Examining coaching practices and philosophy through the lens of organizational culture in a Danish high-performance swimming environment

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Abstract
Interest in coaching and coaches, as well as coach–athlete relationships, has for a long time been a traditional and solid part of talent development literature. In recent times, talent development research has employed a holistic ecological approach and emphasized the important role of a broader athletic environment in athletes’ development and a constitutive role of organizational culture in the success of such an environment. This case study uses the holistic ecological perspective to examine coaching practices and philosophy through the lens of organizational culture in a Danish high-performance swimming environment. The environment was selected based on its performance success but also because of its nontraditional organization compared to typical Danish swimming clubs. Data were generated from in-depth interviews with six coaches, 30 h of participant observation of training and meetings, and analysis of related documents. Thematic data analysis was guided by Schein’s model of organizational culture. The findings revealed the organizational culture that incorporates specific features of coaching practices and philosophy through cultural artifacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. In the artifacts, coaching practices were explicit (e.g. flexible training groups and schedules) and philosophy implicit (e.g. ongoing flow of feedback), while in the espoused values, coaching philosophy was explicit (e.g. swimmers as whole persons, long-term development focus) and consistent with basic cultural assumptions (e.g. swimmers’ autonomy as a basis for progress). The study revealed that the cultural lens was helpful in exploring consistency between what coaches communicate about what they do (and how and why they do it) and what they actually did (and how they did it).

Keywords
Coaching, coach–athlete centered coaching, organizational culture, swimming, talent development environment

Introduction
Coaching is a social, ethical, and pedagogical activity that takes place in complex, dynamic, and often unpredictable contexts.¹ Athletic coaches’ everyday practices as well as their professional philosophies are in many ways constituted by the local environmental context (e.g. human resources, facilities, time schedules) and related culture (e.g. spoken and unspoken traditions).

Recent talent development research has shifted its focus from tracing athletes’ individual development supported by significant others (e.g. coaches) to examining athletic talent development environments (ATDEs) as contexts for athletes and coaches’ interactions and relationships. The holistic ecological approach²⁻⁵ emphasizes two interconnected ways of analyzing ATDEs. First, there is a focus on the ATDE structure, and particularly on the roles and cooperation of key individuals and organizations (e.g. club, national federation, school, coaches, and parents). Second, there is a focus on the factors influencing the ATDE’s success (e.g. human resources, process, and organizational culture) in promoting their talented junior athletes into seniors. A series of in-depth case studies of successful ATDEs in Scandinavia³⁻⁶ have shown that, even though the successful environments were different, they shared
a number of features, for example, inclusive training groups, proximal role models for talented youth, focus on long-term development instead of current results, a strong and coherent organizational culture, and the integration of efforts from different social agents (e.g. club, school, and family). Among these shared features, organizational culture was found to be a key integrating factor in reaching successful outcomes in talent development. In this case study, we take the holistic ecological perspective of examining coaching practices and philosophy through the lens of organizational culture in a Danish high-performance swimming environment. Below, we will briefly introduce the Danish swimming context and contemporary views of coaching, relate coaching to organizational culture, and formulate the aim of the study.

Danish swimming context

Denmark has a solid tradition and an international reputation in swimming, with some big medal-winning names (e.g. Mette Jacobsen, Pernille Blume, Rikke Møller Pedersen; WC gold, Olympic gold, WR). Although swimming is characterized mainly by athletes’ individual performances, the group, the culture, and relevant environmental factors play important roles. Traditional swim training is organized in stable groups (depending, e.g. on age and/or athletic level), in which all swimmers have the same amount of training, begin and end practice sessions at the same time, and execute the same training program planned by a coach. The role of the coaching staff is of great interest because they are responsible for both the swimmers and the club, and for ensuring the club’s public visibility through the swimmers’ reasonable results in competitions. Previous research on elite swimming highlighted mainly instrumental and authoritative coaching with too much focus on athletes’ weight, shape, body fat, and performance. In Danish swimming, the clubs are managed by volunteers (e.g. parents), and usually only head coaches possess sport-specific coaching knowledge and skills. Therefore, on the one hand, the head coaches play key roles in planning practices as well as in developing a coaching philosophy and culture that other coaches are expected to learn and accept. On the other hand, it is “normal” in Danish swimming to see an instruction-based approach to training where the head coach is seen as the only expert who knows what swimmers should do, and how and why they should do it.

Coaching practices and philosophy:
Contemporary approaches

In a recent review of coaching, four major contemporary approaches to understanding coaching are highlighted. The first is a view held by Bowes and Jones43 and Jones et al.44 of coaching as a complex system in which chaos and order, flexibility, and structure are present at the same time, with coaches “orchestrating” situations to reduce the chaos and increase the order. The second is Lyle’s45 concept of holistic coaching aimed at coordinating athletic, socio-cultural, and psycho-social aspects of how athletes and teams function.46 The third is Co*’e’s and Gilbert’s47 conceptualization of coaching as an integration of performance-related issues, developmental issues, and contexts (participation- or performance-focused). The fourth is Jowett’s48 view of coaching as an interpersonal process with the coach-athlete relationship as a central factor (“a heart”) of coaching effectiveness. The coach-athlete relationship is described by the 4C model48 with four dimensions: closeness (i.e. interpersonal feelings, e.g. trust and respect), commitment (i.e. interpersonal thoughts, e.g. keeping optimistic regardless of ups and downs), complementarity (i.e. interpersonal behaviors, e.g. autonomy support), and co-orientation (i.e. interdependence, e.g. mutual understanding and acceptance). In the aforementioned approaches, coaching effectiveness is seen as dependent on (respectively) how successfully the coaches orchestrate the chaos; coordinate different parts in the holistic picture of how athletes/teams and coaches function; integrate athletes/teams’ performance, development and context; and develop and maintain an effective coach–athlete relationship. Jowett further problematized a view that coaching should be only athlete-centered and advocated understanding effective coaching as coach-athlete-centered: “When coaching is viewed as either athlete-centered or coach-centered…, its scope, quality and functions become restricted, whereas, when coaching is viewed as coach-athlete-centered, its scope becomes readily inclusive and mutually empowering” (p.154). It is important to note that the coach-athlete-centered approach calls into question the leading position of coaches in the coach–athlete relationship. It also challenges traditional views of coaching styles such as, e.g. an authoritative or instruction-based style, supported by relevant coaching philosophies.

Coaching behaviors or practices are aimed at helping athletes and teams to develop physical, technical, tactical, and psychological knowledge, skills, and attitudes to training, competitions, relationships, daily regime, and combining sport with other activities. How these practices are executed in order to achieve these aims depends on the coach, the athletes, the club, and the context, and is guided by coaching philosophy based on a set of underlying values, beliefs, and principles. For example, current motivation research promotes an autonomy-supportive style and philosophy of coaching as opposed to a controlling style of coaching.
Controlling coaches decide and define what and how athletes should do based purely on their expertise (i.e. coach-centered coaching). They conceptualize athletes as performers and can be successful in reaching performance goals but may also have a destructive impact on athletes’ wellbeing and development (e.g. injuries, high drop-out rate, mental health issues). In contrast, the autonomy-supportive coaches conceptualize athletes as whole persons responsible for their decisions and behaviors. According to Occhino et al., autonomy-supportive coaching satisfies the basic psychological needs of athletes in terms of competence, relatedness, and autonomy, sustains intrinsic motivation, promotes continued engagement in sport, and enhances athletic performance. Coaches working together at the same club or in the same team influence each other, learn from each other, often share basic tenets of their coaching philosophy, and contribute to the development and maintenance of, and (if necessary) change in, the organizational culture of their club or team.

**Organizational culture and coaching**

According to Schein’s functionalistic approach to culture, all groups are faced with two fundamental tasks: to survive and adapt to a constantly changing external environment, and to keep the group functional through internal integration. Group members fluctuate, and internal integration must ensure that newcomers adapt to the procedures and processes within the organization. Schein describes organizational culture as consisting of three layers: cultural artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic assumptions. The top layer—cultural artifacts—addresses physical and social surroundings including, e.g. ways of addressing each other, training schedules, composition of groups, warm-up routines, and training drills. Cultural artifacts are characteristics of the club that can be viewed, heard and felt by the club’s insiders and observers. Espoused beliefs and values are the social principles, norms, goals, and standards that the organization presents to the world and articulates explicitly to its members (e.g. how to react in certain situations). The core of a culture consists of basic assumptions that are no longer questioned by the group members and work as “mental maps” that define what to pay attention to, what different things mean, how to react emotionally, and how to behave in different situations. These assumptions are shared and, therefore, mutually reinforced by the members of the environment. Organizational culture is characterized by the integration of the key basic assumptions into a cultural paradigm that guides the socialization of new members, providing stability and facilitating their adjustment within a dynamic environment, such as a high-performance swimming club.

The organizational culture of an ATDE is not established by itself but is a product of social learning, where history and practice are combined, and coaches play important roles. Therefore, it can be expected that dominant coaching practices and shared features of coaching philosophy become inherent parts of the organizational culture of an ATDE, with coaching practices more visible in cultural artifacts and coaching philosophy, in espoused values, and, especially, in basic cultural assumptions. In previous ATDE and coaching research, this relationship between the organizational culture (e.g. of a sports club) and coaching philosophy and practices within the same sporting environment was not especially emphasized. To bridge the gap, this case study aims to examine coaching practices and philosophy through the lens of organizational culture in a Danish high-performance swimming environment.

**Method**

**Design**

Following the holistic ecological approach, this study was designed as a case study investigating real-life phenomena within their contemporary context and using multiple data sources. The phenomena under study were coaching practices and philosophy at a high-performance Danish swimming club in pre-season 2014/2015. Data were collected through interviews with coaches, participant observation of daily life in the environment, and analysis of relevant documentation. In the thematic analysis of the data, Schein’s model of organizational culture provided a cultural lens for constructing our view of coaching practices and philosophy in the ATDE in question.

**Site, participants, and contact**

The first-division swimming club in Denmark (hereafter referred to as the Club) was invited to be involved in the study based on its success in developing elite swimmers. At the time of the study several of the Club’s swimmers were members of the Danish national team, had participated in the 2014 World Championships, and were preparing for the 2016 Olympic Games. At the Danish 2014 Short Course Swimming Championship, the Club was the third most successful. (Three years after the data collection, we revisited the Club’s webpage and discovered that in recent years the swimmers who took part in the study were still among the top-level swimmers in Denmark. Some of them performed at the 2017 European Championships.)

The Club’s coaching staff consisted of six coaches (five male and one female), who were aged between 19 and 64 and had coaching experiences in competitive swimming.
swimming from six months to 35 years. In their past all of them were competitive swimmers (from this or other clubs) and one was the Danish national team member at his time. The coaches’ experience with the Club ranged from 1 to 10 years. Two senior coaches (hereafter referred to as the head coach and the mentor) were leaders for the others. The head coach was 32 years old with over 10 years of coaching experiences, and the mentor was 64 years old, a former head coach of the Club and earlier—a national team coach in the neighbor country with 35 years of working with national and international level swimmers in the background. The group of swimmers (n = 21) focusing on elite swimming were 16–27 years of age and competed at both national and international levels.

The first author gained access to the Club through the head coach, who worked as a gatekeeper. The head coach learned about the study, explained its idea to the coaching staff, and then confirmed that the Club was interested in being involved. After confirmation was received, the first author contacted all the coaches via e-mail with information about the study, an informed consent form, and an invitation to take part in interviews. In addition, the coaches and athletes were informed that observations would be made of the Club’s everyday life. Discussion of confidentiality issues led to the decision that neither the Club’s identity, nor the identities of any of the participants in interviews and observations would be disclosed. The participants were also informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Data collection

Data were generated from interviews, participant observation, and analysis of documents. The research also included informal talks with coaches, athletes, and parents.

A semi-structured interview guide25 consisted of four parts with the main topics being swimming and coaching philosophy, daily coaching practice, and thoughts and visions about the Club and swimming to link the present situation to future challenges and opportunities. Open questions allowed for the perspective of the interviewees to be clearly stated. In the introductory part, the interviewees were asked about their background and immediate reflections on swimming philosophy (e.g. approach to swimming technique and training methods). In the descriptive part, the interviewees were asked about their roles and functions regarding daily training and competitions. The explanatory part, examining factors contributing to the Club’s success, comprised questions about coaches’ relationships with each other and with athletes, their coaching beliefs, values, principles, and the Club’s culture. In the concluding part, to put the current state of the environment into a broader time-frame, they were asked to reflect on perceived challenges and opportunities for the Club keeping in mind that the Club was still in the process of defining their strategies and forming the organizational culture.

A pilot interview was conducted with a swim coach from a traditional club who worked with competitive swimmers of the national level, and this led to improvements being made to the interview guide (e.g. adding more nuanced questions about daily life and coaching philosophy to make clearer contrasts with the traditional coaching). Main interviews were held with six coaches and took place in the Club’s meeting room at a time chosen by the participants. The interviews lasted for about 50–65 min. Before the interviews, the participants were asked for their permission to have the interviews recorded, and the permission was granted.

Participant observations of social practices in the Club were conducted by the first author and these enabled insights to be gained into the environment, organization of practice, coaches’ and athletes’ behaviors, communication, and relationships.26 The observer gained access to all activities that made it possible to study the coaches and athletes in a variety of contexts, such as training, staff and parents’ meetings, and social events. The observation guide was loosely structured and focused mainly on interactions between coaches and swimmers. The observations included several informal conversations, which enabled the observer to ask about the Club members’ experiences in situ rather than in a formal setting, perhaps long after the event under discussion.27 For example, one swimmer who just finished his training session shared with the observer how much it is inspiring to practice together with other swimmers committed to reach an elite level. Altogether these observations covered 30 h of swim practice and meetings spread over one month. The observer tried to assist the athletes and coaches (e.g. helping to take times) in order to get a better feel for the environment and to have more opportunities for informal talks. Observation notes and field notes on informal talks with coaches and athletes were written down as soon as was possible.

Documents used for the analysis included any available written materials (e.g. website, internal documents, blogs, rankings, training programs, etc.) and were used to gain a better understanding of how the Club presents itself to the public, and how it is evaluated from outside.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis24 was adopted to analyze the interview transcripts, observation and field notes as well
as relevant public materials (e.g. the Club’s website materials). First, the transcripts were read several times to become familiar with them. Second, the interviewer/observer (i.e. the first author) examined the transcripts in more detail and conducted initial coding with the study aim in mind. Third, through an organizational culture lens, codes were interpreted in lower-order themes related to cultural artifacts and espoused beliefs and values (as illustrated in Figure 1). Fourth, the interviewer/observer came back to the transcripts, elaborated on the themes already identified, and deduced basic assumptions of the Club’s organizational culture. Throughout these steps thematic analysis discussions were held between the authors to reflect and elaborate upon emerging themes with a view to promoting critical reflections. The second and third authors served as “critical friends” in an iterative process, stimulating debate through critical insights and providing alternative explanations of the data (e.g. we discussed whether “proximal role models” issue belongs to artifacts or to exposed values; whether swimmers’ autonomy is the basis for progress or other factors). Fifth, higher-order themes were created inductively based on the lower-order themes relevant to each layer in the organizational culture. Thus, Figure 1 was completed, and then all the themes described. Supporting quotes were translated into English. Sixth, the first author presented Figure 1 and a description of the themes to the Club’s coaching staff and received positive feedback.

Findings
As shown in Figure 1, the themes reflecting coaching practices and philosophy were structured according to the three layers in Schein’s21 model of organizational culture. Themes relating to cultural artifacts and espoused values were derived directly from the data, while the basic cultural assumptions were deduced from the authors’ discussions and based on all the information collected. Below we describe cultural artifacts, then espoused values, and finally basic cultural assumptions (the themes are shown in italics).

![Diagram](Figure 1. Coaching practices and philosophy through the lens of organizational culture at a high-performance Danish swimming club (based on Schein, 2010 model).)

**Cultural artefacts**: Training structure looking like chaos
- Flexible training groups and schedules
- Coaches working together
- Ongoing flow of feedback
- Friendly atmosphere

**Espoused beliefs and values**: “You may learn from everybody but need to make it fit yourself”
- Individualized training
- Swimmers as whole persons
- Proximal role models
- Nobody has a monopoly on knowledge – disagreement is a strength
- Long-term development focus

**Basic assumptions**: Swimmers are part of the enterprise
- Coaches and swimmers learn from each other
- Swimmers’ autonomy is a basis for progress
- Performance is central but studies and other spheres of life are also important
Cultural artifacts: Training structure looking like chaos

Four lower-order themes were identified to describe the cultural artifacts: flexible training groups and schedules, coaches working together, ongoing flow of feedback, and friendly atmosphere. These themes were then integrated in the higher-order theme training structure looking like chaos (see Figure 1).

The first visual impression from visiting the Club was of an atmosphere of a high-performance environment. Pictures of a famous Danish swimmer, Mette Jacobsen, and other performance-related pictures and banners adorned the walls, showing that this is a place for competitive swimming. Observations of training sessions revealed that the swimmers practiced in mixed (i.e. male and female, junior and senior) and flexible groups, and also arrived at and left the pool at different times. Interviews with coaches and informal talks with the swimmers confirmed that training schedules in the Club were flexible, and therefore training groups were flexible as well. The coaches were in charge of different aspects of the training within the Club (e.g. strength, technique, or dryland training). Each coach was responsible for a small group of swimmers, but together they were responsible for all the Club’s competitive swimmers. At practices, several coaches were present at all times and worked together to provide feedback and engage swimmers indialogue:

A typical training session lasted between one and three hours and was led by between three and five coaches. Swimmers interacted with each other, coaches talked on the deck, and swimmers and coaches constantly engaged in dialogue. The swimmers commented on each other’s swimming technique, and there was an ongoing flow of feedback and an exchange of ideas, experiences, and adjustments before, during, and after each workout. (from observational material)

Younger and older swimmers swam side-by-side with two or three swimmers in each lane and in a friendly atmosphere. When asked to reflect on the daily training, one of the coaches said:

If you look through the window, you will see several coaches on the deck and swimmers in the pool with plenty of space. Obviously, we coordinate this to ensure that the older swimmers have enough space. One coach is responsible for organizing the training program and the other coaches assist, helping the swimmers get the best out of each workout.

Another coach reflected on what impression coaches from other clubs might have when observing the

Club’s practices:

I think most of the [guest] coaches would describe our training sessions as extremely chaotic and demanding, because there are people everywhere. We constantly discuss swimming-related themes with each other. There are many decisions to be made in a training session and therefore we ask questions and encourage the swimmers to reflect and to choose which decisions to make.

The coaches often approached the swimmers individually or in small groups and they usually kneeled down to get closer to the swimmers. One of the coaches described the training environment as follows:

People [meaning both swimmers and coaches] are happy about what they are doing, and they do not feel unable to express their own point of view. A space is created where it is legitimate to fail and where it is possible to try out new ways of practicing swimming. I like that no one is just an assistant coach, but all the coaches have a specific role to fulfil.

Espoused beliefs and values: “You may learn from everybody but need to make it fit yourself”

Five lower-order themes were identified to describe espoused values and beliefs of the Club’s organizational culture: individualized training; nobody has a monopoly on knowledge – disagreement is a strength; swimmers are whole persons; proximal role models; and long-term development focus. A quote from one coaching interview – “you may learn from everybody but need to make it fit yourself” – was used here as a higher-order theme to express the essence of the Club’s espoused values and beliefs (see Figure 1).

Observations, interviews with coaches, and informal talks with the swimmers revealed a concept of individualized training as one of key factors of performance progress. All the swimmers had personal development plans with short- and long-term goals. Coaches encouraged them to take responsibility for their training and to support each other:

At the end of practice, swimmers discussed how much time they had left and what they were going to work on during this time. Even though the swimmers were working on individual swimming programs, they supported and encouraged each other. (from observational material)

There was an explicit expectation that the swimmers should be open to various methods of training and
apply what feels right for them. This is further exemplified by the fact that to learn from each other every swimmer made a personal SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis and shared the results with the group. Doing this highlights “that no two swimmers are identical”, as one of the coaches stated. Learning through swimming was seen as learning both through the group experiences and through athletes’ own actions and physical experiences. One of the coaches explained how coaches and swimmers should work with application of knowledge from different sources:

As soon as swimmers getting more mature, the coaches should help them to filter and combine different pieces of knowledge that fit into the swimmer’s individual perspective. In this process it is important that coaches encourage swimmers to test even minor details because they not always know what is best for each swimmer...

Both swimmers and coaches should be open-minded and ready to listen and learn.

For the coaches, knowledge-sharing was a specific characteristic acted out in their behavior during the training sessions. They often disagreed with each other but valued the discussions and an opportunity to express their own opinions:

Two coaches were discussing how a swimmer was using her arms in the front crawl during the training session. One of the two coaches demonstrated the crawl stroke in the way that he perceived the technique, and they challenged each other to enhance their knowledge about swimming. Then the two coaches asked the swimmer how she perceived the stroke, and they all continued to discuss it together. (from observational material)

Furthermore, one of the coaches highlighted that all swimmers and coaches had a right to contribute to swimming knowledge and that disagreement was positive and contributive to development: “We do not always agree about details, but in terms of the philosophy, mission, and process in general, we do. There will always be disagreements and different opinions, but this is what I think creates a versatile training environment”. Another coach added: “The essence of our philosophy is that you may learn from everybody but need to make it fit yourself”.

Some coaches emphasized the important role of senior swimmers as role models for the younger ones. The mentor shared that once he was approached by a 12-year-old swimmer asking about how to become an Olympian. The mentor replied: “What do you think? Can you look at our best swimmers and try to answer that question?” By asking these questions the mentor encouraged both self-awareness and observational learning in the young swimmer.

On one day the first author was able to observe a social meeting where the national team swimmers within the club were invited by the head coach to talk about their career paths. The national team swimmers talked not only about training and competitions but also about the importance of coordination between a large amount of training and studies. One national team swimmer shared how he had experienced a period of stagnation when he was in high school, and because education is considered an important part of Danish culture, it became a challenge for him to fulfill expectations, due to the large amount of training in addition to his schoolwork. He concluded that to find their own path to success, swimmers have to search for a balance between their athletic and nonathletic needs. In fact, this story fits well with coaches’ view of swimmers as whole persons who need to pay attention to their studies and other activities. Here is an example from the observational material: “One swimmer had difficulties balancing sport and everyday life due to high amount of training at the time, and the head coach suggested adjustments. They agreed and decided to give it a try”.

Focusing on an athlete as a whole person also helped to prevent early dropout from the sport. On the Club’s website there was a clear message that coaches worked with swimmers with a long-term development perspective in mind. Swimming was portrayed as a sport not only for children and adolescents but also for adults at both competitive and recreational levels.

**Basic assumptions: Swimmers are part of the enterprise**

The Club was characterized by a cultural paradigm consisting of three interconnected basic assumptions: coaches and swimmers learn from each other; swimmers’ autonomy is a basis for their progress; and performance is central but studies and other spheres of life are also important. These basic (lower-order) assumptions are integrated in a higher-order assumption: swimmers are part of the enterprise (see Figure 1).

The authors’ conclusions about the basic cultural assumptions of the Club were based on repeatable comparisons between what the Club coaches say they do, how they explain what they do and why they do it, and what they actually do and how they actually do it. Interviews with the head coach and the mentor were especially useful in helping to understand the uniqueness of the Club’s culture compared to what they called “traditional” Danish swimming culture. The mentor and the head coach can be seen as cultural leaders in
this swimming environment, and they said that new coaches were hired only if they agreed to follow the Club’s philosophy. At the Club this also made it easier to develop a coaching team that did not question the basic assumptions.

The mentor said: “It was important to develop a culture where the swimmers are part of the enterprise with their own motivations, swimming philosophy, and technical issues”. This was seen by the mentor as contrasting to the traditional swimming culture where coaches had a monopoly on knowledge and decision-making. In the Club, it is both explicit and implicit that coaches and swimmers continuously learn from each other. For example, the mentor shared a typical training situation:

I watch a video together with a performing [and filmed] swimmer and another [observing] swimmer. We look at different performance aspects, and a dialogue about optimizing technique begins. They share their knowledge, I share mine, and they learn how to deliver feedback to a teammate. My words are not law around here, and I believe this way of doing things contributes to a culture where the focus is on the process, sharing, and development.

In their talks, coaches highlighted that a swimmer is alone in the water when swimming at a competition, and a coach cannot help. Therefore, the Club’s coaching staff found it important to work on making the athletes self-responsible and independent of the coaches. At the staff meeting observed by the first author, one of the coaches said: “To a large extent we place responsibility on the athletes for their progress in training”. Another coach noted that they had coined the term “training by themselves”. Below are some examples of the swimmers’ autonomy:

The coaches did not criticize the swimmers if they weren’t feeling well during the training sessions. If a swimmer had to take a break in the middle of a set or a training session... they just did. It was the swimmer’s own decision. (from observational material)

In competitions, swimmers shouldn’t conform to the team and shouldn’t be expected to cheer for eight hours in a warm and poorly ventilated facility. It is all about individual preparation and performance. Some arrive at the competition venue early, and some late... .The swimmers must deal with competitions themselves if they are selected for the national team. We [the coaches] need to prepare them for the competitive situations – they should learn how to compete at a high level without their coach. (from the interview with the head coach)

Swimmers’ autonomy as a basis of the progress sounded like a deliberate strategy of the coaching staff because they believed that in this way the swimmers become more responsible for their own performance, learning, and development.

Even though the mission of the Club is to create high-performance senior swimmers, balancing studies and other spheres of life are also important for the Club. The head coach explained that they had to deal with changing plans on a daily basis. He shared a story about two swimmers who had entered high school and found it more stressful than they expected it to be. They agreed to cancel one training session each week to minimize the stress (from observational material). The head coach also commented: “The big difference in this Club [compared to others] is that we are not afraid to reschedule training sessions to maintain a balance between the swimmers’ studies, social life, and family”.

To sum up the description of the Club’s organizational culture with coaching practices and philosophy that can be observed from the analysis, here is an extract from the interview with the head coach:

Interviewer: I found no written documents about the Club’s vision and goals. Why don’t you share your ideas?

Head coach: I don’t think that’s a mistake. I don’t think the Club is that far advanced in the process. What we do here is so different... We do things that nobody has done before [at least in Danish swimming], and we needed time to see how it works. Now is the time for defining goals, visions, and strategies to make us more aware of where we are heading.

Interviewer: If the Club is so different, how do your swimmers adapt at the national level?

Head coach: When our young swimmers are at national gatherings, they conform to that system [i.e. coach-centered], but when they return to the Club they say: “We are happy to swim here at this Club”.

Discussion

In this study, we used the lens of organizational culture framework21 to describe coaching practices and philosophy in a high-performance Danish swimming environment. The layers of organizational culture (artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic assumptions) helped to distinguish various aspects of coaching practices and philosophy, from explicit artifacts to an implicit cultural paradigm (i.e. a set of basic assumptions). Coaching practices interpreted as cultural artifacts included the organization of athletes (flexible training groups and schedules), the organization of coaches (coaches working together), methods of instruction (ongoing
flow of feedback), and the motivational/emotional climate (friendly atmosphere) at training sessions. Training structure looking like chaos was in fact not chaotic. It was very dynamic and complex but constantly “orchestrated” by the coaches to balance the interests of the swimmers, whose experiences, maturity levels, and training tasks were different. These orchestrating practices (e.g. organizing interactions, providing feedback and encouraging reflections and decisions, adjusting schedules, improvising, etc.) were well coordinated between the members of the coaching staff and supported by their shared espoused values and beliefs that underpinned the practices. The coaches in the Club believed in (and valued) an individual approach (individualized training), a holistic view of the athlete (swimmers as whole persons), observational learning (proximal role models), dialogic, community-type learning (nobody has a monopoly on knowledge – disagreement is a strength), and a developmental perspective (long-term development focus) as key features of their coaching philosophy. They communicated their coaching beliefs and values, for example, in their talks to athletes, and at coaches’ and parents’ meetings, in order to make them explicitly clear or implicitly understood. One of the coaches summarized the coaching philosophy at the Club as: ‘‘You may learn from everybody but need to make it fit yourself’’. As mentioned in the ‘‘Findings’’ section, two persons—the mentor and the head coach—were initiators of a shift in the Club from the traditional instruction-based and authoritative (i.e. coach-centered) coaching practices and philosophy that have dominated Danish swimming to the coach—athlete-centered approach. Despite the flat structure of the Club’s coaching staff (“I like that no one is just an assistant coach…”), the mentor and the head coach could be positioned as cultural leaders of this ATDE. They created the foundational principles of their approach and hired coaches on condition that they agreed to learn and adopt the Club’s culture. Even when they welcomed athletes to the Club, they felt it important to inform them about its specific features. To deduce the basic assumptions of the Club culture we used all the collected materials and worked on comparing what the coaches said about what they do and how and why they do it with what they actually did and how they actually did it. The cultural paradigm derived from these comparisons was entitled “Swimmers are part of the enterprise”, with three basic assumptions reflecting community-type learning (coaches and swimmers learn from each other), orientation to autonomy support (swimmers’ autonomy is a basis for progress), and the holistic view of athletes (performance is central but studies and other spheres of life are also important).

All the cultural features outlined above are rather different to what is described as traditional elite swimming culture, where coaches demand that athletes look at their lives through the lens of swimming performance, i.e. putting performance, body, weight, shape, etc. first, and other life issues second. The aforementioned authors studied Australian competitive swimming culture but, based on the reflections of the Club’s coaches, the same could be observed at national team camps and other clubs in their country. It is important that, despite not supporting the traditional elite swimming culture with relevant coaching practices and philosophy, the Club is a successful ATDE with a respectable high-performance record. Below we consider the study findings from the perspective of the holistic ecological approach and coaching frameworks.

The Club as an ATDE

Several in-depth case studies examined successful ATDEs in Scandinavia from the perspective of the holistic ecological approach. The cross-case analysis revealed that, despite different sports (e.g. sailing, kayaking, athletics) and organizational statuses (e.g. national team, elite sport school, sports club), the successful ATDEs demonstrated not only unique but also shared features. Henriksen and Stambulova summarized these features as follows: training groups with supportive relationships, proximal role models, support of sporting goals by the wider environment, support for the development of psychosocial skills, training that allows for diversification, focus on long-term development, a strong and coherent organizational culture, and the integration of efforts from different ATDE agents to ensure synergy in athletes’ everyday lives. The main focus of this study was on the Club’s coaches, athletes, and their interactions, with other aspects of ATDE structure and functioning (e.g. cooperation with schools) in the background. Meanwhile, several features of the Club’s organizational culture overlap with the list above. For example, the artifacts, such as ongoing flow of feedback and friendly atmosphere at practices might trigger training groups with supportive relationships. Providing role models in close proximity, helping athletes to develop psychosocial competencies (e.g. communication, feedback, responsibility, autonomy), and focus on long-term development are clearly visible through both the Club’s espoused values and basic assumptions. According to the summary of ATDE research, a strong and coherent organizational culture is a key factor of the ATDE’s success because it successfully compensates for a lack of some human and material resources in the environment. Therefore, it is important to consider the strength and coherence of the Club’s organizational culture.

Strength and coherence of an organizational culture are related to each other in such a way that only
a coherent culture (i.e. with a consistency between all the three layers) is strong, well accepted by the group members, and adds stability to the environment. In this study, working on basic assumptions of the Club’s culture, we systematically compared interview, observation, and informal field notes in order to understand the coherence between what coaches said about what they do and how and why they do it and what they really did and how they really did it. Through these comparisons, the basic assumptions we reached were very consistent with both the espoused values and artifacts (see Figure 1). Therefore, we can conclude that the Club’s culture is coherent, helpful in the adjustment of new swimmers and staff members, and as perceived by the Club’s coaches and the research team, the Club’s culture contributes positively to its success in raising elite swimmers. At the same time, the head coach reflected that they needed time to see how this culture works in order to be able to move forward in defining their vision, goals, and strategies.

The Club with coach–athlete-centered coaching

The overarching basic assumption of the Club’s organizational culture: “Swimmers are part of the enterprise” and the three supporting assumptions (see Figure 1) trigger (to a different extent) coach–athlete-centered coaching, relational coaching and coaching as orchestrating, and holistic and integrating coaching. These conceptualizations emphasize different aspects of coaching (e.g. coaches’ knowledge, coach–athlete relationship) but all of them support the idea that coaches and athletes are inseparable, and that their relationship, interaction, and knowledge-sharing produce “emergent effects” related to the development and performance of both athletes and coaches. Jones and Ronglan defined orchestrating as “a functional community of practice through maximizing knowledge exchange among participant athletes across the group, and constructing learning within realistic complex situations... In this way, the opportunity for meaningful action is constructed, while action itself is left to the players.” (pp. 8–9). This definition of orchestrating is closely associated with the basic assumptions of the Club’s culture, especially with “coaches and swimmers learn from each other” and “swimmers’ autonomy is a basis for progress”. The Club’s coaches help the swimmers to become independent learners by facilitating an ongoing flow of feedback and encouraging them to decide whether or not they want to make use of the feedback. In other words, the coaching staff legitimizes the swimmer’s own thoughts and feelings about their performance process in order to help them to steer their own development and career path. Furthermore, orientation to athletes’ autonomy can be seen in how the Club’s coaches prepare the swimmers to be autonomous during competitions. Swimmers are expected to be on their own in competition settings. Therefore, it is necessary to learn how to act in pre-performance, performance, and after-performance situations through daily swim practice. The coaches design a learning environment with a space that is similar to a competitive setting to prepare the swimmers to make decisions and manage competitive stress on their own.

Holistic and integrating coaching concepts emphasize different facets of coaching (e.g. professional, socio-cultural, psychosocial) aimed at encouraging athletes’ developmental outcomes (e.g. competence, confidence, connection, and character) to the degree required by the context (e.g. participation or performance). For example, Co’té and Gilbert described coaches’ objectives when working with young adolescents in a performance context as follows: (a) to organize the sporting experience to promote a focus on one sport, (b) to teach “the rules of competition”, (c) to offer opportunities for fun with increasingly greater demands for deliberate practice, (d) to teach and assess physical, technical, perceptual, and mental skills in a safe environment, and (e) to present positive growth opportunities through sport. In the Club culture, these objectives are visible in the organization of an autonomy-supportive and friendly learning environment, in which “performance is central but studies and other spheres of life are also important”.

In contemporary sports, high performance has become “technocratic” with different monitoring systems considered helpful in nurturing talents and developing committed, competent, and better-performing athletes. Sports administrators and coaches often use individual characteristics and measurements (e.g. body weight, size) to calculate and predict athletes’ performance, and thus their worth. The Club has moved in the opposite direction, where “…the effectiveness of coaching resides within the coach and the athlete and the unit relationship they develop. Within this conceptualization the coach and the athlete need one another to develop, grow and succeed... .” (p. 154).

Limitations and future research

Two limitations of the study are worth mentioning. First, it is difficult to appreciate the uniqueness of the environment, its culture, and coaching since it is not possible to compare it directly with other swimming environments studied using the same approach. Second, understanding culture is a complex, time-consuming process and it should include not only the perceptions and voices of the coaches but also the experiences and voices of the athletes. Perhaps because of this limitation, the culture of the Club was portrayed
as largely top-down in approach. To understand the success of this Club, further research should focus on the perspectives of more members of the Club and the wider environment (e.g. school, families, media, national federation, national team, other clubs, etc.) in order to put coaching practices and philosophy into a more holistic context. A more in-depth examination of the role of the head coach as a cultural leader might be beneficial in order to understand the relationship between the Club’s organizational culture, coaching practices, and philosophy of working together to support the talent development and performance of the athletes as well as the professional development and performance of the coaches.

Conclusion

This study contributes to talent development and coaching literature by means of relating coaching practices and philosophy at a Danish high-performance swimming environment to its organizational culture. The lens of organizational culture was helpful in examining consistency between what coaches communicated about what they do, how and why they do it, and what they really did and how they really did it. The study revealed a coherence between different layers of the Club’s culture, with basic cultural assumptions reflecting the coach-athlete-centered coaching, autonomy support, and a holistic view of athletes and their development. As shared and effective coaching practices and philosophy are explicit and implicit parts of the Club’s organizational culture, they add stability to the environment and (as perceived by the coaches) contribute to the Club’s effectiveness in talent development and performance.

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