judgments about the participant's values. In consideration of the above, the authors made conscious efforts to engage in ongoing discussions about reflexivity and positionality (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021) while carrying out the study, including meeting to discuss how their shared personal experiences and observations about systemic inequities in sport and education shaped how they engaged with the data.

Study Rigor

Several reflexive practices were employed throughout the research process in efforts to enhance the rigor of the study. With the help of a colleague not involved in this study, the first author participated in an individual bracketing interview two months prior to data collection, allowing him to become more aware of his own assumptions, biases, and preconceptions related to social justice and high school sport coaching (McNarry et al., 2019). This colleague was selected to conduct the bracketing interview because they had a close professional relationship with the first author and shared overlapping research interests related to social justice, gender equity, and Canadian sport. The first author also kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process, enabling him to engage in critical reflexivity about how his positionality and life experiences inescapably shaped his interpretation of the data (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Below is one example of a reflection from this reflexive journal:

Because I share a very similar intersectional identity to the participant recruited (i.e., white, male, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, Canadian-born, English-speaking, university educated), will I be hoping his attitudes towards social justice are similar to my own? Will I try to defend some of his statements (if they are not supportive of social justice) because of our shared intersectionality and professional backgrounds (i.e., physical and health education, youth sport coaching)?

Throughout the conduct of the study, the first author read several important texts on intersectionality, whiteness, and systemic racism (e.g., Butryn, 2016; Feagin et al., 2001; Kendall, 2012) with the aims of both encouraging his own critical reflexivity and widening his interpretative lens with regards to social justice and whiteness in sport coaching. Together, the authors engaged in critical discussions about their positionalities and on past/current social justice issues in high school sport and in broader sport contexts. For example, the authors discussed reflective questions together on video calls, "We know that our role as white privileged individuals can be limiting at times because we lack personal experience with marginalization/oppression/

discrimination, but to what extent can we leverage our privilege to effect the greatest amount of good?" During the conduct of the study, all three authors continued to self-educate themselves on social justice topics, such as by taking part in a series of workshops addressing racism (e.g., Sports Can Battle Racism workshop by Positive Coaching Alliance, 2021) and promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in sport (e.g., Centering Black Youth Wellbeing by Youth Research and Evaluation Exchange, 2021; Gender Equity LENS e-module by Canadian Women & Sport, 2021).

Results

The results are presented under three higher-order themes in accordance with the CPYD framework and critical consciousness: critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action. More specifically, results are framed within a perspective that highlights *missed opportunities* related to Stephen's (lacking) critical consciousness within the high school sport context.

Critical Reflection

The first higher-order theme of critical reflection encapsulates how Stephen viewed the impacts of power, privilege, oppression, marginalization, and discrimination within the high school sport context where he coached. Results showed how Stephen was somewhat inconsistent in his reflections, and thus not truly critical or transformative. Three sub-themes are presented: the importance (or lack thereof) placed on social justice, not keeping up to date with social justice issues, and privilege.

The Importance (or Lack Thereof) Placed on Social Justice

Stephen acknowledged the importance of social justice in school, in sport, and beyond, saying that, when he thinks of social justice, he thinks of "just justice in general. I think of fairness and equity." He added that when it comes to addressing overt social justice issues, such as witnessing a clear act of discrimination, he considers it his responsibility to speak up and address the issue, "I don't think anything should be left unsaid. If it, you know, perks your ears up enough to say, 'there was something not quite right there.'"

However, despite claiming a responsibility to speak up when issues occur, Stephen also recognized that his reactive approach to social justice issues, where he waits for incidents to occur before acting, is "probably not ideal." He did, nevertheless, acknowledge the importance of addressing social justice issues proactively, insisting

that a better understanding of social justice would allow him to develop the competency needed to move past his reactive approach, “as we go further and as we understand things better, definitely proactive – so that you’re not having to be as reactive – obviously, would be, would be best.” Yet, a perceived lack of competency may not have been the only reason for Stephen’s reactive approach to addressing social justice issues. In his role as a teacher, he pointed to the importance he places on ensuring students move as much as possible during physical education classes, given the sedentary nature of other classes. The following quote illustrates how Stephen prioritized having students being active during physical education, which may inevitably leave little to no time to proactively discuss matters related to social justice:

Um, again unfortunately [there are] so many things to consider in Phys. Ed. They [the students] do a lot of sitting and listening and discussing and things like that in so many other classes, getting them up and moving is priority number one. Again, it’s finding that balance I suppose, so, you know as time goes on, continuing to evolve in terms of teaching and realizing what’s important.

Not Keeping Up to Date on Social Justice Issues

Despite acknowledging the importance of proactively addressing social justice, which requires intently learning about and staying current on present and past events, Stephen appeared mostly passive in his approach to keeping up to date on social justice issues, waiting for new information to be presented to him rather than seeking it out for himself. Specifically, he shared a dislike and complete avoidance of mainstream news in the year preceding the two interviews:

I haven’t watched a minute of news in about 13 months... So, if there’s stuff that’s happening, I’m just not up on it. I’m only hearing things through second-hand reporting from friends and things like that. So, it’s not like I’m completely out of the loop, I’m just not seeking it out myself these days just because all of the other garbage that I see happening.

Stephen’s avoidance of mainstream news, particularly during a year that spotlighted social injustices across the world, illustrates his privilege of being able to disconnect from social issues or be selective in his intake, given that the issues at-hand do not affect him directly. Despite his avoidance of the news, Stephen did discuss how he engages in conversations with colleagues and friends, whom he considers as having higher levels of expertise

with social justice, as resources that allowed him to maintain some awareness on current issues:

You know, I’ve obviously got a few friends that are involved – people that I enjoy talking to – so that ends up being, whether when we get together or chatting on the phone or something like that, ‘ok, well, let me know what’s happening’ and they can get decently in-depth into it.

He also added that watching sports on television allows him to be somewhat exposed to social justice issues, “I suppose the way that I do [keep up to date on social justice issues] is, because I’m a big sports fan, that’s oftentimes where I will see it,” referencing events such as NFL athlete Colin Kaepernick taking a knee during the national anthem to protest violence and systemic racism against Black Americans.

Even though Stephen was mostly passive in how he stayed up to date on social justice issues, he did talk about attending an extracurricular social justice club for students at his high school. He shared how he enjoyed sitting in on the club’s lunchtime meetings whenever he could make time in his busy teaching and coaching schedules, although he explained that he preferred to remain quiet during the discussions, “I’d rather just sit and listen and hear what people have to say.” When asked to elaborate on why he preferred to listen as opposed to actively engage in the discussions, he explained:

I’m not necessarily the person who needs to be heard in the first place. Um, so, I like listening to what other people have to say, you know, it’s fun... It’s the same thing when I go into [teaching and coaching] workshops and stuff like that: let’s hear what people have to say and I’ll jump in if I feel it’s necessary. But it’s also necessary to give other people the opportunity to have the chance to speak and be heard by people who are actually listening to them.

When asked if he ever felt that his social identities (e.g., White, heterosexual, man) made him feel as though he could/should not contribute to the discussions on social justice, he explained, “I’ve never felt like I can’t speak, I’ve just felt like there’s no need to, or I won’t really bring anything new or all that great to the table during those discussions.” He then clarified that his passivity in these discussions is so that he can listen and learn, saying that his quiet involvement in these discussions is “more for personal growth than for anything else.”

Privilege

In both interviews, Stephen did demonstrate some level of critical reflection given that he was able to acknowledge and reflect on his privileged social

identities. In explaining how he had never personally faced social injustices related to marginalization or discrimination, Stephen stopped to add:

We're talking right now from my perspective as a middle-class, white, male, heterosexual, uh, born in Canada. I've been really fortunate in my life to not come across too many unfortunate difficulties [related to social injustices], that other people haven't had that same good fortune.

Although Stephen did recognize the presence of social injustice and inequity in the Canadian high school sport context (e.g., racism, sexism, heteronormativity, ableism), it appeared as though such topics were not high on his priority list. Perhaps more problematically, he indicated how he felt a proactive approach to social justice was not something he needed to integrate in his teaching and coaching because he believed that he was already creating socially just, inclusive, and safe environments. On the topic of actively integrating social justice into his teaching and coaching, he explained:

It's not really something that I've put a ton of thought into. I think, luckily, I just kind of do that kind of stuff naturally within my teaching... And now that it's becoming more and more, um, hot button, it'll be something that I try to work on a little bit more. I wish I did because it's an interesting subject and topic... But just haven't put enough thought into it in the past.

Stephen's stance, which likely stems from not being personally affected by social injustices due to his privilege and social identities, allowed him to at times make statements that inadvertently worked to downplay the deeply engrained and longstanding histories of social injustices by referring to social justice movements as "an interesting subject," "such a buzzword these days," and "kind of a hot topic du jour." Moreover, Stephen appeared to circumvent the idea of putting more emphasis on social justice in his teaching and coaching, instead making use of speech acts (i.e., treating people fairly is already a basic feature of my teaching/coaching) through the appropriation of language that essentially exonerated him from having to alter his ways. He highlighted that as teachers and coaches: "we shouldn't have to put extra emphasis on it [social justice] because that emphasis should be there in the first place." Stephen followed up his circumventing and exonerating statements by expanding on how he was often worried about how he would be perceived if he was not seen by others to make extra efforts to integrate social justice more actively, pointing to ongoing tensions, "but then I don't want it to be made to look as 'this person doesn't care about this stuff that's being put out there these days.' Um, because I absolutely do."

Political Efficacy

The second higher-order theme, political efficacy, refers to Stephen's belief in his ability to affect positive social change within the high school sport context in which he coaches. Stephen believed that coaches can hold a significant amount of influence over athletes during adolescence, recognizing that:

[Organized] sport is a platform where we are setting a particular example... I do think that the biggest thing we teach is examples of how to be, how to behave, how to treat each other... It's so much more important than any of the information-based stuff that gets passed along.

That being said, Stephen was also transparent about his own lack of perceived comfort and competence in addressing social justice issues with his athletes. He self-assessed his level of confidence with social justice issues as a "5 on 10" and admitted, "I'm not an expert in the least." At one point in the second interview, Stephen anxiously paused after saying the word "gender," then explained, "again, I'm always nervous about [using] that term." In elaborating on his comfort level with language in relation to social justice issues, Stephen positioned himself within a discourse of self-victimization, and explained how, "there are lots of terms these days that's just difficult to keep track of." In further indications of his low perceived political efficacy, Stephen demonstrated a clear unwillingness to serve as an active figure in the social justice movement. For instance, when asked if he had any recommendations for promoting social justice in Canadian high schools or in the broader youth sport system, Stephen stated: "I'm definitely not going to be at the forefront of any of this stuff. I'll be somebody who is 100% supportive... I don't know, I'm definitely not the person for that particular question." Despite situating himself as fully supportive for promoting social justice in high school and sport, Stephen remained vague as to what his "100% support" entails on an everyday basis. In sum, in reference to political efficacy, Stephen acknowledged the influential role of the high school sport coach but positioned his lack of knowledge of and comfort with social justice as preventing him from proactively addressing social justice issues with his students and athletes.

Stephen stated how he views his role as a teacher and a coach as entailing some responsibility in acting on instances of social injustice. He indicated that when he notices an instance of social injustice at his school, he acts on it but then deems it necessary to reach out to more experienced and more knowledgeable colleagues, letting them take responsibility to follow up on the issue with administration. Thus, he acknowledged not

wanting, or not having to take full responsibility on such matters at his school because:

There's always gonna be people that have a great comfort level speaking on subjects that they just have a greater background in, uh, whether it be they've done schooling related to it, they've done that much more research, they have a passion for it in particular.

When asked what it would take for him to feel comfortable enough to handle social justice issues on his own, Stephen mentioned the importance of gaining access to more professional development opportunities that would allow him to have, "a greater understanding of things that have happened in the past, things that are currently going on, it allows us to form a better understanding and to be more well-spoken on the subject." Stephen suggested using pedagogical days, scheduled within his school for the teachers to engage in professional development, as opportunities to "educate the educators" by organizing social justice workshops with guest speakers. However, thus far in his career, Stephen stated how he had yet to receive any type of formal social justice training at his school as a teacher or as a sport coach.

Critical Action

The third higher-order theme of critical action refers to social justice activism and advocacy-related efforts occurring at Stephen's school, which he acknowledged and praised, but tended to *watch from the sidelines* instead of directly getting involved. Two sub-themes are presented: the value of dialogue, and collaboration among staff and students.

The Value of Dialogue

In the two interviews, Stephen referenced only one instance during which he was the one to directly address a social justice issue while coaching, and this was done reactively after an event had occurred. He explained:

We had an instance several years ago – four years ago maybe – where myself, a student, and our vice principal at the time had to go to another school [...] to apologize for the mistreatment of a student on their basketball team because of a slur that had been uttered by one of our students.

Stephen then elaborated on how he did his best to work with his school's administration to address the situation with the student to ensure a similar incident did not occur again. Stephen discussed the importance of transparency when discussing social issues to help ensure advocacy-related efforts are effective in instigating change. Moving forward, he acknowledged

how the ability to dialogue fluently in the language of social justice is something he needs to develop in order to address his lack of comfort:

It's just a matter of creating a setting for open dialogue and non-judgmental interactions with other people. And through those conversations, being somebody that can, you know, guide a conversation in a particular way. Just being able to hear other peoples' thoughts and opinions, more importantly hearing about their experiences, yeah just having an open mind and encouraging others to take that same approach. It might counterbalance my lack of knowledge when it comes to these things.

Collaboration Among Staff and Students

Stephen emphasized the importance of collaboration in addressing social justice issues. He talked about how at his school, the administration plays an active role in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion among staff and students, particularly through making efforts to recruit a diverse population of students through the admissions process. For example, Stephen shared how the administration at his school was proactive in sending an urgent email to all students and staff to diffuse any potential conflicts that may arise at school in response to the dispute that occurred between Israel and Palestine in May 2021.

[The email was] reinforcing and repeating our school's code of conduct inside the walls and beyond, um, and how if there's anyone being mistreated, or you hear or see signs of anything happening to please make sure to delve into it or to bring it forward to the people who would be able to deal with it further.

Stephen followed this by praising the administration's active efforts to create a quality school environment, saying that they play "a massive role in kind of being the umbrella over all these different elements within the school."

Stephen also discussed the role of students in addressing social justice issues, mentioning how he observed several advocacy efforts whereby the students at the school engaged directly with the administration to instill positive social change. In one instance, he said:

We had students who, when it came to Black History [month] and Black Lives Matter and that push that was happening, they involved themselves more along with the administration in terms of 'okay, how can we go about making a greater difference?' So, having your voice heard and that type of thing is extremely important, and feeling like you have value and are validated.

Together, the examples of critical action illustrated above indicate how Stephen generally took a passive

approach to social justice activism and advocacy-related efforts at his school.

Discussion

The study provides insights into one coach's attitudes on social justice in the Canadian high school sport context, as interpreted by the researchers through the lens of the CPYD framework and critical consciousness. In the discussion, three reflections are offered: reflecting on privilege, reactivity and reluctance, and a need for social justice education. In the case of Stephen, these reflections are framed as *missed opportunities*.

Reflecting on Privilege

Stephen demonstrated only some level of critical reflection during the two interviews, particularly in relation to his privilege. White (male) privilege has been described as “an invisible knapsack” (McIntosh, 1989, p. 1) full of unearned advantages, with Stephen appearing to recognize how this privilege resulted in him having no personal experiences whatsoever related to social injustices. As suggested by Leonardo (2004), Stephen's concern for how he was perceived by others in relation to social justice advocacy (i.e., not wanting to say the wrong thing) may have prevented him from working towards developing a greater understanding of the structural, systemic mechanisms of privilege and social injustices. Furthermore, Stephen's privilege meant he could afford to disconnect himself from mainstream news and avoid having to make efforts to keep himself up to date on social justice issues for over a year. As elucidated by Compton (2022), remaining neutral in the face of ongoing social inequities is only made possible by a privileged social identity (e.g., white, cis-gender, man), and Stephen exhibited this privilege and neutrality by choosing to remain disconnected from ongoing social justice issues. *White silence* refers to the notion that many white individuals choose to not contribute to, or avoid entirely, crucial discussions related to social justice and social inequities (DiAngelo, 2012), which appeared to mostly be the case for Stephen. A related notion is that of *white complicity* – the idea that white individuals (unknowingly) play a role in maintaining social injustices through their silence and inaction related to race and other social justice issues (Daum, 2020). Indeed, many white children are socialized to not discuss race and whiteness (Hazelbaker et al., 2022), which has produced generations of white North American adults who tend to avoid critical discussions related to race. DiAngelo (2016) underlined how anti-racist practices require a person to continuously educate themselves about social justice and strive to build cross-racial relationships –

and that white silence only serves to prevent these two requirements from being fulfilled. While white individuals may participate in discussions about race without actively contributing (i.e., listening only), the only way to work toward ending white silence is for white individuals to meaningfully contribute to these social justice discussions (Wattsjohnson, 2003) in ways that allow for their thoughts and biases to be challenged and restructured (DiAngelo, 2016).

Stephen's speech acts downplaying the social justice movement were problematic and his choice of referents such as “buzzword” or “hot-button topic” worked to discredit the enduring reality of the historical and systemic oppression and marginalization in the lives of millions (Hammond et al., 2019; Spaaij et al., 2020). Similarly, discursive practices of self-victimization (i.e., “I'm doing my best”) prevented Stephen from becoming more aware and active regarding social justice issues, which is in line with previous research that examined how youth sport leaders resist social justice efforts through discourses of victimhood (Spaaij et al., 2020). Related to discourses of victimhood that dismiss critical discussions of social justice is the notion of *white fragility*, which refers to how many white individuals in North America possess a low ability to tolerate racial stress (i.e., difficult conversations about race, racism, and privilege; DiAngelo, 2011). White fragility often leads to anger, fear, guilt, and silence among many white individuals, which unfortunately only serves to reinforce the existing inequities that perpetuate marginalization and oppression (Applebaum, 2015; DiAngelo, 2011). By breaking down white fragility, white individuals can in turn reverse trends of white silence by finding ways to be reflexive and to act as social justice allies. It is important to note that, while white silence, white fragility, and white complicity all refer to race-related social justice, these notions can be applied to all aspects of one's intersectional identity (e.g., gender, sexuality, disability). In other words, individuals with privileged social identities must find ways to educate themselves about *all* social justice issues, which can in turn allow them to meaningfully contribute to social justice discussions and activism-related efforts.

Overall, study findings suggest that Stephen appeared to lack a *critical* approach to teaching and coaching, which is needed in order to understand “the impact of power, privilege, and oppression on young people's lived experiences, regardless of social group membership” (Gonzalez et al., 2020, p. 31). In line with previous research from Newman et al. (2021), Stephen did not proactively prioritize social justice issues in his role as

a physical educator and coach and appeared to employ a normative (DeJaeghere, 2022) and functionalist coaching practice (Kochanek & Erickson, 2019), which fails to address the many systemic inequities that shape youth sport participation and subsequent development outcomes. As discussed by Gearity et al. (2019), coaches must work harder to improve their sociocultural awareness, specifically pertaining to white privilege, but also in relation to other forms of privilege (e.g., cisgender privilege, able-bodied privilege), if we are to create more socially inclusive and safe sporting environments for young athletes. Similarly, considering the influence coaches can have on adolescent athletes' development and experiences in sport, it is crucial to consider how coaches' silence or inactivity in relation to social justice may impact athletes. Indeed, many white individuals appear to *talk the talk* when it comes to advocating for social justice issues, claiming to support various social justice efforts. *White intellectual alibis* (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013) refer to white individuals' efforts to put forth a non-racist self-image rather than making real efforts to meaningfully align themselves with anti-racist practices. In the case of Stephen, there is no evidence that he *walks the walk* – essentially, the results suggest that Stephen made no efforts to support his alleged advocacy with any social justice engagement/activism. Considering Stephen's privileged position as a teacher and coach, this case elucidates missed opportunities for social justice advocacy/activism within the high school sport setting.

Reactivity and Reluctance

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Camiré et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2021), Stephen believed that coaches can have a significant impact on adolescent athletes' development and recognized that high school sport is a context suitable for teaching a wide range of life skills. However, Stephen's reactivity and reluctance to engage in discussions on social justice illustrates missed opportunities for sport to serve as a meaningful platform for dialogue and action in the service of social issues (Camiré et al., 2021). Of note is Stephen's view that there is always someone else who can take responsibility for social justice issues, thereby propagating a narrative of exoneration that in turn allowed him to shy away from difficult, yet necessary, conversations surrounding social justice. Stephen's reliance on colleagues and friends to keep him updated on current social justice issues was problematic, as it contradicted his previous statements on the importance of staying informed about current and past social issues. Moreover, a reliance on colleagues and friends of colour to educate Stephen

about social justice issues is particularly problematic, as it exemplifies a *colonizer logic* (i.e., extracting value from individuals of racially minoritized groups; Harkins et al., 2021). In terms of critical praxis (i.e., the combination of awareness and action related to oppression and social injustice), Stephen appeared to be at the lower end of the continuum outlined by Kochanek and Erickson (2019), as he demonstrated low levels of awareness of social injustice and oppression, especially related to systemic injustices. Moreover, from the two interviews, Stephen did not discuss any instances in which he or his peers actively challenged dominant coaching discourses.

To effectively develop their critical consciousness, white coaches and athletes should, according to critical sport journalist Dave Zirin, use their privilege to speak up against injustices and thereby take some pressure off Black coaches and athletes (Agyemang et al., 2020) who have traditionally been at the forefront of social justice activism efforts through sport. Developing one's critical consciousness is highly important for coaches because it can help them not only work to better serve athletes who experience marginalization and oppression but also assist those in privileged positions who are seeking to demonstrate allyship (Love, 2000). Adopting a critical lens to one's coaching, supported by the CPYD framework, can be valuable for coaches given that "by including critical reflection and political efficacy, CPYD leads to more transformative, critically grounded and informed youth [and adult] contribution and systemic change in the form of critical action" (Gonzalez et al., 2020, p. 32). In the case of Stephen, his identities, privilege, and his deliberate efforts to disconnect from mainstream news meant that he may have engaged in critical reflection only partially and inconsistently, which impeded him from fully contributing to the transformative, systemic change alluded to in the CPYD framework (Gonzalez et al., 2020).

Beyond the privilege that led to Stephen's lack of social justice action, another reason that might have contributed to his reluctance and reactivity was the social climate in which he worked, which aligns with findings from Martin et al. (2022) who suggested that senior college athletes were less likely to engage in social justice activism due to perceived lack of support. Moreover, a review from Meir (2020) suggested that shifts in curriculum and professional development related to social justice are more likely to be successful when they occur within broader organizational cultures of social justice. Although Stephen appeared satisfied with the promotion of social justice at his school, more data would need to be collected on the school environment in order to draw further conclusions. In

sum, while Stephen's privilege likely played a major role in his missing many opportunities to promote social justice in his role as a physical educator and coach, it is also important to consider the environment (i.e., social support, school culture) that enabled Stephen to remain disconnected from social justice advocacy and activism. However, it is imperative to note that individuals maintain a responsibility to educate themselves about how to positively contribute to social justice activism efforts, and an over-reliance on one's environment to learn about social justice issues can be, as discussed above, problematic.

A Need for Social Justice Education

Stephen's self-proclaimed lack of comfort with notions of social justice may speak to the need for sport systems to offer coaches access to educational initiatives that meaningfully address social justice issues. However, more research is needed before these claims can be applied across the entire Canadian high school sport context. Stephen's claim that he would have benefited from greater access to social justice training is in line with research from Tam et al. (2020), who alluded to in their study on the #MeToo movement in Canadian sport that many coaches want to receive more formal training and professional development opportunities related to social justice. For Freire (1973, 2000), the essence of critical consciousness is reading, dialogue, reflection, and action, supported by a knowledge of history that is crucial to grasping the roots of marginalization, oppression, and discrimination. Thus, in theory, for coaches to enhance their critical consciousness, they should read, reflect, and derive knowledge that is historically situated. Studies that have explored the merits of critical consciousness-focused coach education through the use of critical pedagogies have shown how these initiatives can have a positive impact on coaches' developing critical consciousness, exemplified through some coaches learning how to act as positive role models for youth athletes (Spaaij et al., 2016), and learning how to promote a more positive cultural impact among their athletes (Wright et al., 2016). It is suggested that implementing similar interventions in the Canadian high school sport context is needed moving forward. Recent research from (Bishop et al., 2023) explored perceptions of white privilege and social justice issues among Canadian high school coaches, finding that coaches who had a higher awareness of white privilege in society were more likely to have favorable attitudes towards a range of other social justice issues (e.g., anti-racism, support for 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, recognition of the urgency to address climate change). These findings suggest that

coach education initiatives related to social justice may benefit from using white privilege as a stepping stone to get coaches to become more aware – and eventually, more active – in relation to their ability to effect positive social change through social justice activism and advocacy.

Accordingly, it is recommended that experiential components in the form of dialogue be included in the development of educational initiatives aimed at enhancing coaches' critical consciousness. In the context of sport, previous research has demonstrated the value of dialogue between coaches and student-athletes in addressing power dynamics (e.g., Mac Intosh & Martin, 2018; Ryba et al., 2013). As stated by Watts et al. (2011), if a single encapsulating term for critical consciousness existed, it would be *group discussion*. Through critical group discussions, both coaches and athletes can increase their awareness of and ability to address microaggressions (e.g., colorblindness, use of sexist and heterosexist language, pathologizing cultural values) that continue to exclude, discriminate, and marginalize various groups (e.g., racially minoritized groups, 2SLGBTQIA+ community), even when coaches appear to not have overtly oppressive intentions (Gearity & Henderson Metzger, 2017). Ultimately, a combination of informational and experiential learning opportunities can help coaches work towards creating and maintaining safe, inclusive, and equitable environments for all their athletes. Schools, school boards, and school sport governing bodies must seek to work with diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals, as well as other qualified professionals who are experienced in areas of social justice, coaching, and sport psychology.

Limitations

The study is not without its limitations. First, it must be noted that the findings reflect the perspective of a single (white) teacher-coach from one high school in Canada. Future research is needed to explore the perspectives of other stakeholders (e.g., coaches who identify as women, coaches of equity-deserving groups, coaches who identify as 2SLGBTQIA+, athletes, and administrators) to provide a more holistic understanding of critical consciousness and social justice in the high school sport context in Canada and elsewhere. Second, despite our best efforts to engage in a continuous reflexive process (i.e., bracketing interview, discussions with critical friends, ongoing professional development and education in the form of workshops and seminars), we recognize that as researchers, our interpretations are bound within the realm of our limited experiences with oppression and marginalization and are shaped by

identities (e.g., white, cisgender) and our positions of privilege and power (i.e., university students, professor). Third, a more robust approach to data collection (e.g., multiple interviews, multiple participants, varied data collection methods) may have enhanced the richness of the data and ultimately led to additional nuances and insights deriving from our interpretations. In line with recommendations from Watts et al. (2011), researchers studying critical consciousness could consider using collaborative methods, case studies, and mixed-method longitudinal study designs. For studies centered on coach critical consciousness, this could include exploratory case studies of multiple coaches; data collection through the use of individual interviews, solicited journaling, and field observations; and data collection at time points across a span of 12 months or longer.

Future Directions

Based on the findings of this exploratory case study, we suggest several directions for future research. First, before coach education initiatives around critical consciousness can be developed, future research should be conducted to explore high school coaches' attitudes and motives for advocating for social justice, as well as their potential willingness (or not) to take part in social justice training. By first understanding coaches' attitudes and motives around advocating for social justice, coach education initiatives may be met with open-mindedness and commitment rather than defensiveness and reluctance to change. Critical reflection has been said to be the catalyst to critical consciousness development (Watts et al., 2011) and thus, we suggest that critical reflection should be a central focus of research on social justice in coaching moving forward. More specifically, researchers should explore how coaches can partake in meaningful dialogue and group discussions as a means of social justice education, which may include looking outside of the immediate school environment and seeking guidance from professionals who are qualified and experienced in leading social justice-related workshops and training programs (e.g., Athlete Ally, Black Canadian Coaches Association). Second, as suggested by several scholars (e.g., Cooper et al., 2019; Kluch, 2020), social justice activism can take many forms and is not limited to boycotting and protesting. Thus, future research efforts should focus on educating coaches, athletes, and administrators about the various ways in which they can proactively participate in social justice activism, which may ultimately serve to get more people engaged in fighting for social justice. Third, longitudinal research could be conducted to explore the sustainability of critical consciousness-focused coach education, helping answer

questions such as: Is this type of coach education leading to changed attitudes and actions in the short-term (i.e., intervention effects) or long-term (i.e., durable effects)? Such research would be useful in helping determine the coach education priorities of Canadian high school coaches and their preferred mechanisms for delivering social justice education (e.g., formal training, informal training, mentorship programs, and online programs). Fourth, moving beyond individual attitudes and motives, future research should be conducted to explore the environments in which high school coaches teach and coach, and how these environments (i.e., social support, school culture) work to promote or resist the status quo (i.e., white, Eurocentric, androcentric) in relation to critical consciousness and social justice.

Conclusion


This case study explored the attitudes on social justice of a Canadian high school sport coach. Findings suggested that the coach had a developing critical consciousness, which was underpinned by a reactive approach to addressing social justice issues. A critical analysis informed by the CPYD framework (Gonzalez et al., 2021) led the researchers to frame the results as missed opportunities to engage in social justice advocacy and activism. Moving forward, more research should explore the attitudes of high school sport coaches related to social justice. Furthermore, it is suggested that critical consciousness should be an integral component of coach education and professional development opportunities for physical educators in Canada. Specifically, critical consciousness education for coaches should not only focus on Freirean concepts such as dialogue and group discussion but also educate coaches about systemic injustices that extend beyond acknowledgements of individual privilege. Moving forward, privileged teachers and sport coaches must make better use of their positions to positively influence the next generation of athlete-activists. In conclusion, the study's findings advance research in sport and serve to stimulate discussions about how to integrate social justice initiatives within the high school sport context as a means of having sport play a meaningful role in creating a safer, more inclusive society.

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