The social construction of coach learning in disability sport
Robert Townsend & Prof. Chris Cushion

Rationale
• Sport is a powerful site for the visibility of people with disabilities.
• In disability coaching there is an established discourse of coach learning – primarily assumed to be a process of acquisition and application.
• Assumes “knowledge is neutral and foundational rather than socially and culturally constructed and thus non-foundational”.
• Tendency to force disability into the background of coaching.
• The interrelation between ‘disability’ and the coaching context is underexplored.

Research Context
• 18 month ethnographic case study in high performance disability sport
  – Integrated coaching process; highly qualified ‘performance’ coaches, physio, nutritionist, S&C, PDW and team manager
  – Athletes with learning disabilities
  – Observations, interviews, focus groups
• 2 year case study of an ‘impairment specific’ coach education programme
  – Observations, pre/post-course surveys, interviews
  – Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

Social Construction of Coaching Knowledge
• Social Constructionist perspective – highlights the construction of coaching knowledge in relation to an overarching coaching context and wider cultural values.
• Coaching knowledge structured by a powerful socialisation process – a product of ideology, interest or power (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009)
• Coaching ‘field’ understood as a ‘generative’ site of coaching knowledge – but ‘how’ and ‘what’ is being learned?

Rejection of ‘Disability’
• Important to understand the ‘instruments of knowledge’ coaches co-construct about disabled athletes:
  “What’s my attitude towards disability? ‘Disability’? It’s just a fucking label…It doesn’t exist…to me it’s all bollocks it’s all spiel. I coach these boys like I would a 13 year old boy, in the same way. Otherwise I’m changing my beliefs (as a coach) aren’t I? Which would mean I’m coaching the disability not the cricketer”. (Coach)

‘Athlete-first’ discourses
• The coaches tended to display a highly normative and ableist coaching gaze that (re)constructed disability under a valued athletic identity
  “For me (disability) it’s irrelevant I’m dealing with people with impairment disability whatever you wanna put it, they’re just a group of players which just have slightly different needs to another group of players; you’re just coaching a group of people…just an athlete who wants to be coached” (Coach).
‘Athlete-first’ discourses

- Such an ‘athletic’ identity had symbolic capital and a pre-defined set of valued expectations and dispositions:

“It really pisses me off when people say, oh, you know, I work in disability sport or I coach disabled athletes. No, you work with athletes. There’s no difference between disability and impairment, because actually we should all be looking at it going, actually, they’re athletes first – people first, athletes second, someone with a disability impairment third”. (Team Manager)

Secured by institutional culture

- Coaching in high performance disability sport is characterised by a highly normative, ableist rejection of ‘disability’.
- These views of disability were secured within and through the institutional coaching culture:

The element that I’m involved in is a performance programme. To the point where as far as possible disabilities are left at the door when they come in. (Head of Disability Cricket)

Disability Coach Education

- Coaches are not trained in the specifics of coaching in disability sport.
  - Fragmented and competing coach development provision.
  - Disability often overlooked or reduced to modifications/adaptations required in practice.
- Coaches left to ground their understanding in the material and experiential conditions of coaching through ‘trial and error’.

Discourses in the field

- The instruments of communication and knowledge constructed and used by coaches can be understood as instruments of power (Bourdieu, 1979) in that they legitimate certain coaching methods as ‘right’.
- Rejection of ‘disability’ was not simply an instrument of cognition but fulfilled an important practical function (Bourdieu, 1998)
- Inherent discourse of individualism that blurred the structural causes of disability within a coaching environment – medical model

Discourse of ‘problematics’

- Coaches are left to take knowledge generated outside of disability sport and apply to specific contexts – problematic?

 “Their spectrum of disability, it’s probably the hardest one to coach. They don’t understand. It sounds bad but you realise actually how dumb they are” (Coach).

Discourses in coach education

- Focus on ‘impairment specific’ mode of coach education – autism spectrum disorders.
- This form of coach education focuses on disability specific and categorical approaches which are considered central to effective coaching.
- This is in contrast to a coaching environment that was constructed around the ‘invisibility of disability’.

(Taylor et al., 2014, 2015; Townsend et al., forthcoming)

(L. Wareham et al., 2017; Townsend et al., 2016. forthcoming; DePauw, 1997)
Centralising Impairment Knowledge

• By focusing explicitly on autism spectrum disorders (ASD), coach education in this case focused on identifying characteristics of disability and promoting ‘best practices’ for intervention (cf. Rice, 2006).
• The effects of constructing an educational programme around knowledge about impairment had very ‘real’ effects in the formation and expression of coaching knowledge.

Homogenising Assumptions

• Coaches constructed uncritical, self-referential and ‘legitimate’ understandings of ASD:

  (I have) more knowledge on what an autistic child or adult is thinking or how they feel. How an autistic person feels and when they say something then that is exactly how they are feeling (Coach).

  When talking to a person with autism I have to make sure I don’t make any eye contact with them even when speaking to them (Coach).

  Autistic individuals hate noise; some don’t like change, and take instructions literally (Coach).

(Dis)ableist Pedagogy

• This was in part due to the teaching and learning conditions of the course that ‘problematised’ impairment for coaches:

  It was up to the initiative of some coaches to role play during the practical session which highlighted the core elements of communication with autistic people (Coach).

• Coaching was therefore learned according to discursively formed ideological understandings of what ASD ‘looks like’ in practice.

  I maybe did it a couple of times (laughs) just looking back I deliberately just took everything they said- just to wind them up- literally...just to be awkward (laughs) because I’ve seen it myself (Coach).

Implications

• The effects of a systematic lack of coach education means that the coaching workforce in disability sport is largely uncritical and self-referential.
• Disability sport coaching is a field of struggles – Medical model discourses in tension with coaching discourses have an effect on coaches’ knowledge formation and expression.
• ‘Disability’ holds a tenuous position in a field characterised by competing discourses.
• How best to educate and develop coaches is an ongoing concern, as are effective models of CPD.

Summary

• The ways that we perceive disability influences the classification systems that underpin practices, which in this case pertain to coaching.
• Therefore there remain questions about how social fields such as coaching ascribe value and judgement to people with impairments.
• Coaches need to re-examine their assumptions about the nature of disability in coach education.

Conclusion

• The analysis suggests that coaches are not learning but are in fact reproducing dominant and legitimate forms of knowledge that permeate the disability coaching context.
• Discourses about disability can both enable and constrain coaches as they function to produce knowledge that is legitimate, right and ‘best practice’.
• Coaching knowledge in the absence of formal and interrogative educational structures is comprised of shared cultural ideology, is grounded materially within social practice and largely self-referential.