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# Existential Learning in Youth Sport: Lessons Learned through Negativity

Noora Ronkainen<sup>1</sup>, Tatiana V. Ryba<sup>1</sup>, Kenneth Aggerholm<sup>2</sup>, Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland; <sup>2</sup>Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Oslo, Norway;

<sup>3</sup>University of Lincoln, Lincoln, United Kingdom





# Sport, informal learning and the learning society

‘Sport has an educational dimension and plays a social, cultural and recreational role’ (...) ‘through its role in formal and non-formal education, sport reinforces Europe's human capital’

(European Commission, 2007, White Paper on Sport)



Sports and Life Skills  
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## How Do Sports Develop Life Skills?

- ◆ Communication and Interpersonal Skills
- ◆ Decision Making and Critical Thinking Skills
- ◆ Coping and Self Management Skills
- ◆ “Life Skills are defined as a set of skills that people use to effectively deal with life challenges, benefit the individual and create a healthier community.” (PlaySport)

[www.playsport.net/en/lifekills](http://www.playsport.net/en/lifekills)



# Sport, informal learning and the learning society

Sport as an avenue to promote development and learning of (e.g., Coakley, 2011):

- (1) 'At risk' youth
- (2) Disadvantaged communities in the Global South (sport-for-development projects)
- (3) Talented athletes who might compromise educational success and attainment of formal qualifications in pursuing their sporting dreams

Offered solutions:

Teaching *life skills* to equip young people to face challenges of life and the life after (elite) sport.



# Sport, informal learning and the learning society

In our research, we argue that the educational dimension of sport is not reducible to ‘life skills’ only but also contains more holistic, perhaps not always ‘useful’ and critical elements that shape youth athletes’ ways of being-in-the-world

While there is a push to formalise learning in sport (intentional teaching of life skills), we know from studies in the workplace that much of human learning occurs in informal and non-formal situations (e.g., Eraut, 2004)

Eraut, M. (2004). Informal learning in the workplace. *Studies in continuing education*, 26(2), 247-273.

SPORT, EDUCATION AND SOCIETY  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2020.1712655>



## Learning in sport: from life skills to existential learning

Noora J. Ronkainen <sup>a</sup>, Kenneth Aggerholm <sup>b</sup>, Tatiana V. Ryba <sup>a</sup> and Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland; <sup>b</sup>Department of Physical Education, Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Oslo, Norway; <sup>c</sup>School of Sport and Exercise Science, University of Lincoln, Lincoln, UK

### ABSTRACT

Youth sport is habitually promoted as an important context for learning that contributes to a person's broader development beyond sport-specific skills. A growing body of research in this area has operated within a life skills discourse that focuses on useful, positive and decontextualised skills in the production of successful and adaptive citizens. In this paper, we argue that the ideological discourse of life skills, underpinned by ideas about sport-based positive youth development, has unduly narrowed the research on learning in sport to only what is deemed functional, teachable, and economically productive. After considering the problems associated with the currently dominant life skills approach, we explore existential learning as an alternative perspective on conceptualising and studying learning in sport. An existential approach provides a non-instrumental theory of learning with an emphasis on discontinuity, relational self and 'becoming', opening an avenue for exploring various forms of informal learning under-explored in sport. We discuss the applications of this alternative approach for future research and practice in learning in youth sport.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Positive youth development;  
athletes; discontinuity;  
informal learning; identity

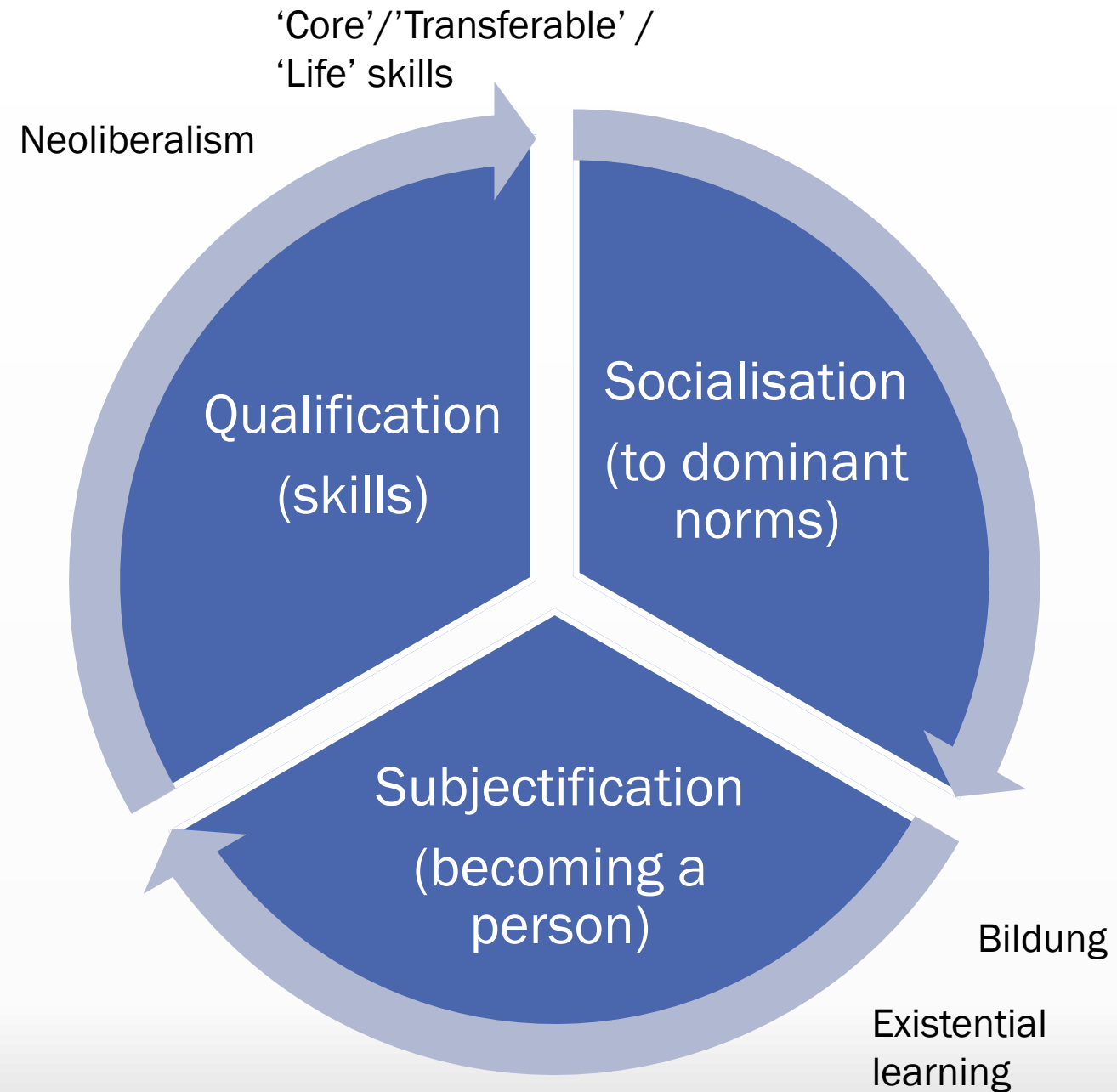
# Three functions of education (Biesta, 2009)

In youth sport, the focus has been on 'life skills', defined as 'those internal personal assets, characteristics and skills such as goal setting, emotional control, self-esteem, and hard work ethic that can be facilitated or developed in sport and transferred for use in non-sport settings'

(Gould & Carson, 2008, p. 60).

Biesta, G. (2009). Good education in an age of measurement: On the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 21(1), 33-46.

Gould, D., & Carson, S. (2008). Life skills development through sport: Current status and future directions. *International review of sport and exercise psychology*, 1(1), 58-78.





# What is existential learning?

- The ‘object’ of existential learning is the person’s whole **mode of being**; that is, how we are attuned to the world, find meaning and value in life, and make life choices.
- Focus on learning that is triggered by **an encounter with ‘negativity’** (Bollnow, 1987), that is, collisions with something unfamiliar and surprising which place our existence in question
- The educator’s role is to **recognise these significant moments** and accompany the learner in exploring their meaning and overcoming crises



# Existential learning in youth sport

## The empirical work

Qualitative Interviews with 18, Finnish, 'pre-elite' athletes in 2015-2019 (age 15-16 at baseline)

('Winning in the Long Run' project, PI: Tatiana Ryba)

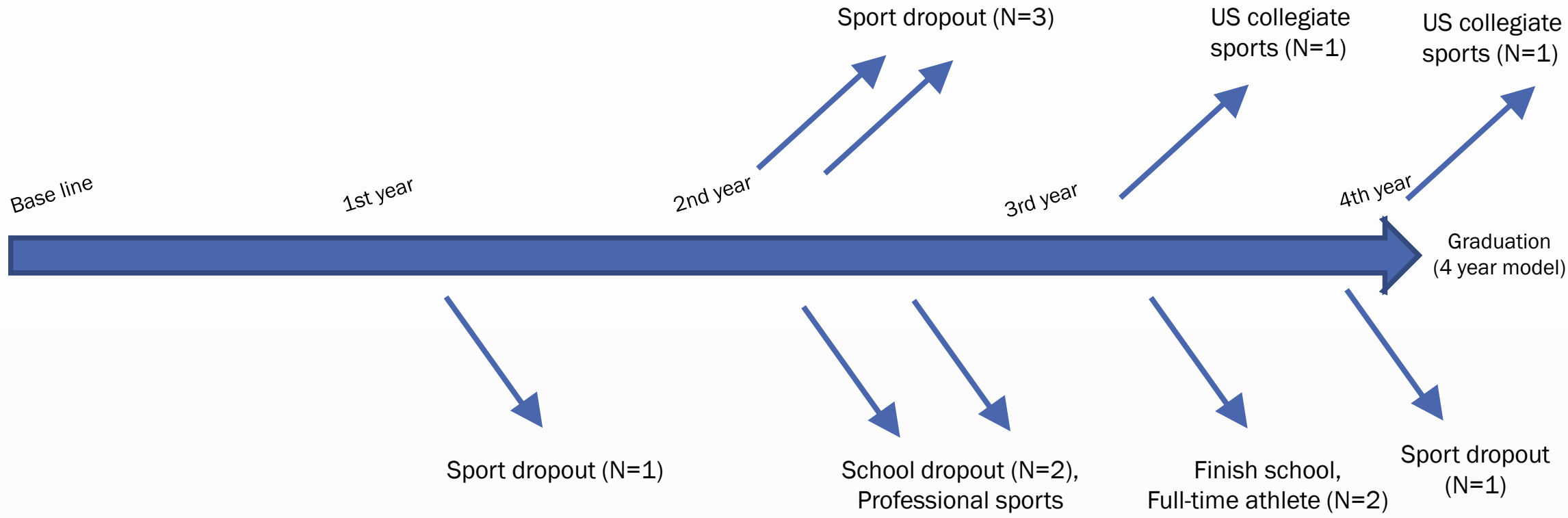
- *6 time points – interviews, visual methods, vignettes*
- *T6 focused on existential learning (N=16), spring-summer 2019*
- *Various winter and summer sports (ice hockey, cross-country skiing, alpine skiing, ski orienteering, football, basketball, swimming gymnastics, athletics, judo)*







# Participant pathways



**T6 (Spring-summer 2019), N=16:**

Professional athlete N=3  
'Hopeful' (gap year, focus on sport) N=5  
Planning to retire (gymnastics) N=1

US collegiate sport N=2  
Dropout from (elite) sport N=5



## Lessons learned through negativity (1): Encountering your limits

‘I am over conscientious and over achiever... I learned a lot about my limits’ [through overtraining]’ (F3)

‘You can work very hard, a lot more than someone else, but they might still win and it is not fair by any means. Many people want to get to Olympics but not everyone will become an Olympic athlete’ (F2)



## Lessons learned through negativity (2): 'Being' and 'doing' recognitions

'People in sport, they value other people very much based on what they have achieved and how they are doing in sport. And I have a completely different way of thinking.

I feel that people lift me to a better [person] when I have achieved something, but when I haven't, then I am nothing.' (F4)

'Athletic success does not mean so much to who I am. Even if I were an Olympic winner I would still be the same person (...) My father has said several times that it does not matter to him or mom whether I am an elite athlete or not.' (M6)



## Lessons learned through negativity (3): Responding to adversity

‘Last year it did not go so well, but it was not as serious as what I had thought’ (F4)

‘Maybe the world’s top athletes do not have [setbacks] but I don’t know if I consider myself as good as them. Others, in the intermediate level, they have some small injuries. If I am there, then maybe I will have those, too. If I did not expect them, then maybe I would not have overcome them so well.’ (M2)



## Lessons learned through negativity (4): Dangers of perfectionism

My qualities that are good are also my challenges or weaknesses. Extreme self-discipline is good, but there is the danger that you overdo everything and hurt yourself because you just don't give up. I realised that and it was painful... But that does not show up to others as a negative thing, they just think it is great.

I always had to run faster or longer. It wasn't fun anymore because I always had to exhaust myself. Even if I knew I am not supposed to do that but I just wanted to do it perfectly and better than last time. (F1)



## Lessons learned through negativity (5): The selfish world of elite sport

‘In the team, everyone is only thinking of themselves.’ (M5)

‘[After disengaging from elite sport], I do not need to be selfish anymore like an elite athlete sometimes has to be.’ (M6)

‘[As an athlete], sometimes you just think too much about yourself. It was an individual sport and everything was centred on you; the coach is focused on you, the parents are focused on you, everything depends on you. Now I have tried to be more considerate of other people and started to think about how I can help other people.’ (F6)



# Reflections

- Besides 'life skills', youth athletes can learn important lessons about *themselves* (both 'positive' and 'negative' qualities, embodied limits), their *relationships* (based on 'being' or 'doing') and world as such (e.g., fairness).
- These athlete-led processes of learning are often unintended, informal and not always immediately 'useful', but nevertheless important for these young people's development and self 'becoming'.





# Thank you for your attention!

noora.j.ronkainen@jyu.fi



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## Project

### Learning and Being in Sport: A Phenomenological Investigation (Learn2)

 Noora Ronkainen ·  Tatiana V. Ryba · ...

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Goal: The key aim of our research is to theorise learning in sport (episteme) and to understand how student-athletes develop practical wisdom for life through sport (phronesis). This novel framework for learning will form a much-needed theoretical basis for future research and inform

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