

Examining the Role of Hockey Leadership to Foster Inclusive Coaching Practices: Discussions from Atlantic Canada

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Abstract. Coaching has been widely examined in the sport of ice hockey. Technical skill development, player management, and the ability to improve performance have been very notable areas of inquiry. As the critical roles of coaching leadership and communication become clearer, there is limited research available which explores the context of inclusive hockey coaching leadership to support more equitable practices. This paper will focus on specific data extracted from a previous study completed by the authors in which general hockey leadership skills and professional development were explored. This paper will present the outcomes of fostering inclusion and diversity from a coaching lens. Thirteen minor hockey coaches from Atlantic Canada (i.e., who are members of the Atlantic Hockey Group) participated in this qualitative study. Semi structured interviews were conducted online or in-person. A thematic analysis was used to explore data obtained from the interviews. Results revealed that coaches had limited communication training experience when working with diverse abilities, age groups, languages, genders, or cultures. Limited professional development specific to inclusive training was noted by participants. Our results demonstrated that various self-led leadership strategies were utilized to promote inclusive practices such as informal community-peer mentorship opportunities, and small group instructional sessions. Overall, the results give us insights into coaches' experiences with inclusive leadership and highlight current gaps. During the conclusion, future recommendations for continued study, specifically within leadership training for diversity within ice hockey, are offered.

Keywords: Communication, Ice Hockey, Coaching Leadership, Cultural Diversity, Inclusion, Performance, Player Engagement

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1 Introduction

1.1 Inclusivity in Sports

Sports are an integral part of an active and healthy lifestyle (Statistics Canada 2023). According to Statistics Canada (2023), Canada is a leading sport nation. There are several factors which contribute to participation, such as the season and the geographic and social diversity in the area. Hockey, our national winter sport, was invented in Canada in the 1800s, and basketball was invented by Canadian Dr. James Naismith in 1891 to condition young athletes during the winter. Other sports, such as soccer and basketball, are also popular. According to Gough (2023), hockey is the most popular sport in Canada, followed by soccer and basketball.

The influence of coaching behaviors on athlete performance has been one of the most investigated topics in coaching science (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). Coaches are engaged with providing and assessing the development of various technical skills and monitoring training at various levels. Performance assessment has become a field of expertise that is crucial for researchers and practitioners (e.g., coaches, strength and conditioning coaches, scouts, program directors), who need to be aware of the mechanisms that predispose hockey players to perform in key situations (Bournival et al., 2023).

The National Hockey League (NHL) is the leader for many directives within ice hockey. Understanding communication, coaching leadership and cultural diversity has been examined recently. NHL commissioner Gary Bettman has stated that, “we are working to better understand and accelerate our engagement across all layers of diversity, including nationality, race, gender identify, sexual orientation, disability and religion,” (Wyshynski, 2022). We know very little about hockey coaching communication within the realms of inclusion and diversity. More research is needed to better understand perceptions, best practices, and inclusive practices to employ within ice hockey coaching specifically to improve coach engagement, player experiences, and hockey performances. Supporting this development, NHL commissioner Bettman stated that “Each day, we are committed to ensuring inclusion becomes more of ‘who we are’ than ‘what we do’” (Wyshynski, 2022).

According to Oldham (2022), society must break down the interlocking forms of discrimination and social injustices at the junior, college, and professional levels of ice hockey. Furthering a notion of “Why does this happen?” and “How can we fix it?” Leadership in sport is an emergent field which has been gaining attention on a national level (Jones & Khan 2017). More specifically, understanding the optimal leadership training for more inclusive hockey coaching is intriguing. The objective of this paper is to document and examine the communication experiences of minor hockey coaches in Canada who support youth with diverse needs and determining what resources are required to improve coaching experiences. According to Matthews and Erickson (2023), youth sport is a context that can promote positive youth development (PYD), with coaches being a key agent for positive development. Furthermore, transformational leaders employ

four strategies, colloquially referred to as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Matthews & Erickson, 2023, p.1). Lara-Bercial & Mallett, (2016) investigated characteristics of coaches and their relationship to leadership. The findings of this study revealed that coaches had a common set of personal characteristics, which included an exceptional work ethic, strong communication skills, a quest for continuous improvement, and effective leadership behaviors that inspired their athletes. This research study will explore coaching leadership through an inclusive lens. As described by Liew and McTigue (2010), educating the “whole child” became more prominent and thus enhanced the teaching and coaching skills of professionals who work directly with youth. Leadership and training are imperative to properly address the expansive growth and popularity of Canadian hockey.

1.2 Hockey and Canada

As the IIHF reported, there are currently 513,684 Canadian hockey players registered (IIHF, 2024). The total number of players registered with the IIHF is 1,563,749, meaning that Canadian players account for 1/3 of the total membership of an organization that governs 81 countries. Hockey is considered a cultural truism and a way of life among Canadians, with a connection so powerful and strong that it has united a vast nation from coast to coast (Cairnie, 2019). In fact, the sport is often considered a Canadian national treasure for its ability to build kinship bonds between ethnicities, classes, and cultural groups. While such perceptions of inclusivity have remained prevalent in the sport, recent critical events, such as abuse scandals and racism, have negatively impacted the sport and its leaders (Burke, 2022).

1.3 Inclusive Hockey Leadership & Coaching

From an understanding of the early vision that guided Canadian sport history, its is readily observable that promoting inclusivity in Canadian sport has been recognized as critically important and can be best described as follows:

“Sport is welcoming and inclusive, offering an opportunity to participate without regard to age, gender, race, language, sexual orientation, disability, geography, or economic circumstances” (Canadian Sport Policy, 2002, p.13).

In December 2021, the Prime Minister of Canada released a mandate letter, providing clear direction on the importance of incorporating the views of Canadians when considering society, inclusivity, diversity, and our historically marginalized communities. As he noted:

“We must continue to address the profound systemic inequities and disparities that remain present in the core fabric of our society, including our core institutions. . . I expect you to include and collaborate with various communities, and actively seek out and incorporate in your work,

the diverse views of Canadians. This includes women, Indigenous Peoples, Black and racialized Canadians, newcomers, faith-based communities, persons with disabilities, LGBTQ2 Canadians, and, in both official languages.” (Kay et al., 2022).

Providing equal opportunity and accessibility is an imperative need within Canadian sport communities. As noted by Kay et al. (2023), sport research findings suggest that research participants felt efforts should be made to increase the participation of under-represented groups in sport. Particularly, these groups included indigenous people, racialized people, women and girls, persons with disabilities, children and youth, new Canadians, and economically disadvantaged people. Hockey Canada, the governing body of amateur hockey in Canada addressed this need recently. In October 2020, the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) task team provided a report to the Hockey Canada Board of Directors that included a framework for the strategic plan on EDI. Additionally, organizations require strategies to support the successful engagement of hockey players from these underrepresented groups (Hockey Canada, 2023). Hockey Canada has published its first Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Path Forward, which includes a Commitment to Action statement that summarizes the organization’s ongoing work to drive long-term, sustainable change within the hockey ecosystem in Canada, building an environment where people feel valued for their differences and have positive experiences with hockey (Hockey Canada, 2023).

According to Matthews and Erickson (2023), youth sports can promote positive youth development (PYD); coaches are a key agent for positive development. Furthermore, transformational leaders employ four strategies, known as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Matthews & Erickson, 2023, p.1). Duguay et al. (2020) found that coaches who embody effective leadership qualities not only impart essential athletic skills but also instill crucial life lessons, such as teamwork, discipline, and resilience. Additionally, inspirational leaders serve as role models, encouraging young athletes to strive for excellence while maintaining a positive attitude, sportspersonship, and respect for others (Davis, 2018). Conversely, poor leadership can have detrimental effects, leading to a toxic atmosphere, demotivation, and even dropout rates among youth participants (Fouraki et al., 2020). Fostering an environment of belonging and inclusivity is essential for all youth hockey players and may be difficult for coaches. Jedwab & Holly (2021), researched immigration and diversity in ice hockey and concluded that despite the many challenges hockey faces as the country’s most watched and played sport, it still creates a strong sense of community belonging amongst those who choose to play (p.164). Providing coaches with appropriate training and leadership skills to support diversity is critical (Saotome, 2013). Additional research concludes that personality, character, and communication skills are essential (Erickson, 2023). In addition to coaching leadership research, evidence suggests that youth with strong leadership skills are more likely to have positive work and family relationships, enter and graduate college, succeed in their careers, and have better mental and physical health outcomes (Greenberg et al., 2017). Previous research

has determined that when enhancing learning, one important factor is the ability and experiences educators and coaches possess to engage and support learners (Jones & Kahn, 2017).

2 Methodology

This qualitative research study utilized open-ended, semi structured interview questions to collect data specific to the training and coaching experiences of hockey coaches from Atlantic Canada. Data were collected for this study from November 2022-May 2023. Participants were recruited by email from the project partner, The Atlantic Hockey Group (AHG). The participant sample (n=13) comprised of minor hockey coaches who volunteered with the AHG and instructed youth aged 4-18 years. The sample for this research was purposive, as ice hockey coaches, both male and female, were invited to participate. Recruitment also involved notices through social media and direct email from the Atlantic Hockey Group. There were small inducements of Tim Horton coffee cards offered for study participation.

Participation was voluntary, and coaches were invited to complete a short interview with a member from the research team. The interviews took place in-person and/or online, via Zoom™ depending upon location and availability of each participant. All participants self-identified as male (i.e., n=13) who ranged in age from 23 to 52 years. The average span of coaching experience was 9 years.

The qualitative interviews were composed of five open-ended questions. For this paper, three questions served as focal points of analysis. Interview questions analyzed specifically for this paper included:

1. Social-Emotional Learning includes aspects of enhanced leadership, empathy, understanding, self-regulation, behavior support, trust, honesty, inclusivity, etc. What is your experience with these specific components? Were they taught explicitly or included within your coaching training? If yes, what types or when?
2. In your coaching career, how often are you provided with leadership training? What types of training did you receive as professional development?
3. When coaching young ice hockey players, what is the most challenging aspect in terms of connections and relationship building with your players and/or families? Are there other barriers or challenges with your players? What types of training do you feel would be beneficial for coaches?

Researchers took field notes at the end of sessions to ensure key messages were highlighted. Sessions were also recorded with permission for transcription. Ethics approval was obtained from Cape Breton University prior to engaging in our interview process.

Research Question: What are the hockey leadership experiences of coaches in Atlantic Canada?

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study was framed upon aspects of Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Encompassing approaches where youth and children learn to recognize and manage emotions, develop positive relationships, behave ethically, care about others responsibly, make good decisions, and avoid negative behaviors (Gould et al., 2022). It involves “. . . teaching children to be self-aware, socially cognizant, able to make responsible decisions, and competent in self-management and relationship skills. . .” (Zins et al., 2007, p. 195). Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is critical for children and youth’s long-term success in and out of school (Weissburg et al., 2015). Examining the intrapersonal characteristics for success, in-depth personal reflection, emotional intelligence, and a quest for continuous improvement have been instrumental within SEL research (Domitrovich et al., 2017).

SEL can be used to promote character development among athletes (Elias, 2016). The term “Educational Athletics” is used by the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association to express how athletics and competition can be used as an extension of the classroom and an educational activity to teach life lessons and prepare young people with values for lifelong learning (Elias, 2016).

3 Findings

In this section, one major, overarching theme will be presented through the analysis of three questions posed to hockey coaches, reflecting experiences within a leadership and inclusive lens. These semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim and filed within a Microsoft™ Office Teams account. The first author and researcher read and reviewed the raw data transcripts sets several times and listened to audio files during the analysis to assist with the conceptualization of ideas presented. Data were organized and analyzed using a coding process that led to the construction of themes (Saldana, 2014). Inductive content analysis was employed as this project included non-complex research and the sample size (n=13) was small (Vears & Gillam, 2022). An inclusive theme among the research team emerged during our iterative, co-constructed analysis processes. As noted by Williams and Moser (2019), coding in qualitative research comprises processes that enable collected data to be assembled, categorized, and thematically sorted, providing an organized platform for the construction and development of meaning. In this article, one main theme is presented, highlighting inclusive practices for hockey leadership.

3.1 Theme 1: Development for Inclusive Leadership Practice

A key theme of inclusive leadership emerged as a result of data analysis from interviews with 13 minor hockey coaches. Participants in this study expressed the need for leadership training and development specific to coaching youth with varying hockey skills, cultural backgrounds, gender, and language capabilities. While participants attempted to recall types of professional development training they had received, many found this task very difficult.

Gender. In some cases, participants described challenges when coaching self-identified males and females on the same team. They felt a disconnect in team cohesion due to having separate dressing rooms for males and females, which left the female ice hockey players feeling isolated. Participant 2 illustrated this complexity in stating,

... I have a female hockey group, I am a male coach and its different than coaching males. . . we work on lots of skills and I need to know what is happening in their lives because if they are having a bad day at school or failed a math test they will show it. . . I have to be careful not to push them to far, right? . . . I do that on my own; it's important to build relationships. . .

Participant 10 also addressed gender in hockey and the complexities regarding leadership training in this quotation,

... there's no behavioral, you know, teaching classes or any kind of courses like that let's put it that way. So that's really not at all. It's a very, you know, male dominated industry, I would say. . . push to have, you know, girls involved in coaching positions, things like that so like the diversity aspect. . . and you know welcoming everyone has changed. . .

Relationship and Leadership Building. Participant 1 highlighted the importance of building relationships with parents,

To get to know the parents off the ice. Because everyone's schedules are so busy and hockey practices/ games are at weird times. Getting to know them more is the most challenging part. The hockey tournaments are beneficial because at a hotel the parents get can meet each other. During the weekday everyone's got to get home and get ready for the next day. As a coach you're the first one there and the last one out so mostly everyone is gone by the time you're out. . .

Informal community peer mentorship was identified as crucial for understanding and learning about leadership. Participant 8 also noted that the positive and welcomed impact of community mentors. He stated that,

"...the hockey code mentor was pretty good. I had a guy, who is at Dalhousie, hockey team, so he gave me some drill ideas if I asked, and we walked a couple of our practices, and he came out a couple times. . ."

Participants often shared how they created relationships with community partners and other coaches. Peer mentoring was described as informative and useful, providing an informal opportunity for less experienced coaches to learn from more experienced or diversified coaches. Participant 3 shared his personal experience with local coaches. He stated that,

... the Atlantic Hockey Group team that I did, I was basically the head coach and manager of. I didn't really, I did everything myself. Basically,

I took a couple of my buddies on to help me out when it came to like the on- ice stuff, just to be around and push some pucks. And if they had any drills, I made sure that the guys that I had on the bench were hockey guys too. . .

Further, participant 2 explained that communicating expectations is vital for success:

“I think one thing is coaches need to be exposed to understanding team dynamics and how those things happen. So, there’s, yes, you have expectations of the team. There are overarching expectations”.

Participant 1 explained that,

... There’s been a whole new level of respect and peer coaching that we didn’t have before. So, this year I got another player new to my team whose brother is actually the captain of the same major bantam team. What do we need to work on? And plan practices around their feedback and then really have the kids learn from their peers. They may have more talent on the ice, but they’re kids that will not socialize. They sit in the corner in the dressing room. They won’t talk to anybody else. They you know, you go away for a tournament, they won’t go out to supper. They’ll stay in their room. It is imperative to appreciate the need and desire for minor hockey coaches to identify existing gaps within leadership training. It is from this identification that professional development can be employed where and when necessary. . .

Participant 3 summarize his thoughts on mentorship and its value:

“My first year that I got involved, I actually was handed head coach of the skills group, didn’t even get to assistant, didn’t even get to help out for a year. I was handed it the first year basically. Very good. I’ll call it Mentor ahead of me that handed over all his notes and took the coaching clinics from hockey.”

In alignment with the other participants, participant 2 reported:

... this is the gap right now within our hockey communities. Is that there’s a lack of understanding that we’re building leaders... so what we say is all we’re focused on the kids, and we forget that we’re also developing coaching staff and future leaders in that... but the aspect of those other pieces of growth and leadership is where we could really improve, and we could build on. . .

Supporting Players with Disabilities. Describing some of the most challenging aspects of coaching a player with diversity and disabilities, participant 1 noted that,

... some of those Hockey Canada modules, we did a lot on diversity for sure. Biggest training would be working with kids who have like ADHD and stuff like that it kind of it kind of misses that number of years we've had 4-5 maybe six kids that if levels of ADHD and I wish I was more training I guess on that part of things sure like diversity they cover very well yeah but I find kids with ADHD there needs to be more training...

The additional need for training to support successful coaching was also highlighted by participant 1 as noted here,

"...I received ...not a whole lot other than what's covered in hockey Canada that's mandatory. We would have to volunteer to take on others on our own time. I wish there was a lot more..."

Conversely, participant 4 recalled discrimination in sport and fair play course trainings that were offered through Hockey Canada and this training was augmented with additional courses added by Atlantic Hockey Group.

"That is one thing I can say, like to list couldn't possibly remember the courses, but they are great to make sure the coaches have what they need". Participant 9 expressed the need for additional and frequent training: "I'd say professional development. I haven't really seen any other than the requirement, which is every three years to do the courses."

Language and Cultural Diversity. During the interviews, participants discussed important experiences coaching culturally diverse teams. For example, participant 3 revealed the following:

... but I think when it comes to like the inclusivity part, I think like we've had over the years, we've had a lot of kids from Indigenous communities and ask us only playing on our team... compared to kids who are from Non Indigenous communities, who are not really around that much unless they're playing against them... to bring them in on a team and have them playing together, it was kind of like a different thing for the kids out in the Bay where there's not many First Nations people out there...

Communicating with youth and parents/caregivers who have language or cultural diversities can be challenging for coaches. The participants agreed that when coaching a player with language barriers, this can be difficult to engage the player within the team game plans and practices or it can also hinder the team bonding. As participant 4 revealed,

Uh, sometimes it can be just a simple thing like language. Like, I coach quite a few kids from all over the province. Yeah, you know, so like, a lot of times you do, you have like, your Francophones and your French speaking stuff. This can be difficult, right ?...but, nothing... Can't be overcome.

The training gap was identified again by participant 8 who explained,

“...and, I believe there’s one coaching... development at the beginning of the year, um, but other than throughout the year, it’s, if there’s no complaints, then nobody really says anything to you.”

Participant 10 shared a valuable case, specific to cultural diversity where he stated that,

I would like to see maybe more education along the way on how to treat people. Times have changed, you know diversity and inclusion is a big part of you know the sport that really there’s not a lot of training about, you know, so I would like to see some stuff like that had, how did you come from Ukraine? We’ve got, you know, roles and different ethnicities

In conclusion, some participants noted that they felt unprepared to coach players with diverse cultural backgrounds and language.

4 Discussion

The findings of this study emphasize the importance of current professional development training required for the changing landscape of ice hockey in Canada. Coaches are essential to hockey at every level. A caring, enthusiastic, well-trained coach can positively influence the experiences of players, parents, and other coaches (Hockey Canada, 2024). Provincial hockey coaches receive certification from the National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP). Hockey Canada works with local hockey associations across Canada to provide effective education, certification, and registration for thousands of hockey coaches annually. The Hockey Canada Learning Lab has also been recently launched to provide additional coaching training resources (Hockey Canada, 2024). To remain active within the NCCP program, hockey coaches must maintain their status by obtaining professional development (PD) points. Activities such as e-learning hockey modules workshops, judging, facilitation, committee work, and active are all accepted PD points (Hockey Canada, 2024).

Communication, inclusive practices, and the need for additional training and professional development were focal points addressed by participants. This study suggests that many coaches had received technical training in ice hockey coaching; however, there is a need for additional training that addresses parent communication and coaching for diverse populations and cultures. Coaches also described the distinct difference between community and formal mentorship training and mandated technical development training. Previous reports have suggested that professional development training in these aspects can be beneficial in sport coaching (Shen, Rose & Dyson, 2022). This research may inform coaches, hockey administrators, players, and parents about inclusive hockey practices that can support gender diversity, players with disabilities, and cultural awareness.

Important findings emerged from discussions surrounding the need for accurate and frequent development training that included gender, cultural diversity,

and communication best practices. Implications from this study support the ongoing need for training and professional development, addressing existing gaps in current training, and the changing culture within ice hockey from a male-dominated sport to one more welcoming for all abilities and all players.

Suggestions for future study include additional research in the area of ice hockey coaching, particularly focusing on diversity and inclusive application. Limitations and research directions for qualitative inquiry noted in the study included sampling from only one hockey organization. While the present study explored coaching leadership in ice hockey and the aspects of inclusivity, cultural diversity, and gender, the findings and discussion focused on the participant's experiences in coaching. All participants had coached hockey for the AHG in Atlantic Canada. Additional and continued research is also needed to explore training delivery modalities and specific content for leadership and professional development. Future qualitative studies may also focus specifically on these inclusive sub themes to cultivate an in-depth understanding of coaching leadership.

Replicating the study within other regions of Canada would also be important to allow for a larger sample and broader base of study. Based on the findings of this research, the authors recommend a streamlined access point or tab system that directly outlines PD links from the Hockey Canada website, as accessing the e-training modules was difficult. Data from this study revealed several challenges in coaching players with disabilities or language barriers. Offering PD training such as Inclusive Coaching Practices for Players with Intellectual Disabilities may be helpful. New courses supporting effective communication practice with adolescents may also be beneficial. Community coaching mentorships with experienced junior-level coaches could be recommended to support successful leadership. Engaging local minor hockey associations with local Junior level coaches could potentially provide practical and experiential learning opportunities.

5 Conclusion

This study explored leadership and professional development training experiences among hockey coaches in Atlantic Canada. Specific findings examined inclusive practices within hockey coaching. These emerged as topic areas of gender, relationship, and leadership building, supporting players with disabilities, and players with cultural or language diversities. The results suggest that most coaching training is done by Hockey Canada and provincial associations, and informal training was provided through local community hockey teams or via peer coaches. Additional training that focuses on inclusion, diversity, adolescent development, and communication within hockey realm is necessary. Hockey culture is evolving, and coaching needs to support a much more diverse population.

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