Using mentors to facilitate the delivery of a longitudinal coping intervention amongst national junior netball players

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Abstract

This study evaluates the utility of mentors in facilitating a longitudinal intervention designed to enhance the coping skills of junior national netball players (mentees). Mentors used information packs to develop five coping competencies amongst mentees including: planning and organization; goal setting; emotional intelligence; problem solving and communication. On completion of the intervention, semi-structured interviews were completed with eight mentees and eight mentors to ascertain their experiences with Mentoring. Results identified factors that helped and hindered mentoring during the five stages of Kram's (1983) behavioral model of mentoring. These included the interpersonal skills and roles adopted by mentor and mentee and opportunities for mentoring. These findings are discussed with the objective of better understanding the role of mentors in implementing coping interventions. To conclude, practical suggestions are offered in order to increase accessibility to mentors and enhance the mentor experience.

Keywords: Coping interventions, mentoring, adolescence, social support

Introduction

Aspiring adolescent athletes are susceptible to experiencing a multitude of potential stressors including sport, academic, social and developmental issues. Devonport (2006) found that national junior netball players used a range of coping strategies to manage such stressors, although all players reported experiencing an inability to cope with the combined demands of academic study, sport, and socio-developmental stressors. When exploring interventions intended to help adolescents manage stress, previous research advocates the provision of a supportive environment (Baker, 2001). It is suggested that this helps develop an individual's self-efficacy perceptions regarding their ability to deal with stress (Zeidner, 1990). Individuals who have highly efficacious beliefs in coping skills are more likely to approach problems with the aim of solving them, rather than avoiding them, clearly a desirable outcome in any coping intervention (Frydenberg & Lewis, 2002). Social support is particularly important for younger athletes whose coping skills may be underdeveloped due to their stage of psychosocial development (Aldwin, 1994; Frydenberg & Lewis, 2002). In such instances social support is of value because it may provide a more positive inter-personal environment and may act as a buffer against stress (Anshel & Delany, 2001; Piko, 2001).

In order to establish a supportive environment for coping skills development, mentors were provided for the duration of the 12-month coping intervention. Mentoring has been described as a one-to-one developmental relationship where the mentor and mentee work together to establish goals, driven by the needs of the mentee (Linney, 1999). Hon and Shorr (1998) suggest that the mentoring is based on the idea that all individuals need three attributes to facilitate personal development namely clear goals, someone who believes in them and can help them, and determination. When considering the characteristics of effective mentors, attributes identified in the literature to date include: good listener, non-judgmental, understanding, approachable, knowledge of issues/ experience, adaptable/flexible, encouraging, supportive, empathetic, good communication skills, patient, able to inspire/motivate, and being trustworthy (Brad-Johnson, 2002; Clark, Harden, & Johnson, 2000; Cull, 2006). Regarding the age of mentors, it appears adolescents prefer to confer with trusted adults when discussing sensitive issues, important decisions, or future goals (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, et al., 1993). When exploring the attributes of successful mentees, Starcevich and Friend (1999) found they were proactive in maintaining the mentoring relationship, listened, acted on advice, demonstrated a commitment to learn and develop, were open to feedback and criticism and also open-minded and willing to change.

To date no published research has explored relationships between mentoring and coping, with little research exploring the use of mentors with athletes (Bloom, Bush, & Schinke, et al., 1998), despite evidence suggesting that athletes might be a group where mentoring might be helpful (Devonport, 2006). There are also few empirical studies that have pursued an understanding of those factors that optimize mentoring relationships (Hezlett & Gibson, 2005).

A number of benefits resulting from mentoring have been identified in contexts such as the workplace, community and school settings (Brad-Johnson, 2002; Clark et al., 2000). These indicate its suitability in developing a supportive environment, facilitating goal identification and achievement, and facilitating learning (Megginson & Clutterbuck, 1995; Parsloe, 1992). It was anticipated that these outcomes previously identified in the mentoring literature, would be of value in the present study by assisting the development, generalization and habituation of enhanced coping behaviors.

The purpose of the present study was to explore the role of mentoring in developing coping competencies, identifying factors that impact upon the mentor-mentee dynamic.

Method

Design

Approval for this study was attained from the authors' University ethics committee and England Netball. Participants signed informed consent forms for participation in the coping intervention, and the collection and subsequent use of all qualitative data. Where participants were under the age of sixteen, parental consent was also required. No incentives for participation were offered.

The purpose of a mentor was to guide mentees through activities presented in six coping packs. Mentees were given the option to self select their own mentor, or have one identified for them. Once mentors were identified, approval was subject to a Criminal Records Bureau check and a statement of consent regarding the use of the mentor by the mentees parents/guardians and England Netball.

Approved mentors were invited to attend a mentor training day intended to help prepare them for their role, and provide an opportunity to ask questions and meet fellow mentors. At the start of the training day each mentor was provided with six mentor packs that they would utilize over the next 12 months. Pack one provided guidelines for setting up a mentor agreement whilst the remaining five packs focused on the development of five coping, or coping related constructs. These included 1) Planning and Time Management; 2) Goal Setting; 3) Emotional Intelligence; 4) Problem Solving and 5) Communication. For each pack, there was a discussion of its aims and objectives, and mentoring scenarios were explored so examples of good mentoring practice could be identified.

In providing a remit for the roles and responsibility of the mentors, mentors were empowered with skills for managing the change process and the development of coping, as opposed to exclusively passing on knowledge and providing solutions (Galvin, 1998). The mentor was to offer encouragement, motivation and advice to help maintain the self-efficacy of mentees whilst undergoing a process of behavioral change. This would require personal virtues such as being; trustworthy, approachable, non-judgmental, and through abilities such as questioning techniques and provision of useful feedback.

Kram's (1983) behavioral model of mentoring was used as a framework for establishing the expectations of mentoring. This model identifies a number of phases that the mentoring process undergoes.
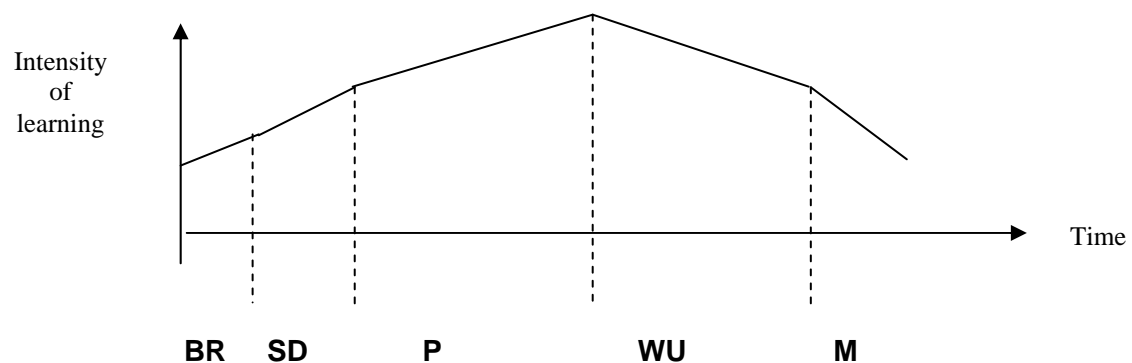

Figure 1: Adaptation of Kram's (1983) behavioral model of mentoring

1. Building Rapport (BR): The initial phase where the mentor and mentee explore similarities and differences, clarify expectations and negotiate how their relationship will progress.
2. Setting Direction (SD): In this phase goals and objectives are established and the relationship is given purpose and meaning.
3. Progression (P): The main phase of the mentoring relationship and where most of the learning and development is achieved. The skills of the mentor in supporting, challenging, encouraging and enabling are considered crucial to the success of this phase.
4. Winding Up (WU): It is important to review the mentoring relationship regularly and determine when to end the partnership.

5. Moving On (M): The mentoring relationship either ceases or is redefined e.g. becomes a 'professional friendship'. This signals the end of the formal mentoring process.

Pack one was intended to address the first and second stages of the mentoring process, those of building rapport and setting direction. Packs two-to-six focused on the progression stage whereby coping competencies were subject to review and development. Finally, as the formal mentoring relationship was intended to discontinue after a twelve-month period, mentor and mentee were encouraged to discuss winding up and moving on the mentoring relationship as the twelfth month approached. It was left to the discretion of those involved as to whether they intended to continue the mentoring partnership or redefine their relationship.

Study population

Forty junior national netball players from the under-seventeen and under-nineteen national development programme were invited to partake in the present study. Of this group, twelve individuals volunteered thereby becoming mentees. The mentees collectively identified thirteen volunteer mentors who would facilitate the coping intervention. Further details regarding mentors and mentees can be found in Tables 1 and 2. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of all participants and named individuals. On completion of the 12-month coping intervention, eleven mentors and all twelve mentees were contacted by e-mail and/ or postal correspondence. Two mentors were not contacted regarding the possibility of a post intervention interview due to ill health or non involvement with the programme.

Eight mentees offered consent for post intervention interviews, and all had completed at least fifty percent of coping intervention activities (see Table 1). Eight mentors also provided consent for a post intervention interview, of these six had maintained frequent contact with their mentee for the full duration of the coping intervention. Those individuals completing post intervention interviews are highlighted in **bold** on Table 1 and 2 for ease of identification.

Measures

Qualitative data - Qualitative data were collected throughout the duration of the coping intervention using a range of methods. Firstly, mentees and mentors were asked to submit a monthly diary. This asked mentees to reflect on the coping skill addressed over the last month, the mentoring relationship, and any other aspect of the coping intervention they wished to comment on. Mentors were asked to reflect on the same issues, and also reflect on any developments in their skills as a mentor.

Telephone and/or e-mail contact with mentees and mentors was maintained every two-to-three months during the coping intervention. The purpose of this correspondence was to offer support, provide an opportunity for questions, and monitor progress. A summary of telephone conversations was kept, and all e-mail correspondence was retained to document the experiences of mentees and mentors with the coping intervention. Unless otherwise specified, the qualitative data presented herein is derived from post intervention interviews.

Table 1: Participant Details: Mentees in the coping intervention

Mentee	Talent squad status	Age*	Mentor	Packs completed with mentee
Theela	Initially active member of under-nineteen (U19) Talent squad. Withdrew December 2004.	18	Danny	No packs completed
Beverley	Active member of U17 squad	16	Hazel	No packs completed
Janet	Active member of U17 squad	16	Denise	No packs completed
Jayne	Active member of U17 squad	16	Tracey	Pack 1 – Setting up the Coping intervention Pack 2 – Planning and time management Pack 3 – Goal setting Pack 4 – Emotional intelligence Pack 5 – Problem solving Pack 6 – Communication
Collette	Active member of U17 squad	16	Christy	Informed some packs completed but unable to verify
Ellis	Active member of U19 squad	18	Jasmine	Pack 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.
Tara	Active member of U17 squad	16	Katrina	Pack 1, 2, and 3.
			Kelly	No packs completed with Kelly
Simone	Active member of U17 squad	16	Wendy	Pack 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.
Jodie	Active member of U17 squad	16	Helen	Pack 1, 2, 3, and 4.
Mia	Active member of U17 squad	15	Paula	Pack 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.
Tamsin	Initially active member of U17 squad	15	Sarah	Pack 1, 2, and 3.
Kate	Active member of U17 squad	15	Gemma	Pack 1, 2, 3, and 5.

*Age at the start of the Coping intervention – May 2004.

Table 2: Participant Details: Mentors in the coping intervention

Mentor	Relationship with mentee	Vocation	Netball/sporting experience
Danny	Unknown. Did not initiate the Coping intervention with Theela.	Unknown	Unknown
Jasmine	Coached at Ellis's netball club, and also played for the senior squad.	Insurance sales	Was a senior county netball player.
Tracey	Was Jayne's Physical Education (PE) teacher for the first two months of the Coping intervention. Thereafter, she taught at a different school.	PE teacher	Unknown
Katrina	Was the first mentor for Tara and also her PE teacher. Ill health forced her to cease the mentor role in September 2004.	PE teacher	An ex-international athlete (athletics).
Kelly	The replacement mentor for Tara and also her netball coach.	Kelly worked for an insurance company.	Kelly was a netball coach.
Wendy	Played netball at the same club as Simone.	University lecturer	Played club netball
Hazel	Taught Beverley biology at school	Biology teacher	Self-professed no sporting interests

Denise	The national U17 coach netball coach for Janet.	Primary School teacher	U17 national netball coach.
Helen	Played for the same county squad as Jodie.	Bank Clerk	Played county netball and an ex- member of the under nineteen Talent squad.
Christy	Unknown: No returned correspondence from player or mentor.	Unknown	Unknown
Paula	Was Mia's PE teacher.	PE teacher	Played club netball.
Sarah	Was the half sister of Tamsin.	University student (Psychology undergraduate)	Ex-member of the Talent 1 and 2 netball squads.
Gemma	Was Kate's PE teacher.	PE teacher	Netball coach.

Interview procedure - Participants were widely distributed across England, and given their expressed comfort in engaging in telephone correspondence, a decision was made to complete telephone interviews following completion of the coping intervention. Wilson, Roe and Wright (1998) compared the effectiveness of face-to-face and telephone interviews concluding that the response rate and quality of responses was comparable. In light of this information, it was determined that the use of telephone interviews would not detract from the quality of data collected.

Sixteen individual interviews were completed exploring the experiences of mentees and mentors with the coping intervention. All participants were provided with information regarding the nature and purpose of the semi-structured interview. This included the interview rationale, the use of interview data, issues of confidentiality, topics to be discussed, and procedures for tape recording and transcribing the interview. The interview explored issues such as skills linked to effective mentoring; changes resulting from completion of the coping intervention and recommendations intended to enhance the coping intervention and mentoring. Open questions such as 'What were your experiences during and following completion of the planning and organization pack?' and 'What do you believe are the skills that help a mentor to be effective?' were followed by clarification and elaboration probes. At the end of the interview, participants were asked whether there was anything else they could tell the interviewer concerning their experiences with the coping intervention and mentoring. All interviews were recorded and ranged from 25 to 75 minutes in duration.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim resulting in 132 pages of single-spaced text. In order to check the interview transcripts for accuracy of representation and content, all participants were provided with a copy of their interview transcripts and could add, omit or change comments as necessary. Whilst no omissions were made, one participant added further information. QSR NVivo-2 (2002) was used to complete inductive coding, quotes were extracted from the interviews and categorized into raw themes that represented a meaningful point.

Results and Discussion

The results are described by presenting each stage of the mentoring process as proposed by Kram (1983). Those factors influencing the success of each stage along with its contribution to the development of coping competencies are explored. In line with the recommendations of Bryman

(1988), extended extracts of qualitative data are presented allowing the reader to form their own ideas based on the views expressed by participants.

1. Building rapport and 2. Setting direction

During these two stages, mentor and mentee decided whether to work together, clarified expectations, negotiated how their relationship would progress and established goals and objectives for mentoring. The following discussion will address those factors that impacted upon the decision making processes involved in these two stages.

When identifying a mentor, mentees were given the choice of self-selected or assigned mentors (Fagenson-Eland, Marks, & Amendola, 1997). All mentees opted for self-selection explaining that the criteria used for selecting a mentor were subjectively determined, for example, working with a mentor they liked and felt comfortable approaching. With one exception mentees chose a mentor who possessed an interest in sport. Ellis (mentee) explained, "*I picked Jasmine 'cause I knew she's somebody whose more experienced and somebody who's involved in all types of netball generally …so she kind of understands the commitments I have rather than having to learn all about it*". By contrast, Hazel (mentor) perceived her lack of interest in sport to be a barrier in developing an effective mentor-mentee relationship. She explained, "*I'm not remotely athletic, or interested in sport in any way, and I just wonder if it might be more helpful getting a Physical Education teacher who has kind of been through similar things to what Beverley's* (mentee) *going through*". Each mentee chose an individual they had frequent contact with, either through school or netball. Seven mentors were teachers/lecturers, and eight mentors played or coached netball. All mentors were older than mentees, and twelve of the thirteen mentors selected were female (see Table 2).

Findings regarding the characteristics of mentors selected may be partly reflective of the guidelines provided for selecting mentors, which considered both operational and relationship issues. In operational terms, it was suggested that mentees should ideally reside locally to mentees. Mentors and mentees need to be able to meet frequently, and therefore it makes sense if the mentor is linked to the mentees school, university or workplace. In terms of the relationship, they should have an established platonic, trusting, and openly communicative relationship. However, when mentees rationalized their decision to self-select mentors, their perceptions comply with the notion that self-selected mentors are perceived to result in more identification, relational comfort, motivation for mentoring and communication than would be accrued via formally assigned mentors (Fagenson-Eland et al., 1997). Furthermore, mentees reported that shared interests and frequent contact formed the basis of enduring and effective mentoring relationships (Brad-Johnson, 2002).

Regarding the implications of this stage for the development of coping competencies, mentees and mentors felt that a mentor should have an understanding of the challenges that young females competing in sport at national level faced. They concluded that experience with sport was desirable as this would assist in the development of appropriate coping competencies. It is likely that the mentees held the notion that being a good athlete contributed to their self-esteem, and selected a mentor whom they believed shared this view at a similar age, and continued to be interested in sport.

When unpacking these beliefs, participants exemplified elements of Bandura's self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1986; 1997). For example, mentees felt that they could talk more openly with self-selected mentors, sharing concerns and experiences. This enhanced self-efficacy, via the mechanisms of verbal persuasion and vicarious experiences. Take the example whereby

mentors shared their sporting experiences, mentees gained confidence what they were already doing as athletes, or identified new ways of operating. This was exemplified by Tara (mentee) who explained *"she's been in the Olympics twice so she knows everything about sport, she's been there and done all the training and everything, and she's had mentors herself"*. Statements such as these suggest mentees believe that they can learn from shared experiences, and accrue benefits when sharing the goal of maximizing sporting potential with a mentor. Bandura (1986; 1997) emphasizes the cognitive nature of verbal persuasion and vicarious experiences, suggesting that the interpretation of information by the receiver is important. It would appear that in the present study, mentees perceived information given by mentors as credible, and this would have been useful when mentee-mentor relationships were forming.

All participants were able to describe additional mentor qualities they found beneficial for the mentor-athlete relationship, and the goal of developing coping competencies. Mentees identified the following characteristics; understanding, approachable, friendly, experienced, nice, objective/non-biased, supportive, good listener, genuine, funny, laid back, interested in sport, someone older and having authority. Mentors identified the following; good listener, understanding, approachable, knowledge of issues/ experience, contactable (have time for it), adaptable/flexible, encouraging, supportive, empathetic, able to think 'out of the box', impartial, good communication skills, patience, able to inspire/motivate, trustworthy, interested in sport. Collectively, these characteristics not only support, but build upon, the existing body of literature concerning effective mentoring (Brad-Johnson, 2002; Clark et al., 2000; Cull, 2006; Klasen & Clutterbuck, 2002). When comparing the attributes identified, mentees cited more interpersonal qualities and commonly emphasized these as most important. By comparison, whilst mentors also identified interpersonal skills, they were also inclined to identify more cognitively based competencies such as knowledge and thinking out of the box. It would appear that mentors placed more importance on these cognitively based skills than mentees.

When identifying common themes, the attributes understanding and supportive were identified by all participants as impacting upon the success of mentoring. Their importance was outlined by Ellis (mentee) who explained, *"they left responsibility for me to do it as well, it wasn't just like I was being spoon fed the whole time … it really helped having someone who understood what it was about, who had the time to understand me"*. Mia (mentee) appreciated having someone to listen, *"at the beginning when she just sat there listening that was brilliant…she just helped me get the right set of mind to plan my own things, which was brilliant 'cause that was the best learning"*. However, a critical incident changed this relationship. *"I'd just come back from injury and could only play in like two or three of the matches. When she made me play the whole tournament I was a bit like hmmm okay, I think she's getting a bit more biased in what I'm doing"*. Mia explained *"the problem that I have talking to her now is that I'm scared of her primary interest being school netball"*. These events described by Mia demonstrate a mentoring relationship where trust had been eroded and she felt the mentor was no longer impartial and understanding.

When exploring mentee characteristics that contributed to effective mentoring relationships, a number of factors emerged. These included commitment, honesty, willingness to learn, motivation, open to new ideas, determination, communicative (listening and well as talking) and having the time for mentoring. Helen shared mentoring experiences with Jasmine, a fellow mentor who lived locally.

Helen: *"It just seemed a lot easier for Jasmine, I think Ellis has* (Jasmine's mentee) *just got a very different personality, she comes bouncing forward and says hello, she's very forthcoming whereas Jodie, you have to pry stuff out of her...I tried not to take it personally because I don't think it is a personal thing, I just think that's Jodie, she's very quiet. I've certainly learned stuff from it, and moving forward I'd do things differently. With her not being completely open with her feelings etcetera just made it twice as hard for me to get stuff out of her"*.

Jasmine (mentor) substantiated the views of Helen, *"you know Ellis was easy and so forthcoming, I know that another member of (*identifies county*), she found the girl she was mentoring very, very difficult to approach and very difficult to talk to. I was very, very lucky in that respect"*. Consistent with previous research, both mentors concluded that mentees had to be forthcoming and honest for the mentor relationship to work effectively (Klasen & Clutterbuck, 2002; Cranwell-Ward, Bossons, & Glover, 2004). The importance of open and effective communication is also supported by previous research indicating that it can assist individuals in obtaining personal goals, and consequently enables them to develop self-efficacy expectations regarding goal attainment (Bandura, 1977; Bedell & Lennox, 1997). In this context this relates to the goals of mentor and mentee, whereby poor mentee communication was providing a barrier to goal attainment for both parties.

The mentoring relationship of Kelly (mentor) and Tara (mentee) failed to establish at all. Kelly was a replacement mentor following the withdrawal of Tara's original mentor due to ill health. In an e-mail dated 21st November 2004 Kelly raised early concerns. *"There were a couple of incidents last season that I knew had some bearing on the things Tara told me. I kept quiet about things because of confidentiality but it put me in an awkward position. My response was to step back from Tara and try not to be so involved"*. Kelly expanded on these issues in the review of her experiences, *"the concern at the beginning was the relationship I had with Tara I think that got in the way of it, and I just found her difficult to deal with sometimes, ... there was a reluctance on my part to put in more effort. I just think Tara was a taker rather than a giver, and it needed to work both ways"*. Kelly concluded that she might have been a good mentor, but not for Tara.

The examples described above illustrate the importance of the first two stages of mentoring, in that when building rapport and setting direction there is a need to ensure the compatibility of the personalities involved. It is important to establish personal respect, boundaries and goals between mentor and mentee from the outset, and ensure these are monitored and maintained as mentoring progresses. Doing so helps ensure that the objectives of mentoring are met (in this instance developing coping competencies) and that both parties enjoy the mentoring process.

3. Progression

This ten-month stage of mentoring focused on the goal of evaluating and developing coping competencies. The skills of the mentor in supporting, challenging, encouraging and enabling were crucial to the success of this stage. However, time was a factor perceived by all participants as being highly influential on the progression stage. Time and its impact on the evaluation and development of coping competencies was cited in three contexts, temporal considerations, competition for time, and frequency/duration. Regarding temporal considerations, the school and netball environment typically provided the forum for scheduled meetings to complete and reflect upon coping pack activities. Consequently, once school holidays began and the netball season had

concluded, opportunities for mentor meetings declined considerably. Gemma (mentor) reflected on these difficulties in her reflective diary, *"I feel it has been okay and I've been able to help Rachel through some difficult times. The main problem now is that it is holiday time"*. It is suggested that there is an optimal time of year to initiate mentoring with adolescent populations. It is advisable to start mentoring when school term and netball season is in progress, and collective sporting and academic commitments are low. This is to provide the mentor with opportunities for access to the mentee at school or club, and to minimize pressures resulting from exam or high performance netball commitments.

The second context in which time was cited, was competition for time. Denise (mentor) felt she was unable to create time to see her mentee, *"there's always something that takes my time and I know that's pathetic but that's what happened"*. Denise explained that the only time she could see Janet (her mentee) was before or after training, and that because Janet always got a return lift to and from training from other parents, this prevented mentor meetings from taking place.

The third context in which time was cited was frequency and duration. Most mentors met at least once a month during the school term/netball season. However this did change depending on personal and situational circumstances, and coping activities addressed. This was described by Paula (mentor), *"it was about once a fortnight, once every three weeks, when it was particularly needed it became more often, and when she was injured it became less, it was entirely her who decided when we should meet …so it varied but it was from sort of once a week to three weeks"*. For those mentees and mentors who were able to maintain a mentoring relationship, mentoring quickly developed an opportunistic element to it, whereby a five minute conversation in the playground, providing a lift to training, or the start of a training session provided an additional forum for mentoring. The following mentees exemplified such instances; Jayne, *"I had lessons with her so I could have brief conversations"*, Simone, *"I saw her at netball as well every week so we kind of spoke about it then as well"*.

In summarizing the theme of time, it was perceived as being highly influential on the progression stage. Those mentoring partnerships that were most successful in terms of coping gains and personal satisfaction were those where both parties felt that sufficient time was invested as required. In these instances all coping activities were completed by being flexible and adaptable to the constraints faced by both parties. These findings highlight the issue of perception and management of time. It is possible that an individual with a great deal of free time may perceive they have little. This may be because minimal effort has been devoted to estimating and managing time. It is commonly believed that individuals can manage time more efficiently or less efficiently (Covey, Merrill, & Merrill, 1994). The effective planning of time is an essential first stage in time management, the second stage of keeping to schedule is also important (Francis-Smythe & Robertson, 1999). Problems with time management include spending lot of time on interruptions like private conversations or texting, waiting until deadlines are very close, or underestimating/overestimating task completion times (Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994; Burt & Kemp, 1994). Such guidelines can be used to help ensure time estimates and management are optimized amongst mentors and mentees.

During the progression stage, many mentors experimented with, and adapted their mentoring behaviors. As demonstrated by Jasmine, many mentors became more informal as the mentor-mentee relationship developed:

> *Jasmine: "Initially I was very official about it all, I was sort of 'I think we need to meet at least by this date, we need to get this done', I think I was very much more relaxed towards the end and instead of me ringing Ellis up saying I haven't heard from you for a while (*laughs*), I changed and I let her come to me when she needed me."*
> Interviewer: *Did that affect the mentor-mentee relationship do you think?*
> *Jasmine: "I think so yes because I don't think she felt that I was looking over her shoulder all the time because I went out with that approach perhaps. I think she just needed to know that there was somebody there who was on her side, who she was able to talk to and to help basically."*

A number of athletes commented that mentors were particularly effective when they acted as a 'sounding board' providing emotional and instrumental support during difficult times. This was exemplified in the diary of Kate (mentee) who described the way in which her mentor helped her cope with a difficult stressor. *"This month has been a tough one because my Grandma died in the middle of my GCSEs, so the ability to cope with revising, exams, netball and family things has been difficult. My mentor has given me great advice on how to carry on with my exams and how to deal with the upset"*. In addition to being supportive, the importance of challenging behaviors was identified by a number of mentors and mentees, for example Ellis (mentee) explained, *"I had to be honest, and Jasmine (*mentor*) had to be honest with me and say 'look I don't think you do that, I think you do this' that's where you had to have a mentor that you could really kind of discuss with"*.

When striving to achieve the goal of developing coping competencies, a number of additional gains were exemplified as a result of discussions between mentor and mentee. In most instances the communication skills of mentees improved producing confidence gains (Bandura, 1977; Bedell & Lennox, 1997). Consequently, mentees were better able to resolve conflicts and produce desirable outcomes. This was evidenced by Kate who explained:

> Kate: *"My friends were all going out and they were putting pressure on me to go out and that was difficult. But I talked about it with my mentor and we were able to come up with ideas to solve it and how I could still see my friends. If I hadn't have had a mentor I don't think I would have overcome that problem."*
> Interviewer: *What would have happened if you hadn't overcome it?*
> Kate: *"Well I was having motivation problems in December and I was thinking about giving up Netball because I didn't know how to get around it. But I talked about what I wanted to get out of life and what my priorities were and worked through it."*

All mentees agreed that mentors were central to reflection, learning and the development of coping competencies. This was not only because they fulfilled the original purpose of providing a supportive environment, facilitating learning, and facilitating goal identification and achievement, but also because they made learning and personal development fun and interesting. This was demonstrated by Jayne *"I enjoyed meeting with my mentor 'cause she's funny as well, I got a lot out of it which I really wanted and I have so much more energy 'cause I know how to organize my time"*.

4. Winding up and 5.Moving on

The relationship that developed as a result of the coping intervention was perceived by most mentors and athletes as a positive outcome of the coping programme. This view was endorsed by the fact that in the two-months following completion of the coping intervention, and in instances where mentees stopped completing the coping packs, the relationship endured for most participants. Jasmine (mentor) explained *"we built up a very good relationship built around trust you know, and I think initially it was nice but its very close now, she knows she can come to me and talk to me at any time"*. Ellis (Jasmine's mentee) confirmed, *"I think she's always going to be my mentor in a way, I think she's always going to look after me in that way rather than be a jokey mate at netball"*. Those mentees relocating also indicated an intention to keep in touch with their mentors *"I'm going to Uni but I'll definitely keep in touch with her"* (Jodie). Such willingness to maintain contact is indicative of the positive regard in which mentees held the coping intervention and the role their mentor had played.

Conclusion

Individuals striving to achieve highly important goals in multiple domains of their life need to develop effective coping strategies. The present study recognized the need to ensure aspiring adolescent athletes had access to a mentor when looking to develop coping skills, and sought to support mentors in their work with athletes. The mentors who volunteered to be involved in the study recognized the challenge of providing effective support. Despite such challenges, all mentees and mentors reported positive experiences resulting from the mentoring process.

The study provides support for those mentor and mentee characteristics previously identified as contributing to effecting mentor partnership (Cull, 2006; Klasen & Clutterbuck, 2002). The provision of mentors who are non-directive and facilitative can assist mentees with the problem solving and decision making process, and ultimately develop confidence. However, the extent to which benefits are accrued is partially mediated by the extent to which mentees take responsibility for maintaining and engaging in the mentoring relationship.

In conclusion, the following practical suggestions are offered in order to increase accessibility to mentors and enhance the mentor experience:

1. Develop mentor training as part of Physical Education (PE) teacher training and coach training. It is likely that such individuals will have contact with athletes demonstrating elite potential;
2. Seek to enhance the self-awareness of mentee and mentor regarding those interpersonal and intrapersonal qualities liked to effective mentoring partnerships;
3. Raise awareness of the requirements of each stage of the mentoring process.

Addressing practical issues such as those outlined above provides the foundation of a positive experience for both mentor and mentee. Doing so should facilitate the 'recycling' of mentors, and ensure the transition of mentees to future mentors.

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