



Exploring coaches' experiences and perceptions of a virtual parasport coach mentorship program

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Disability sport
Formal mentorship
e-learning
Coaching

ABSTRACT

Partnering with a provincial coaching association in Canada, we explored the experiences and perceptions of 15 mentor and 29 mentee coaches who participated in a formal virtual parasport coach mentorship program. Data were gathered via focus groups and individual interviews and analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis. Mentor coaches built a virtual relationship through mutual trust and respect and were perceived by their mentees as supportive, motivating, and knowledgeable. Mentee coaches valued conversations with their mentors surrounding disability-specific knowledge that enhanced their coaching efficacy. Coaches highlighted the need for a greater sense of community within parasport and recommended keeping a virtual component of the program to foster accessibility and learning. Findings provide insight into effective mentorship in parasport for researchers, practitioners, and organizations overseeing this important initiative. Our results will contribute to higher quality experiences for Canadian parasport coaches and athletes and work to progress the growth of parasport worldwide.

1. Exploring coaches' experiences and perceptions of a virtual parasport coach mentorship program

Bentzen et al. (2021) conducted a scoping review of academic literature pertaining to parasport coaches. The authors reviewed the literature on parasport coaching from a variety of data bases (e.g., PsycINFO, PubMed) and charted 44 peer-reviewed articles from 1991 to 2019. Among the results, the authors noted that *becoming a parasport coach* was a commonly discussed topic within the literature (e.g., Cregan et al., 2007; Douglas et al., 2018; Lepage et al., 2020; Wareham et al., 2018). One of the first empirical studies in this domain belongs to Cregan and colleagues (2007), who interviewed six parasport swim coaches and found that they all began their careers coaching able-bodied sport and only began coaching parasport when an athlete with a disability began training at their pool. Douglas and colleagues (2018) also interviewed Paralympic head coaches on their career development. Notably, all of their participants identified as having a disability. Despite also having elite experience as parasport athletes, all the coaches had acquired additional coaching knowledge from other sources, including peers, mentors, and formal education opportunities. Taken together, the pathway to parasport coaching is not always intentional, leaving coaches to acquire disability-specific coaching information in various

ways (e.g., informal or formal coach mentorship).

Sports coach mentorship has received increasing attention over the last 25 years in pursuit of enhancing coach learning and development (Bloom et al., 1998; Chambers, 2015; Jones et al., 2009; Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021; Lefebvre et al., 2020). Much of this research was conceptualized around Kram's (1985) mentor role theory which describes effective mentorship as those who provide career-related (e.g., sponsorship, challenging assignments) and psychosocial (e.g., enhanced competence and confidence) outcomes to their mentees in an informal or formal context. Regarding formal settings, Koh and colleagues (2014) developed, implemented, and evaluated a formal mentoring program for novice basketball coaches in Singapore. Among the results, mentees discussed acquiring technical and psychological coaching skills from their mentors, such as athlete psychology, innovative thinking, and time management. Additionally, Banwell and colleagues (2019) explored the experiences and perceptions of mentor and mentee coaches who participated in the *Female Coach Mentorship Program* that was overseen by the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC). The results revealed that mentee coaches acquired professional (e.g., declarative and procedural knowledge) and personal benefits (e.g., psychosocial support) from their mentors that improved their learning and development.

Gagne (1984) categorized human performance and learning into five

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main outcomes that help understand and conceptualize coach learning, development, and application: (1) Intellectual Skills, (2) Verbal Information, (3) Cognitive Strategies, (4) Motor Skills, and (5) Attitudes. More specifically, *intellectual skills*, or procedural knowledge, encompasses the acquisition of concepts, rules, and procedures. In a sport setting, this could reflect a coaches' ability to develop and implement technical drills within practice. *Verbal Information*, or declarative knowledge, refers to one's ability to organize, identify, and recall information and produce meaningful declarations or statements. As a coach, this represents his or her ability to retrieve pertinent coaching information (e.g., understanding the physiological and psychological intersection of cerebral palsy), and confidently state a plan of action (e.g., an athlete may need a certain amount of recovery time after an intensive practice). *Cognitive Strategies* reflect strategic knowledge and the ability to apply declarative and procedural knowledge to various problem-solving tasks. For example, a coach may need to develop "if-then" situations for a playoff period in which the team discusses their game plan when leading versus trailing in points. *Motor Skills* refer to movements that can be learned and refined over time through deliberate repetition, such as a forehand versus backhand serve in table tennis, which can translate into being a sparring partner for their athletes. Finally, *attitudes* encompass internal states that influence our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. For instance, a coach may adopt a person-centered or autonomy-supportive coaching style, which has the potential to influence athlete motivation, satisfaction, and performance. Taken together, Gagne's (1984) five categories help us better understand desired learning outcomes for coaches participating in coach education opportunities, including mentorship.

With an expanded desire to provide mentorship opportunities to sport coaches around the globe, researchers have emphasized the importance for an individualized approach to mentoring to accommodate the complexities and contextual differences in various sport contexts (Jones et al., 2009; Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021; Sawiuk et al., 2018). Considering that parasport coaches have repeatedly called for coach education to provide contextually specific information on disability-specific information (e.g., Lepage et al., 2020), there is a need for mentorship programs to present a unique learning opportunity for this population and avoid a "one size fits all" approach. This desire was echoed by one of the first studies on coach mentorship in parasport by Fairhurst and colleagues (2017) who interviewed six Canadian Paralympic coaches on their mentoring experiences. Coaches reported learning parasport-specific skills during their mentorship, such as highly specialized disability information and training plans, considered this relationship to be their most significant learning experience, and recommended the creation of formal mentoring programs for parasport coaches to acquire in-depth knowledge for coaching athletes with disabilities. Thus, there is theoretical and practical benefit to providing a contextually specific mentorship opportunity in the parasport context.

Due to the restraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, many - if not all - sport programs around the globe were restricted or shut down since March 2020, impacting the utility of in-person gatherings. The use of virtual mentorship programs has been increasing in popularity, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, within various contexts including academia (Speer et al., 2021), mental health (Keeler et al., 2018), and sport (Grant et al., 2020). Within the sport context, Grant and colleagues (2020) interviewed 12 mentee and 12 mentor US lacrosse coaches who participated in an online mentoring program and found that coaches experienced a number of benefits, such as enhanced lacrosse-specific knowledge, confidence, and a sense of fulfillment. Coaches also discussed barriers from the e-mentoring program, including scheduling conflicts with their mentor/mentee or technological difficulties with the online platform. Thus, coaches recommended that future programs provide the participant coaches with flexibility in communication methods (e.g., video chat, text message, email, telephone). Taken together, there have been a small number of formalized mentoring programs for coaches of able-bodied athletes, with the

majority conducted in person, however it has yet to be determined how these findings relate to a parasport program.

With the aim of providing parasport coaches a formalized learning opportunity, a coaching association in Canada created and implemented a virtual parasport coach mentorship program to foster the acquisition of professional knowledge for parasport coaches. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the program was structured to a virtual format. Consequently, the purpose of our study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of mentor and mentee coaches who participated in this formal virtual mentorship program. More specifically, this study was guided by the following research questions: (1) In which ways (if any) did mentee coaches learn and develop on a professional level through their mentoring relationships and/or the mentorship program? (2) How did participant coaches experience and perceive mentorship on a virtual platform? and (3) What recommendations do mentors and mentees have towards future installments of the mentorship program?

2. Methods

2.1. The mentorship program

A large provincial coaching association in Canada developed a year-long parasport coach mentorship program designed to provide mentor and mentee coaches with a formalized professional network to enhance their coaching practices. Mentor and mentee coach pairings were encouraged to meet for a minimum of 30-min per month. The mentorship program was developed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, therefore it had to be adapted to a virtual context from its original in-person purpose. Various adaptations to the program were implemented, such as hosting virtual webinars or workshops as opposed to in-person events. Additionally, based on previous research in e-mentoring and coaching (e.g., Grant et al., 2020), coaches were encouraged to use the communicative method of their choice (e.g., text message, email, video chat, telephone) to promote flexibility and personal choice within the relationship.

In line with the virtual context, the association implemented three assignments, three webinars, and three online workshops designed to provide coaches with structured learning opportunities throughout the program. Assignments were used to foster connection and commitment between mentors and mentees (e.g., developing a learning plan for the season, creating goals, and reflecting on progress). Webinars were provided as opportunities for coaches to network, connect, and learn about parasport-specific information from researchers, practitioners, and leaders in the field, including Canadian Paralympic athletes. Finally, coaches were provided various workshops throughout the program depending on their role as mentor or mentee. Assignments, webinars, and workshops were provided throughout the program and acted as educational opportunities, as well as a chance for mentors and mentees to interact with other coaches in the program and develop a sense of community. For a more detailed description of the mentorship program, please see Table 1.

2.2. Philosophical assumptions

Our research was guided from an interpretivist paradigm using a relativist ontology and a subjectivist/transactional epistemology (Poucher et al., 2020). We felt that a relativist ontology was appropriate for our study as we were not interested in a single truth for how a parasport mentorship program *should* be implemented or one answer for how it could be improved. Instead, we were interested in the multiple realities that existed based on the varying experiences, backgrounds, and perceptions that came from the individual participants. We also considered a subjectivist/transactional epistemology as an appropriate choice for the context of our study as we were interested in having conversational dialogue with coaches surrounding their experiences participating in this program. Thus, it was important to consider all

Table 1
Basic content of the parasport coach mentorship program.

Learning Opportunity	Description	Learning Goals	Organization
Assignment 1: Communication Agreement	Mentees and mentors were asked to develop an agreement on their meetings (frequency, cancellation policy, etc.)	The goal of this assignment was to minimize conflict within the relationship with regards to communication expectations (e.g., length and frequency of the sessions) and methods (e.g., telephone, email, virtual platform).	In line with previous research on formal mentorship (e.g., Banwell et al., 2019), assignments were formally structured and delivered, however informal conversations were encouraged between mentees and mentors to complete assignments together to foster learning and development within the relationship.
Assignment 2: Learning Plan	Mentees and mentors were asked to complete a goal setting task and consider how to create effective goals to meet mentee needs.	The aim of this assignment was to ensure that mentees and mentors were on the same page with regards to coach learning and to set the partnership up for success with clear goals and action plans.	Although not formally tracked by the coaching association, mentees and mentors were encouraged to reflect and debrief on the applicability of the material to their coaching practices after each learning opportunity. Coaches were also encouraged to comment in a group discussion forum to stimulate reflection and community across participants.
Assignment 3: Reflective Assignment	Mentees and mentors were asked to reflect on the parasport coach mentorship program and document their thoughts and recommendations.	The goal of this assignment was to foster reflection of the mentees and mentors with regards to their own learning and development, as well as to acquire perceived strengths, limitations, and recommendations for the program.	Webinars were presented on a live virtual platform. Coaches were strongly encouraged to attend webinars live, however webinars 2 and 3 were recorded for those who were unable to attend at the time of delivery.
Webinar 1: The Full Parasport Picture	60-min interactive webinar led by leading Paralympians and parasport stakeholders to provide mentees and mentors information on participation and equipment.	With an understanding that the parasport context is unique in sport, the goal of this webinar was to provide coaches with a better understanding of participation and equipment considerations for coaches to be mindful of.	
Webinar 2: Quality Disability Sport Participation	60-min interactive webinar led by a leading researcher on quality participation in parasport.	The aim of this workshop was to provide coaches with an enhanced understanding of what quality participation means in the parasport context and to develop a personalized blueprint for creating quality experiences as a parasport coach.	
Webinar 3: Classification	60-min moderated session with Canadian Paralympian about classification in parasport.	To goal of this webinar was to provide coaches with a better understanding and knowledge of the classification system in parasport.	
Workshop 1: NCCP Coaching Athletes with a Disability	45-min NCCP module designed to prepare and educate coaches on coaching athletes with a disability. This workshop was only for coaches who had not previously completed the CAWAD module.	The aim of this workshop was to educate coaches with a foundation of principles to be aware of and implement when coaching athletes with disabilities (e.g., inclusive language).	Workshops were provided on a live virtual platform or completed through module-based learning.
Workshop 2: NCCP Mentorship	For mentors only: One day NCCP workshop designed to prepare individuals for their role as mentors.	The goal of this workshop was to provide mentors with a formal training opportunity to learn effective mentoring principles through behavioural techniques, such as paraphrasing, pacing and leading, and active listening.	
Workshop 3: Transformational Coaching	In this 60-min interactive workshop, coaches were educated on transformational coaching and association behaviours (Turnnidge & Côté, 2017).	Coaches learned about and reflected on transformational coaching behaviours and were given opportunities to reflect, practice, and receive feedback on their use of these behaviours in their own coaching practices.	

Note: Abbreviations: NCCP: National Coaching Certification Program, CAWAD: Coaching Athletes with a Disability. Apart from NCCP workshops/modules, learning opportunities were created by the stakeholders from the coaching organization, leading researchers, or parasport stakeholders. Topics and content for assignments, webinars, and workshops were derived from previous research in coaching and mentorship (e.g., [Banwell et al., 2019](#); [Turnnidge & Côté, 2017](#)).

parties involved in the co-creation of knowledge. The team consisted of a PhD student and supervisor, both with experience conducting research on parasport coaching, as well as two stakeholders from the coaching association. These stakeholders led the creation and dissemination of the mentorship program, whereas the two researchers led the data collection and analysis.

2.3. Participants

Following ethical approval at the authors' university institution, 29 mentee and 15 mentor coaches voluntarily consented to participate in this program. Mentors were required to have a minimum of 10 years' experience as a head coach of a parasport team and mentees were required to have under five years of experience coaching in the parasport context. The participants were asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire during the first month of the mentorship program. Forty-two out of 44 coach participants completed this questionnaire. Among the information provided, 25 coaches identified as female (59.5%) and 17 as male (42.9%), seven coaches reported having a disability themselves (16.7%), 24 coaches identified having a friend or family with a disability (57.1%), and all but five participants had completed the NCCP *Coaching Athletes with a Disability* e-learning module prior to starting the

program (88.1%). Multiple mentee coaches reported having little to no experience coaching athletes with disabilities prior to the start of the program. Full participant demographic information can be found in [Table 2](#).

2.4. Data collection

We used focus group and individual semi-structured interviews to acquire participant experiences and perceptions throughout the program.

2.4.1. Focus groups

Focus groups ([Krueger, 2014](#); [Smith & Sparkes, 2016](#)) were conducted at the mid-point of the program with three purposes in mind: (a) for the *participants* to experience a sense of community with other mentor/mentee coaches in the parasport context, (b) for the *organization* to ensure that mentors and mentees were fulfilling their requirements and to identify any desired changes that could be implemented in the second half of the program, and (c) for us as *researchers* to utilize the information from the focus groups to develop and refine the content of the interview guide for the individual interviews at the end of the program.

Two 120-min focus groups were conducted; one for the mentees and one for the mentors. Five mentors (five male) and six mentees (four female, two male) participated in their focus groups respectively. The focus groups were led by the lead researcher who worked alongside the organizational team to develop semi-structured, open-ended questions to pose to the group. Major questions included: “Describe your experiences working with your apprentice/mentor, including your most memorable experience.”, “What are some of the key things that you learned from your mentor that you plan on implementing into your coaching practice?”, “Please describe an experience with your mentor/mentee that you considered to be positive or beneficial to your own professional development.” and “In what ways (if any) have you experienced challenges or barriers within your mentee/mentor relationship so far?”. The focus groups averaged 123 min in length.

2.4.2. Semi-structured interviews

One-on-one, virtual interviews were conducted at the end of the mentorship program with eight mentors (two female, six male) and eight mentees (six female, two male). A semi-structured, open ended interview guide was created in collaboration with the research and organizational team to acquire information on the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the program, preferences regarding coach learning, as well as recommendations for improvement (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Major questions included: “Describe a typical meeting with your mentor.”, “Describe the topics you typically discussed with your mentors.”, “Reflecting back to your goals and objectives for participating in this program, do you feel that you got the information you were looking for?” and “What recommendations would you provide to the organizers in revising this mentorship program for the next iteration?”. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for the participants to receive a uniform set of questions yet provided the flexibility of

Table 2
Demographic information.

	Mentees		Mentors	
	N	%	N	%
Age				
18-24	5	17.9	1	7.1
25-34	5	17.9	2	14.3
35-44	7	25	3	21.4
45-54	5	17.9	4	28.6
55+	6	21.4	4	28.6
Gender				
Male	9	32.1	8	57.1
Female	19	67.9	6	42.9
Education				
High School	4	14.3	2	14.3
College	18	64.3	9	64.3
Postgraduate	5	17.9	3	21.4
Other/Do not wish to specify	1	3.6	0	0
Do you have a physical disability?				
Yes	5	17.9	2	14.3
No	22	82.1	12	85.7
Friend or family member with a physical disability				
Yes	14	50	10	71.4
No	14	50	3	21.4
Do not wish to specify	0	0	1	7.1
Competitive level of athletes they coach				
Grassroots/Community	2	7.1	2	14.3
Developmental/Competitive	22	78.6	10	71.4
High Performance	3	10.7	2	14.3
Other	1	3.6	0	0
CAWAD completed?				
Yes	26	92.3	11	78.6
No	2	7.1	3	21.4

Note: N = 42 out of possible 44 participants.

discussing relevant topics outside of the guide (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The individual interviews averaged 53.71 min for mentees and 58.37 for mentors.

2.5. Data analysis

Data collected from the focus groups and individual interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2016). Reflexive thematic analyses are commonly used in coaching psychology literature to interpret and understand the lived experiences of the participants and obtain a descriptive account of a particular phenomenon (e.g., Henderson et al., in press). The lead researcher began by reading over the interview transcripts multiple times while taking notes of data pertaining to the research questions. The lead author then engaged in complete coding of the data in which main ideas were identified and labelled with initial codes. The second author acted as a critical friend who challenged, supported, and questioned the lead researcher’s initial thinking and labelling (see McGannon et al., 2021), which led to a richer and more comprehensive interpretation of the data. We further analyzed the data to identify larger patterns and themes within and across the transcripts and devised themes and sub-themes that represented our participant experiences. For example, mentee coaches discussed benefits derived from the program in which individual codes were labelled as “Provided Confidence”, “Provided Knowledge”, “Goal Setting”, and “Varying Disabilities” and then grouped into “Mentee Outcomes” and finally into one of our main themes: “Coach Learning”. After continuous reflection and revisions with the research team, we felt confident with our final set of three themes to portray the experiences and perceptions of our coaches: Building a Virtual Relationship, Coach Learning, and Coach Perceptions.

2.6. Trustworthiness

Supporting our relativist philosophical positioning, we chose a flexible set of characterizing traits (Smith & Caddick, 2012; Smith & McGannon, 2018). First, we made a concerted effort to be *transparent* in our research process by outlining our own experiences and positions within the parasport context (Smith & Caddick, 2012). The organizers were responsible for the design and implementation of the program, whereas the researchers were responsible for understanding the perceptions of the participants involved. We felt it was important for the person leading the data collection to be removed from designing and implementing the program to minimize bias in conducting interviews and for participants to feel comfortable sharing their opinions with a more objective third party. Second, we strove to be *reflexive* throughout the research process by keeping an audit trail, taking journal notes after each interview and focus group, and by using a critical friend to challenge the interpretations and perspectives of the lead author (Smith & McGannon, 2018). These reflexive methods aimed to ensure that we, as authors, were aware of our personal experiences, assumptions, and biases that worked to co-create knowledge and contributed to a rich understanding of the participant experiences. Finally, we attempted to obtain *coherence* by collecting data from multiple perspectives, including both the mentor and mentee coaches, as well as using multiple methods of data collection at various time points throughout the year-long program (focus groups at mid-point, interviews at the end; Smith & Caddick, 2012).

3. Results

Our analysis led to the identification of three overarching themes describing (1) how the virtual mentoring relationship was developed, (2) the learning outcomes that mentees developed, and (3) perceptions of the program, including recommendations, advice, and final remarks. Mentee and mentor quotes from the focus groups and semi-structured interviews are included with a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of

each participant. Identifiable information, including sport type and disability, has also been removed.

3.1. Building a Virtual Relationship

Mentor coaches were asked to reflect on how they actively developed rapport with their mentees. Many mentors noted the importance of building this relationship, which was a process that was developed over time and based on mutual trust and respect:

I mean it's like dating – you can't just rush into something like that. Right, it's true (laughs). You have to take time to know her or him ... Let's talk, let's chat it out, how's everything going, and then it got to the point where it was like what do you do when you're not coaching? What do you do as a person? How's your family, do you have kids, stuff like that. I think when I started bringing that up to them, they were like "Oh he cares about me, about what I'm doing" (Todd, Mentor, Interview).

Any success I've had with coaching involves developing trust and rapport. You just can't come in and say I'm coach [name], trust me ... you build trust in small steps. If you're honest and have some fun they're going to respect and trust you. I just approached them as I would with any human being who I respect (Jim, Mentor, Interview).

In most cases, at the beginning of the program, mentors and mentees decided on the frequency, length, and communication method of meetings, with many pairs meeting weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly for 30–60 min through a virtual platform (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams) or by telephone. Multiple mentor coaches highlighted the importance of being able to see their mentee's faces, almost simulating an in-person face-to-face conversation, to build a connection:

I want to see their facial reactions because if I say to somebody "have you tried this", I want to see the reaction. The eyes tell the truth ... They're going to tell you pretty quickly if I'm on the right track or not (Jim, Mentor, Focus Group).

Taken together, mentor coaches used varying methods to build a strong, relational connection with their mentees in hopes of developing trust and respect, which ultimately led to a number of learning outcomes for the mentee coaches over time.

3.2. Coach Learning

With the overarching aim of the program to develop and train incoming or inexperienced mentee parasport coaches, a significant amount of time was spent discussing learning outcomes derived from the program and their mentoring relationships. Thus, coach learning will be described in more detail below using three of Gagne's (1984) learning outcomes: attitudes, intellectual skills, and cognitive strategies.

3.2.1. Attitudes

Throughout the mentorship program, mentor coaches actively shaped the mentee's ability to stay motivated and positive throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Many coaches highlighted how interacting with their mentors worked to enhance their feelings of passion and excitement for when they could return to coaching:

He's really helped point me in the right direction and get me really excited about the potential to coach in the future. I'm very grateful and he has offered himself to continue chatting with me, meeting with me, any questions. We've developed quite a relationship (Yvonne, Mentee, Interview).

Mentoring through the pandemic was a particularly unique and critical component of the relationship as providing mentees with motivation was challenging due to the government-imposed restrictions and lack of coaching opportunities. This often left mentee coaches feeling

like they had no chances to apply what they were learning in the field. Mentee coach Eric explained:

That's the piece that I've missed. It's one thing to watch a movie and it's another to appear in it. You don't get to fail and learn from those failures. I've got all this stuff written down but I haven't been able to actually kind of get out of the classroom.

To combat this challenge in motivation, mentors strove to provide support to their mentees, both on a psychosocial and tangible level. Psychosocially, it was clear that being a supportive mentor who was willing to listen and genuinely care for their mentees was valuable from the perspective of both mentors and mentees. Mentor coach Tom explained: "For me, [an effective mentor is] somebody who's willing to listen or to be there no matter what the question you're talking about is". A similar sentiment was shared by Mentee Eric:

The nice thing about a good mentor is they're actually interested in helping you. They're not just doing it because they have community hours to fulfill, but they actually want to pass on some knowledge. They want to see you succeed in helping athletes.

Coaches also highlighted receiving or providing support on a practical level through tangible resources, such as training plans and parasport contacts:

I think I would have had a lot of problems if I wanted to start [a parasport program prior to this mentorship program]. I wouldn't have known where to start. But going through this whole program, it's really helped me to understand "this is what I need to do" and get the resources needed. I've learned a lot, it's been so good! (Janet, Mentee, Interview).

As a result, the mentor's ability to motivate and provide support to their mentee coaches proved to be an important aspect of mentoring within the COVID-19 pandemic and allowed them to visualize a positive, efficacious future in coaching.

3.2.2. Intellectual Skills

Due to their lack of experience coaching in the parasport context, many mentees described feeling unsure or unprepared to coach athletes with disabilities. In conjunction with the learning opportunities offered through the program (e.g., disability-specific webinars and workshops, see Table 1), mentor coaches actively worked to enhance their mentee's parasport coaching efficacy. For example, one participant had in-depth conversations with his mentor about how to address disability with his athletes and explained:

He told me three little tips. First, ask if the athletes need help before assuming it. Second, you generally would click heels when you meet an athlete with no arms. And third, be absolutely blunt with your athletes and ask them "how do you make this work for yourself?" I found those three things helped me understand how to connect (Eric, Mentee, Focus Group).

Other mentees described how they learned about appropriate disability terminology to use when discussing parasport or coaching athletes with disabilities:

I always thought that it's so important for everyone to be treated equal, no matter if they have a disability or not. But now with everything, with all these webinars and courses I've done, I think so much differently now. So my word is now inclusive like "you're not being inclusive". And he also advised me [of] certain terms we should not be using, so we have to be more careful in the choice of word (Erin, Mentee, Interview).

Mentee coach Mackenzie described learning about functional ability and disability from her mentor who had a disability himself:

I learned a little bit more about classifications of athletes. I figured if you broke your neck at the shoulder blades, from there downward you will be paralyzed – but that's not true. You could be paralyzed

but still have function down your arms so it was a learning curve for me because [my mentor] jumps up and down on his chair like there's no problem, but he has no core body strength (Mackenzie, Mentee, Interview).

Thus, mentee coaches were interested in the disability side of coaching parasport, many with questions related to changing their coaching behaviours based on the needs of the athletes. Although mentees considered these conversations to be valuable towards an enhanced understanding of disability-specific knowledge, they still noted that more specialized and practical training was needed to fully feel confident and comfortable coaching athletes with disabilities. Mentee Cassidy reflected on this point:

Researcher: How do you feel after one year now, how is your comfort level in coaching parasport? Cassidy: It's probably sixty percent. Researcher: What did it start with? Cassidy: Oh, probably about ten percent [laughing]. Yeah, so it's been a big improvement ... The people were so enthusiastic [letting me] know that it's okay if you don't know everything, everybody's learning. I think that was really helpful.

As a result, mentee coaches described how the program played a role in enhancing their feelings of efficacy to coach athletes with disabilities, yet still desired a more hands-on and practical mentoring experience to fully acquire this confidence.

3.3. Cognitive Strategies

Finally, mentors discussed ways in which they set up their mentoring sessions to foster mentee coach learning. Some mentors took on a leadership role in which they developed hypothetical scenarios for mentees to reflect upon, brainstorm, and discuss with their mentors to acquire practical or applied experience.

I would impose open scenarios where I would give them 5–10 minutes to come back with their answers. I said you're an assistant coach and you have been assigned to Mary who's the head coach on an intellectually challenged team. One girl has joined the team who is being aggressive and during the practice and she throws a basketball at one of the other players. So, how would you handle it? What three steps would you take to rectify this or do you think it needs to be rectified? (Jim, Mentor, Interview).

The great thing about [mentor coach] is that every meeting was different. It first started with a regular discussion ... and then we got into scenarios, and I think that really helped. Coming up with a scenario that would probably happen while you're coaching. What if an athlete gets injured, what would you do? (Karen, Mentee, Interview).

To foster autonomy-support, mentors also adopted case study approaches that placed the responsibility of topics and content in the hands of the mentee. For example, Mentor Janet explained:

When we first were getting into it, [my mentee] chose a disability of the week. Each week, she would research a different disability and come with questions, "how would you adapt for this?" or "how would you approach that?". We also did some case studies, which was useful. She was really interested in leadership development skills and how you work your way up as a coach.

Thus, hypothetical case study approaches were an effective method of developing cognitive strategies for their mentee coaches, allowed for a more hands-on approach to coach learning despite the virtual restrictions, and in some cases, provided the mentees choice in their learning.

3.4. Coach Perceptions

The last theme represented mentee and mentor perceptions of the program, including recommendations for the organizational stakeholders, advice for incoming mentee and mentor coaches, as well as final remarks on the program.

3.4.1. Recommendations to the organizational stakeholders

Although many mentee and mentor coaches described a strong and meaningful connection within their mentoring relationships, one recommendation that was discussed among the participants was the desire for a stronger community between other participant coaches in the program: "I would have loved to hear from the other mentors. I don't think I even know the names of everyone in the program and I definitely think there could have been more inclusivity with everyone in the program" (Karen, Mentee, Interview). In fact, participants highlighted enjoying the focus group sessions as a way to connect with and interact with other participant coaches. From our individual interviews, it appeared that many mentor coaches developed a sense of confidence in their role as a mentor from the focus group session by acquiring validation from other coaches who were experiencing the program similarly to them. Mentor coach Bill explained:

I know this gathering [the focus group] is very beneficial to me hearing about what the other coaches are doing. It validates some of the things I think I'm doing right ... at least there's that gauge to say, "oh okay I think I'm on the right track". I think the mentees might need that as well. When they start to see other mentees gain the same, or have the same type of experiences, or some similarities, then I think it would also validate why they're in that program.

Thus, coaches valued these meetings to connect, network, and share experiences, as well as acquire confidence and validation in their practices. Another recommendation discussed by mentee coaches in the focus groups was to continue providing an option for virtual connection and learning. For example, Mentee Nicole and Mentee Eric highlighted that participation in the program may not always be possible without the virtual component due to accessibility or geographic concerns:

Mentee Nicole: I don't think the mentorship would have been possible without [the virtual component]. I'm from a small community and I don't drive. I have [insert disability] so my only transportation would have been on the train. Had it not been for the pandemic and [the] lockdown and this environment we have right now, I probably wouldn't have been included.

Mentee Eric: I actually think the online piece is invaluable because it greatly opens up your capacity to meet with people who aren't geographically able to work with you.

Taken together, although the participants were desiring a human connection, they also highlighted the benefits of learning online to maximize the accessibility of the program.

3.4.2. Advice to future mentors/mentees

As the final question of the individual interviews, each participant was asked to give advice to an incoming mentee or mentor (depending on their role) for the next iteration of the mentorship program. Based on their experiences with their own mentoring relationships, mentor coaches advised incoming mentors to follow their mentee's lead, know their own skillset, to research varying disabilities, and to understand their mentee's goals:

Follow the lead of the mentee. That's what worked well for me. I found that it was successful when [mentee name] would bring something up and then I could say "well what about this?" or "well why don't we look at a case study?" or "how would you approach this?" It's following their lead and knowing where you can slide yourself in to help (Janet, Mentor, Interview).

I think the mentors need to make an effort to research some of the disabilities that they're not familiar with – in particular the congenital ones, the acquired ones are pretty standard, but the congenital ones, not so much (Sharon, Mentor, Interview).

Mentee coaches advised incoming mentees to ask questions, be adaptable, trust your mentor, be willing to learn, be patient, and have a concrete goal coming into the program:

Don't be afraid to ask questions, you're there to learn as a coach, to improve your coaching, to educate yourself. Mentors are there to help you, to assist you, so you can further your coaching (Erin, Mentee, Interview).

Have an open mind, listen, and hear what that person has to say. I'm that type of person, I am a digger, I dig for information. I think just be open minded with everything and feel the excitement and passion that your mentor has (Yvonne, Mentee, Interview).

3.4.3. Final remarks

Overall, there was an overwhelming sense of positivity at the end of the mentorship program, with many asking to be involved in the following year's program. Mentees were particularly grateful for their mentor's knowledge and commitment to helping them grow as a coach and valued the process on a personal and professional level:

The mentorship piece was absolutely critical for me because I had a fantastic mentor but other than that [pause], I was super grateful that I got the opportunity. I definitely am not walking away empty-handed. I've got way more tools now, way more experiences, way more thoughts. So yeah ... super grateful (Eric, Mentee, Interview).

Mentorship programs are so important and I don't understand why every coach doesn't take advantage. It's there to be had, it's valuable experience to go through and I think it adds so much more to you personally (Yvonne, Mentee, Interview).

Mentors echoed these sentiments highlighting the need to continue formal mentorship programs in parasport to continue the development and connection of parasport coaches over the years:

I think [mentorship] is a gap in our system. I think this is where we need to grow the most ... because what mentorship does is take the mentee from the science of coaching to the art of coaching... Part of the reason why I mentor is because I was taught to give back by my mentors. They freely gave to me and the only way I can thank them is to do that to somebody else. That builds a whole system where we save the knowledge that is being generated (Chris, Mentor, Interview).

I have nothing but positive thoughts; everybody has been excellent. ... it was wonderful. Just think a big thank you to all of you has to go out. I've learned a lot, gained confidence, and was able to hopefully enlighten others (Tom, Mentor, Interview).

4. Discussion

This study explored the experiences and perceptions of mentor and mentee coaches participating in a formal virtual parasport coach mentorship program. Mentor coaches were characterized as supportive, motivating, and knowledgeable. Mentee coaches particularly valued conversations with their mentors surrounding disability-specific coaching information that helped to enhance their coaching efficacy. Mentor and mentee coaches highlighted their desire for a greater sense of connection and community among members of the mentorship program and recommended that organizers continue offering a virtual component for coaches living in varying geographic locations as a way for coaches to connect with each other and continue learning their craft. Our discussion will expand on unique aspects of parasport including how to: include disability-specific information in coach education, use

mentorship and peer learning as a tool for enhancing confidence and validation for parasport coaches, and target and tailor mentorship programs to the specific needs of the population.

4.1. Mentee learning and parasport coach education

Our findings suggested that participation in the mentorship program led to mentee coach learning with regards to their attitudes, intellectual skills (procedural knowledge), and cognitive strategies (cf. Gagne, 1984). For instance, to enhance cognitive strategies of mentees, some mentors implemented case study approaches to learning in which a hypothetical situation was presented, and mentee coaches were responsible for brainstorming or discussing methods of problem-solving (e.g., how to coach athletes with varying disabilities). Although case studies have been considered a valuable tool for coach learning (Eastman, 2016), parasport coach education researchers have cautioned the use of hypothetical learning scenarios focusing on a single disability type, such as intellectual disabilities, in fear of perpetuating categorical overrepresentations or stereotypes about athletes with disabilities (Townsend et al., 2018). For example, Townsend and colleagues (2018) examined the influence of a disability-specific education program for coaches of athletes with autism who used scenario-based learning and found that coaches adopted a "one size fits all" approach to coaching (e.g., "Autistic individuals hate noise", p. 357) that emphasized fixing the athlete or the problem of the disability. Thus, it is important for mentors to carefully craft their messages surrounding disability – in this case, provide their mentees with disability-specific information without relaying the message that every athlete with a disability will fit into a universal category of coaching. It is also important for coaches to critically consider the potential impact of using hypothetical scenarios for coach learning and be cognizant of avoiding overgeneralizations of disability types. Instead, coaches are encouraged to shift their focus onto the knowledge, strategies, and behaviours of the coach and his or her role in creating an inclusive environment for all athletes (Thurston et al., in press). Taken together, it is undeniable that disability-specific information has been consistently valued and desired from the parasport community, both from the perspectives of coaches (Fairhurst et al., 2017) and athletes (Alexander et al., 2020). While we believe this information should be offered within parasport coach learning opportunities, including formal mentoring programs, it is equally important for coaches to understand how a focus on categorical disability types can limit their ability to individualize and innovate their approaches for each athlete.

4.2. Mentorship as a source for community and validation

Our findings demonstrated that mentor coaches acquired a sense of validation from their peers in the focus groups with regards to how they were experiencing the program. Coaches appreciated hearing and speaking with other like-minded coaches in this small group meeting, and since it was only held at one time-point, coaches desired a greater sense of community among members of the program outside their mentoring relationship. This finding is consistent with previous coaching research in which coaches seek communities of practice to facilitate learning and development (Bloom, 2013; Culver & Trudel, 2008), which has recently been highlighted within the parasport coaching literature as a method of enhancing confidence and knowledge (Duarte et al., 2021; Lepage et al., 2020). For example, Duarte and colleagues (2021) assessed the value of a virtual social learning intervention in which 16 wheelchair curling coaches (with varying coaching experience), six wheelchair curling technical leaders (e.g., high-performance directors, team managers) and three researchers engaged in online group meetings to foster connection and knowledge sharing. Among their findings, coaches reported enhanced feelings of inclusion despite their geographic distances, faster access to knowledgeable peers to answer questions, and greater confidence to join conversations with their more experienced

peers. Consistent with our study and recent coach mentorship programs in able-bodied sport (Grant et al., 2020), the community of practice developed and implemented by Duarte and colleagues (2021) was built on a virtual platform. The virtual component of our program led to contrasting feelings of connection: on one hand, leading to enhanced feelings of isolation and lack of in-person connection as found by Callary et al., 2020, yet also leading to enhanced networking among coaches in varying geographic locations (Lepage et al., 2020). These contrasting feelings indicate that there is not one “best approach” to coach learning in the parasport context. Rather, we believe in supporting a diverse array of coach learning opportunities, including one-on-one mentorship in both the virtual and face-to-face context as well as group-based communities of practice to provide coaches with diverse and empirically supported learning initiatives.

4.3. Greater attention on marginalized populations

Mentor coaches talked about the professional obligation and sense of stewardship they felt to grow parasport by disseminating knowledge to inexperienced coaches through mentorship. This sense of personal responsibility to disseminate knowledge appears to be indicative of the lack of formal education opportunities historically available for parasport coaches (Fairhurst et al., 2017). To date, there are four coach education courses in the NCCP designed specifically for parasport, including goalball, wheelchair basketball, wheelchair rugby, and bocia, and two courses for coaching athletes with intellectual disabilities through the Special Olympics (CAC, 2021a). This is concerning when you consider there are currently 22 summer and six winter Paralympic sports (International Paralympic Committee, 2021). As such, coach education through the NCCP is currently unavailable for the large majority of parasports. Further, Konoval and colleagues (2020) reviewed the NCCP and found that only 7% of materials covered content on coaching athletes with disabilities and recommended a greater focus on interpersonal (e.g., communication and pedagogy) and intrapersonal (e.g., addressing biases and assumptions) coaching knowledge, as well as information specific to disability-inclusion, such as guidance on disability types, equipment, and considerations for accessibility. This discrepancy in parasport coach education is consistent across the globe, as countries such as the USA, Australia, and the UK offer diverse opportunities, such as one-time educational opportunities in a handful of disability sports (Culver et al., 2020). These inconsistencies limit the global progression of parasport and highlight how parasport may share similarities with other marginalized communities in sport, including, but not limited to racial, gender, and sexual minorities. With an understanding of the challenges that minority sport populations have faced compared to mainstream sport (Alexander et al., 2020; Joseph & McKenzie, in press; LaVoi et al., 2019), the CAC has recently implemented a variety of diverse mentorship resources for coaches and/or athletes identifying as LGTBQ, Indigenous, Black, and female to provide support and resources for marginalized communities within sport (CAC, 2021b). Although there remains work to be done, this increased attention to creating contextualized programs and resources is promising for advancing the development of sport and coach learning for minority populations, such as parasport.

5. Recommendations and conclusions

The results of this study provide a number of practical recommendations that are significant to the parasport community. Even though almost all of our mentee coaches completed the *Coaching Athletes with a Disability* e-learning module prior to the onset of the program, they still lacked confidence and knowledge to coach in this unique setting. Thus, parasport coaching federations are encouraged to provide novice coaches with foundational knowledge on disability and parasport, through structured learning opportunities (i.e., webinars delivered by parasport community members or disability specialists; Fairhurst et al.,

2017), communities of practice, and formal or informal mentoring relationships. There is a need for mentor coaches to be trained on empirically based mentorship principles (e.g., Kram, 1985) to facilitate career and psychosocial outcomes for their mentees as well as *how* to engage in effective mentorship through interpersonal connection. Narrative-collaborative coaching (see Milistedt et al., 2018) is an interesting avenue in peer-to-peer coaching as it presents mentor coaches as co-constructors of knowledge, reflection, and understanding in the mentorship dialogue. Thus, parasport coach mentorship programs should consider implementing narrative-collaborative coaching principles within formal mentor training. With regards to the program itself, the virtual platform led some coaches to feel underwhelmed with the experience and desired an in-person connection, whereas other coaches appreciated the accessibility of online learning and recommended this to continue in future iterations of the mentorship program. On a practical level, mentorship programs can benefit from understanding these various viewpoints collected from coaches who participated in one of the first formal mentorship programs designed for the parasport context. Continued implementation of formal mentoring programs will allow researchers and organizations the opportunity to better understand the diverse viewpoints that mentee and mentor coaches raised in our study (e.g., virtual versus in-person) to ultimately implement a coach learning opportunity that best serves the needs of this population.

Although this study has a number of strengths, including a partnership with a coaching association as well as multiple methods and time points for data collection, this research is not without limitations. For example, the formal mentorship program was originally designed for an in-person environment, however due to COVID-19, had to be adapted to a virtual context and many coaches were unable to coach in-person at the time of the data acquisition. Thus, follow-up data from this cohort of participants would be ideal to understand how coaches have incorporated the information learned from this program into their own long-term coaching practices. Additional methods of data collection and research designs would also be valuable, such as quantitative measures of learning outcomes and designs targeting the perspectives of athletes or coach dyads to better understand how mentorship influences the personal and professional development of parasport athletes. Finally, this research was conducted in the Canadian context, a country with a strong parasport tradition, therefore future researchers should work to expand our understanding of parasport coach education to countries around the globe with different cultural or contextual factors to consider.

In conclusion, we believe our study was the first to explore the experiences and perceptions of mentee and mentor parasport coaches participating in a year-long formal mentorship program. The continued implementation of this program has the potential to influence parasport progression on an individual (i.e., enhancing coach knowledge and confidence), interpersonal (i.e., increasing coaching networks and community), organizational (i.e., coaches starting parasport programs within their sport organizations) and sociocultural level (i.e., dismantling stereotypes of disability and parasport through advocacy and awareness; see Banwell et al., 2021). It is also hoped that this initial program will encourage researchers and community partners to continue working together to create the ideal parasport environment.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities

Research Council of Canada, Fonds de Recherche du Quebec en Société et Culture, and the Coaches Association of Ontario.

The authors would like to thank the Associate Editor and Reviewers for their helpful suggestions on previous drafts of this manuscript.

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