An “Organizational Triangle” to Coordinate Talent Development: A Case Study in Danish Swimming

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Abstract

This case study in Danish swimming was informed by a holistic ecological approach in talent development and aimed to explore: (a) collaborative relationships between the Danish swimming federation, a municipality, and a local swimming club, termed “an organizational triangle”, and (b) factors influencing the success of their collaboration at the local level. Data collection and analysis were guided by the Athletic Talent Development Environment (working) model and a newly developed Collaboration Success Factors (CSF) model. Methods included interviews with talent development coordinators representing the organizations, and analysis of documents. Results allowed us to transform the CSF (working) model into an empirical model containing the collaboration preconditions (e.g., power to make decisions), processes (e.g., strategic planning) and initiatives (e.g., efficient use of the swimming pool), and shared assumptions of the talent development philosophy (e.g., “long-term focus”). The success of this organizational triangle was visible in the way the organizations increased the quality of talent development in the local swimming club.

Keywords: collaboration success factors model, holistic ecological approach, integration of efforts, swimming.

In Denmark, sport management and talent development rely upon the collaboration between talent development stakeholders and organizations within an athletic talent development environment. Guided by the holistic ecological approach (HEA) in talent development (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010a), this case study focused on relationships and factors influencing a successful collaboration between the Danish swimming federation, a municipality, and a local swimming club, termed...
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Fletcher and Wagstaff (2009) argued that sport psychology research has focused primarily on individual athletes or national governing bodies and described the in-between as a “twilight zone.” This zone encompasses “how personnel and the environment are managed, and how individuals and the team interact with the broader organization” (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009, p. 428). The authors suggested that sport psychology consultants could contribute in four different levels: the organizational level, inter-group level, intra-group level, and individual level. Since interactions characterized by tensions and problems might become barriers to the local talent development processes (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009), we argue that it is important to also focus on the inter-organizational level, which has received little attention up to now. For example, a growing body of knowledge in organizational psychology has uncovered the impact of organizational factors on athletes’ day-to-day activities (e.g., attitudes, behavior, stress and well-being) (Wagstaff, 2017). However, little is still known about the influence of inter-organizational relationships.

Within sport management literature, few studies have sought to unfold inter-organizational relationships. Sotiriadou, Brouwers, De Bosscher, and Cuskelly (2017) found that a good collaboration between a club and a sport federation enhanced the elite sport pathways. The federation offered resources and consultancy and as a result, the local clubs enhanced the quality of their training environments and coach education. This collaboration was successful because the clubs improved their player development programs and their coaches gained more knowledge and expertise. However, they emphasized the importance of the context (e.g., organizational, national and sport context) on inter-organizational relationships and therefore they called for more examples of and knowledge within inter-
organizational relationships in sport (Sotiriadou et al., 2017).

In talent development, sport psychology researchers have mainly taken an individual perspective (e.g., individual training histories; Araujo & Davids, 2009), and looked at the role of coaches, parents or peers in young athletes’ environments (e.g., Martindale, Collins, & Abraham, 2007) with little attention given to how different agents and organizations interact to facilitate talent development (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). The present research took a holistic ecological approach, which is philosophically underpinned by central tenets of systems theory, ecological psychology, and cultural and cross-cultural psychology (Henriksen et al., 2010a). The HEA (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; Henriksen et al., 2010b) acknowledges the complexity of a whole athletic talent development environment (ATDE) and therefore seeks to investigate the relationships between agents and organizations. The HEA offers two working models, the ATDE model and the Environment Success Factor (ESF) model to guide researchers in data collection and analysis (e.g., by facilitating development of interview or observation guides, and providing ready higher order themes for the data analysis). In case studies using the HEA (e.g., Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017), these models have been instrumental in structuring what is often an overwhelming amount of data. First, the ATDE working model helps to describe and structure the environment around the prospect athletes into two levels (micro- and macro-) and two domains (athletic and non-athletic) and it is complemented by the past, the present and the future of the ATDE. Second, the ESF working model serves to explain factors (e.g., preconditions, processes and organizational culture) leading to the ATDE’s success. Using the ATDE and ESF models, several studies have investigated successful (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011; Larsen, Alfermann, Henriksen, & Christensen, 2013) and less successful (Henriksen, Larsen, & Christensen, 2014) ATDEs. The studies revealed that each ATDE is
unique but also that successful environments share features across sport and national contexts. These features are: training groups with supportive relationships, proximal role models, support of sporting goals from the wider environment, support for the development of psychosocial skills, training that allows for diversification, a focus on long-term development, a strong and coherent organizational culture, and integration of efforts (Henriksen et al., 2010b).

The Organizational Triangle within the ATDE

Figure 1 presents the ATDE (working) model with the organizational triangle incorporated. Below we describe each organization within the organizational triangle – the national sport federation, a local municipality, and a local club – and their role in optimizing talent development of young prospect athletes.

The sport federation. In Denmark, national sport federations are responsible for the development of their particular sport at both elite and non-elite levels. While Team Denmark, the national elite sports institution of Denmark, sets the overall vision for talent development and provides general guidelines for age-specific training principles (Team Denmark, 2016), the federations set the direction for their own sport’s talent development. The sport federations are not part of the athletes’ everyday life but influence the local clubs and their practices indirectly by providing sport-specific guidelines and structures for talent development. Thus, we placed the federations on the macro-level of the ATDE.

The municipality. Denmark is a small nation of 5.8 million citizens. It is geographically divided into 98 municipalities with their own political elected board and a mayor. A municipality is responsible for all aspects of the lives of its permanent residents including sport participation. A municipality often has a particular person in charge of
coordinating talent development efforts. In 2005, Team Denmark developed a strategy to collaborate with municipalities (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut, 2011). The purpose of this collaboration was to create a framework for systematic talent recruitment and development in Danish sports. At the time of writing, twenty-three municipalities had met a set of criteria (e.g., had sports schools, implemented age-specific training guidelines) to collaborate formally with Team Denmark (including the municipality under study). We positioned the municipality somewhere between the micro- and macro-levels in the ATDE.

The local club. The primary role of local clubs in Denmark is to offer sport participation to the inhabitants. Some clubs offer both recreational sport and elite sport participation. In terms of talent development, their role is to provide an environment in which the young athletes can develop their potential. The Danish clubs are encouraged to live up to the age-specific training guidelines provided by their federation and Team Denmark, which is complicated by the fact that most of the coaches in the local clubs are volunteers and do not always know these guidelines well. We positioned the local club as a central component of the micro-environment because the athletes spent a good amount of their daily life here.

Framework: The Collaboration Success Factors (Working) Model

The foci of the present study were on relationships and factors influencing successful collaboration within the organizational triangle (rather than the success of the athletes). The original ESF model was designed to inform the investigation of specific sport environments in which people interact on a daily basis and thus included key elements such as organizational culture and athlete development. Based on the ESF model and on our previous experiences of working with talent development stakeholders, we heuristically developed an adapted version, termed the Collaboration Success Factors (CSF) model. This model aims to explain factors leading to the successful collaboration among talent development coordinators.
representing the triangle organizations. The CSF model (Figure 2) has its starting point in the
preconditions (e.g., financial, human, facilities and time) provided by each organization in the
collaboration. Then, the model illustrates how the processes (e.g., strategic planning,
communication, coordination, education, organization and evaluation) within the
collaboration lead to three outcomes: joint initiatives and projects, dealing with potential
tensions, and shared philosophy of talent development. All of these factors are interrelated
and influence the success of the collaboration which can be evaluated by improvements
achieved within the local club.

Aims of the Case Study

With the overall aim to pilot the CSF model, we used the concept of the organizational
triangle and the CSF working model to guide data collection in this case study, which
explored: (a) collaborative relationships between the Danish swimming federation, a
municipality, and a local swimming club, termed “an organizational triangle”, and (b) factors
influencing the success of their collaboration in talent development management at the local
level.

Methodology

Design and Participants

The swimming federation was asked to provide examples of successful collaboration
within the organizational triangle (federation, municipality and club), and provided four suchexamples. We selected the present example because it was the first of its kind within the
swimming federation and represented a prolonged successful collaboration, which allowed us
to explore the usefulness of the organizational triangle concept and the CSF model in order to
proceed with other cases and cross-case analysis in the future.
The case study design encourages in-depth understanding of a complex phenomenon in its natural context by way of collecting data from multiple sources (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In this study, data sources included three in-depth interviews with the talent development coordinators (all males) at the swimming federation, the municipality, and the club (hereinafter referred to as the Federation-TDC, the Municipality-TDC and the Club-TDC), and analysis of documents related to each organization involved.

The Danish Swimming Federation was selected because of its successful record in producing successful senior athletes at the international level. It sat strategic goals for Danish Swimming and organized swimming activities and tournaments. The federation offered the most talented swimmers over 16 years old an opportunity to join the National Training Center (NTC) and was engaged in dialogues with local swimming clubs about talent identification and development matters. The Federation-TDC in this study was responsible for collaboration with municipalities and clubs. He held this position for four years after being a head coach and club manager.

The municipality in this study was average in population and size according to Danish standards and was located about an hour’s driving distance from a major city in Denmark. Swimming was a popular sport among the youth residents. Only one swimming pool in a poor condition was available and was shared with a local swimming school and public users. The Municipality-TDC had eight years of experience in this job and successfully led the municipality to enter a formal collaboration with Team Denmark. He was responsible for the development of many different sports in collaboration with relevant federations and clubs.

The local club represented in this case study was recognized as a talent development and non-elite swimming club with a total of 2700 members, 150 competitive level swimmers, and 80 coaches. 18 coaches were responsible for the competitive swimmers, three of whom
were full-time employed. The club was recognized as a successful talent development
environment, but the most successful swimmers moved on to other clubs that had dedicated
elite departments. The Club-TDC had been a volunteer in the club for 11 years, and since
2017 he has been a chairman of the club.

The research team represents experience in case study research and significant expertise
with using the holistic ecological perspective in research and applied work. From research
and theoretical perspectives, the second and third authors developed the HEA and have used
the approach in several research projects. Further, the team has significant applied experience
of working within the Danish elite sport system. The first author has consulted Danish
municipalities in several projects, and the second author has worked as a sport psychology
consultant in Team Denmark for more than a decade. The in-depth knowledge of thinking
from holistic and ecological standpoints in combination with situated knowledge of the
reality of local talent development helped the team establish rapport, and analyze and present
data. The first author took lead in the project, collected data and developed first versions of
models and results. The coauthors contributed to the development of the concepts, models,
interview guides, and data analysis.

Data Collection

In Denmark, research not involving health-related sensitive information does not need
approval from an ethical committee, but the local department of data management permitted
the study and therefore this study was ethically approved. Three semi-structured interview
guides (Smith & Sparkes, 2017) were developed based on the organizational triangle concept
and the CSF working model. Maintaining a similar structure, the interview guides also
reflected specific features of each stakeholder within the organizational triangle. The first part
focused on how the participants experienced their collaboration on a general level including
questions such as: “Please, tell me about collaboration with X and Y, what do you find most important?” and “How do you, X and Y contribute to the collaboration?” In the second part, the interviewees were asked to provide specific descriptions of successful joint initiatives and projects including relevant preconditions and processes, for example: “Please, tell me about a successful project or initiative you organized together with X and Y?” and “What was the secret to the success of this project/initiative?” The third part of the interview guide focused on potential tensions and conflicts, and strategies used to solve them, for example: “Did you experience any problematic issues and tensions in this collaboration? If so, how did you solve these?” In the fourth (closing) part, the participants were invited to reflect more generally on important factors in successful collaboration and talent development, for example: “From a more overall perspective, what is a successful collaboration in your opinion?” and “what could be done to make this collaboration more successful?”

All three participants were contacted by phone and e-mail to provide information about the study and ethical issues. All the interviews were conducted in person by the first author at the places and times selected by the participants. The interviews lasted between 67 and 115 minutes (M = 98 ± 8), and before each interview the participants were reminded of the study’s objectives and ethical issues. Since this case was selected as a successful and inspirational example, the swimming federation insisted that the identity of the federation would be open, but we agreed the names of the municipality, the club and the participants would be kept anonymous. In addition, the three participants were made aware that cultural insiders might recognize them, thus, full anonymity might be not reached. This issue was carefully considered with the participants but seemingly did not bother them and they all verbally accepted the terms. The permission of recording the interviews was asked for, and granted.
Documents used for the analysis consisted of all available materials related to each organization (e.g., websites, age-related training guidelines, blogs) and the formal collaboration contracts between them. We used these documents to get a deeper understanding of their collaboration and to analyze consistency between what they say they do and what they formally agreed to do.

**Data Analysis**

The six steps of thematic analysis outlined by Braun, Clarke, and Weate (2017) were used to analyze the interview data and the most relevant content of the documents. First, the recordings were listened to and transcribed. The transcripts were read repeatedly to become familiar with the data. Second, the first author examined the data in more detail and conducted initial coding in regard to objectives of the study. Third, through the lens of the organizational triangle (Figure 1) and the CSF working model (Figure 2), codes were structured into higher-order themes. To describe relationships within the organizational triangle, two themes were identified inductively. To analyze factors influencing the collaboration success, the components of the CSF model (e.g., pre-conditions, processes) were used as higher-order themes. Inside each higher-order theme, the lower-order themes were identified inductively. Fourth, the first author came back to the transcripts, elaborated on the identified themes and clarified assumptions regarding the philosophy of talent development and collaboration. Fifth, the themes were discussed with other authors who acted as critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2017). Based on these discussions, the themes were finalized, and the results were presented to the three interviewees for their reflections. They generally approved, and their engaged reflections (for example around how time and flexibility were more important preconditions for success than finances) were used to further elucidate the case. Sixth, the lower-order themes were incorporated into the template of the
CSF working model, whereupon we created an empirical version of the CSF model that described the particular case.

Reflective Findings

To address the first aim of the study, which was to describe the relationships within the organizational triangle, we introduce the operational structure, and the formal and informal partnerships of the collaboration. To address the second aim, we present the empirical CSF model summarizing success factors within the organizational triangle.

Relationships within the Organizational Triangle

The operational structure. The three stakeholders had their distinct roles in the collaboration (as described above) and were bounded by a partnership contract. This contract was a declaration of intent meaning that they agreed to commit to shared goals and a working plan to reach these goals. The purpose of the collaboration as described in the contract was “to improve the conditions for high performance and the related talent development in Danish swimming.” The plan matched expectations by defining who was responsible for what, when, and how.

Team Denmark played a key role in initiating the collaboration within the specific organizational triangle, by implementing a strategy emphasizing the importance of collaboration between national sport federations, the municipalities and the local clubs. In specifying the partnership agreement the partners held several meetings preparing the agreement document, communicated regularly, and they all described it as a period of building the collaboration. The Federation-TDC described it as follows: “The Municipality-TDC has been great at getting the work done with the board of the swimming center and municipality authorities. This is probably one of the first and best partnership agreements we have made.”
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Although the investigation of a municipality’s role within ATDEs is novel, their importance within this collaboration had long been recognized by the stakeholders. In this organizational triangle, participants had specific roles and functions within the relevant organization and uniquely contributed to the collaboration. Responding to Sotiriadou and colleagues’ (2017) call for research into inter-organizational relationships involving more than two stakeholders, the municipality in this study was the third part of the collaboration.

Whereas Sotiriadou and colleagues (2017) showcased the positive effects of the dyadic relationship between a local tennis club and the tennis federation, this paper revealed the dynamic and fluid relationship of collaboration when a third stakeholder (the municipality) was incorporated. In this sense, the present research mirrors the complexity of talent development in the real world, and particularly in the specific context of Danish talent development, where the municipality did indeed play a central role.

**Formal and informal partnership.** The interviewees described how their relationship has developed from a formal partnership to a more informal one. When asked about his working relationship with the coordinators from the federation and municipality, the Club-TDC reflected: “The two guys you ask me about are truly an enjoyable company, but also good business partners.” Further, the Federation-TDC said:

> It is a professional relationship. We are efficient and focus on the task. But at the same time people are helpful, and we are really good with each other. There is good chemistry, a friendly chemistry. We talk well, but with a professional respect that they are experts in their areas. I think it works really well.

In Pierce, Blanton and Gould’s paper (2018) on how sport psychology professionals collaborated with community sporting bodies, they emphasized that trust and mutual respect between partners were key factors for their success. Further, informal processes have been
found to have a more crucial role than formal control mechanisms in inter-organizational
relationship management because formal control mechanisms appeared to have a negative
impact on trust (Sotiriadou et al., 2017)

In this case, the informal relationships and knowing each other on a personal level increased their motivation to collaborate, as explained by the Federation-TDC: “Because he [the Municipality-TDC] is a good partner and friend, I always go and talk to him when we meet at a conference or the like.” Informal relationships were efficient, as exemplified by the Club-TDC when he talked about running into the Federation-TDC during a tournament: “We had some minor problems on the vision we had worked on together, and I could just immediately discuss it with him in the swimming center.”

The Empirical CSF Model

To structure the factors contributing to a successful collaboration within the organizational triangle, we present an empirical version of the CSF model adapted to the specific case. Below we present the empirical CSF model describing the collaboration preconditions, processes, joint initiatives, potential tensions, shared philosophy, and perceived indicators of the collaboration success.

Preconditions. Whereas previous research has pointed to preconditions for ATDEs (e.g., finances, facilities and staff; Henriksen et al., 2010a) the present study looked at preconditions for the collaboration between stakeholders. The two major preconditions included decision-making power and prioritizing time for common tasks. The first was related to human resources, where the three stakeholders were all characterized by having decision-making power in their respective organizations. The Federation-TDC had the flexibility of prioritizing his time spent on specific tasks. The Municipality-TDC had
managed to create a network within the municipality, so he could make crucial decisions when necessary. The Club-TDC was the chairman of the club, which obviously provided opportunities in decision making and when ideas were to be implemented within the club’s strategy. Through this they avoided a time-consuming bureaucracy, which they viewed as a barrier in the work of their colleagues in many other local talent development environments. The Federation-TDC collaborated with other municipalities and was impressed by the smoothness of this cooperation. He credited the Municipality-TDC:

He was good at creating support in the political system, getting permissions quickly and being favored in the distribution of resources. He persuaded the mayor of the city to publicly state that it was time to build a new swimming pool. In comparison to other unsuccessful cases, this municipality was not just a third wheel that did not really contribute to the collaboration.

The other precondition was an opportunity to prioritize time for common tasks. The participants stressed that a good collaboration is time consuming. The Municipality-TDC said: “While developing our strategy we have spent many hours and held many meetings together.” The Federation-TDC had to drive several hours to joint meetings, while the other two reported spending countless hours bringing their strategy to life (e.g., measuring amounts of users of the swimming pool, and meeting with the local track and field club and gymnastics club). Interestingly, the interviewees did not mention finances and facilities as a key precondition of collaborative success. As supported by the analysis of documents, many points in their mutual strategy were marked as “low financial costs.”

Processes. The processes within the collaboration included: strategic planning, communication, ongoing evaluation and organization. The strategic planning was most clearly visible in the partnership agreement, which was described as central and as a basis of
every meeting. They were all schooled in strategic thinking, and found this approach natural
and useful. Documents, such as their partnership contracts and working plan, clearly
demonstrated how the strategic work was implemented, written down and formalized. In
Pierce and colleagues’ study (2018) they emphasized the importance of creating open and
clear lines of communication in order to be efficient. In our study, regular communication
was another key characteristic of the cooperation. This was especially evident between the
municipality and the local club, who communicated about strategic priorities as well as the-
day-to-day challenges in supporting the young local swimmers. In fact, the Municipality-
TDC had taught the Club-TDC about how to communicate externally (e.g., what narrative
they should tell the municipality and local community). They both told the story about how
the club used to write angry public letters in local newspapers about a lack of facilities, and
how they cooperated to change this narrative to a more positive one. The Municipality-TDC
explained:

Do you take the role as an unhappy teenager complaining loudly about a lack of
resources, or do you take the role of a skilled co-worker within the municipal landscape,
and demonstrate how the club contributes to solving key local tasks such as providing
swim classes at the local schools. The latter is much more likely to be listened to.

None of the participants used the word ‘evaluation’ explicitly, but it was clear from their
stories that ongoing evaluation was key for keeping the collaboration on track. As explained
by the Municipality-TDC:

Every time we meet with the swimming federation, we collect data on our progress. It is
a strength that, with our help, the club is good at documenting how much time they have
in the swimming pool, and how much they train on dry land. We have measurements on
almost everything, so we know exactly how much we develop.
The Club-TDC complemented this by adding that they continuously meet to follow up on their mutual plan: “We meet to follow up on our progress in regard of our action points (...) so it won’t just be something that we write on a piece of paper.”

The participants worked together on organizing and integrating their efforts both internally and externally. Internally, they used their plan to structure the meetings and keep track on tasks, while externally they organized meetings with the politicians and mutual practice with other sports clubs. From documents, we found out that one of the ambitions in their partnership agreement was to expand the local swimming club to be a regional swimming center (i.e., a center for talented swimmers from the region). To promote this vision, the Federation-TDC took responsibility for setting up meetings and collaboration between clubs from the different municipalities in the region. He was considered a neutral partner without any intentions to promote one club before others:

In relation to these club collaborations, I am responsible for facilitating the relationship. I open the doors into the smaller clubs and convince them of the idea of cooperating. To make sure it is done in a good way. To ensure that there are some ground rules, that the clubs are respectful towards each other.

By opening these doors in the swimming community, the Federation-TDC functioned as “a boundary spanner”, who is: “An individual who engages all stakeholders in the community partnership, negotiates power dynamics, communicates expectations, and builds connections between multiple partners” (Williams 2012 in Pierce et al., 2018 p. 25). Likewise, the Municipality-TDC functioned as a boundary spanner to the politicians, the swimming center and other local sport clubs.

**Joint initiatives and projects.** Even though material preconditions are not key factors for the ATDEs’ success (Henriksen et al., 2011; Seanor et al., 2019), facilities have been
shown to have a large impact on athlete development. From a macro-perspective, the Sport Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success (SPLISS) report (De Bosscher, Shibli, Westerbeek, & Van Bottenburg et al., 2015) supported this finding. Further, a Danish follow up study to the SPLISS report concluded that despite an overall satisfying performance, Denmark scored below average on research and innovation, training facilities, and coach provision (Storm, Nielsen & Thomsen, 2016).

With 900 new members during the last few years, and an increasing waiting list, the three stakeholders spent countless hours working on optimizing the preconditions for talent development in the club, and more specifically to increase the capacity of young talented swimmers. They did this by developing three joint initiatives and projects. First, the three stakeholders made an application for building a new swimming pool, which at the time of writing was under consideration in the municipality.

Second, as a solution to insufficient access to swimming facilities, the Club-TDC and Municipality-TDC initiated practice once a week with local gymnastics and track and field clubs, because the swimming club was unable to meet the swimming federation’s guidelines for optimal practice time. As the Club-TDC explained: “If you compare the total amount of training hours against federation guidelines, we are, on average, about 30 percent below the recommendations.” The initiative was a recommendation from the Federation-TDC, and although it began simply as a solution to a lack of pool access, today it is highlighted as an innovative example of how to optimize talent programs.

The third joint initiative was to provide better conditions for the athletes to pursue their dual careers in sport and school. The swimmers used to practice until 10 p.m. With morning training at 6 a.m., they had poor opportunities for recovery and also often felt fatigued in school. The Municipality-TDC and Club-TDC solved this issue by: (1) collaborating with the
board of the swimming pool to extend the opening hours on Sundays to allow a training
session on Sunday evening; (2) evaluating the usage of the pool by public users and they
found a little used slot on Wednesday from 12-14 p.m., where a training session for the
talented swimmers of the sports school classes could be planned; and (3) rescheduling a
morning practice to 8 a.m. inside the school timetable instead of 6 a.m. Planning training
inside school hours was possible, because the Municipality-TDC could influence the school
timetable. Through these initiatives, the young swimmers were offered additional training
and at the same time a more balanced school and training week.

In a recent study on evaluating ATDEs in English female soccer, Gledhill and Harwood
(2019) suggested that key stakeholders (e.g., parents, coaches, teachers) could benefit from
education around the dual career demands of female football players and strategies to help
players deal with these demands. However, our study indicated that beyond teaching
individual athletes and parents to deal with pressures from multiple domains, integrating the
efforts of key stakeholders positioned both at the micro- and macro-level of the environment
helped coordinate and balance dual career demands (Henriksen, Storm, Kuettel, Linnér, &
Stambulova, under review).

Dealing with potential tensions and conflicts. In collaboration between different
stakeholders, tensions and conflicts were to be expected. A recent study in tennis in Flandern
showed that tensions developed between a club and the federation when the club’s coach felt
that the federation called players to the senior level too early and behind the coach’s back
(Sotiridou et al., 2017). Their study suggested that clarifying responsibilities is a pivotal
aspect of a well-managed relationship.

In the current study we expected some tensions, but the participants did not report any
within the last three years. The Municipality-TDC commented: “Early on we had some
conflicts because the club complained in public, but we don’t experience anything like that anymore.” The rather long history of their collaboration, the shared philosophy (see further below) and the formal partnership agreement might be a reason no tensions were reported. Their agreed upon working plan clearly defines who should do what, when and why, and in addition to where the financing, if any, should come from. In a study on collaboration between several organizations and sport psychology professionals in the United States, the authors found that the stakeholders within the collaboration spend limited time on conflicts and disagreements due to simplicity of the social and political partnership as well as clearly defined roles (Pierce et al., 2018).

Philosophy of talent development. Having a clearly defined coaching philosophy is crucial for a professional coach (Cushion & Partington, 2016). Further, creating an organizational culture based on shared basic assumptions is also essential within talent development (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b). A key feature of the collaboration in this study was the talent development stakeholders’ shared philosophy of talent development. The philosophy was best described by three assumptions: talent development requires a long-term focus; talent development takes place in the local environment, and a creative approach is required to optimize a local training environment.

The first shared assumption was visible in the way they described the development of senior elite athletes (not junior results) as the goal of talent development. This required patience and a long-term focus. The Federation-TDC was clearly impressed with how the Club-TDC and Municipality-TDC managed to stay focused on the long-term achievements of the athletes:

If we just look at their results, they do not win much. They may win one or two medals in the national championship. But the interesting thing is that we hardly ever discuss
how it is now, but more often we talk about how it will be in five to eight year’s time.

Further, the Club-TDC stated:

It is easy to provide the young swimmers with a high amount of training hours to let them win at an early age, but it usually does not work out well in the long run. It is more important that we have a long-term plan than to produce two or three youth stars from time to time.

This assumption was also visible in their formalized agreements, particularly in the way they planned their action points one to two years ahead. Their common work on getting a new swimming pool for the municipality and club was also a long-term effort where everyone knew and accepted that it would take years to accomplish. This corresponds with a recent study in female soccer (Gledhill & Harwood, 2019) that showed how the players had a positive perception of long-term development focus at their clubs.

Another key assumption in their shared philosophy revolved around the purpose of the collaboration. It was all about helping the local club to improve as a talent development environment. Every time they discussed an initiative, they considered its potential impact in the swimming club. The Municipality-TDC collaborated with several federations and had years of experience working together with the swimming federation. He had noticed a change in the federation’s approach. Previously, the federation’s strategy was to design a template that all clubs could use as a guideline. At the time of the study, the federation focused more on developing a contextualized strategy for each club based on its preconditions and history.

The Municipality-TDC said: “Instead of setting up some fixed template that the club should fit into, the swimming federation has chosen to say that partnerships should make sense to both the local club and the federation.”

Due to a tough swimming culture with a large amount of training hours from an early
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In the following, they all emphasized the importance of balancing the young swimmers’ schedule, so it fits better with the daily life routines, school and recovery. The Club-TDC said: “The swimmers had to swim from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. before going to school. So, now that they can come here two hours later... it makes it a bit more humane.” The next step in their collaboration was about educating the coaches of the club. The Federation-TDC explained how the education of coaches was important at all levels, but that a particular challenge was keeping a high-quality training offer for those swimmers who currently could not qualify for the national training center but still had motivation for swimming:

We would like to do something for the group that is just below the elite in order to keep a large group of swimmers for as long as possible. We are already making an effort together with the municipality and club to do something about it.

The third assumption of the shared philosophy was that you have to be creative to increase resources (i.e., facilities, hours in the swimming pool, coaching staff) and to optimize the use of them. This assumption actually connected some of the dots between the other two assumptions. Because making a new swimming pool was not a quick deal, they found other ways to promote the talent development in the club (i.e., mutual practice with the local gymnastics and track and field clubs and rescheduling the training hours). The Municipality-TDC commented: “We could see that there was a problem with the limited time available in the swimming pool. Thus, we set the goal of becoming the best club in “dry-land” training in Danish swimming.” Their lack of access to training facilities might be a part of the explanation why they originally focused on long-term development, dry-land training and joint training with other sports. In case the plans of a new swimming stadium are realized, it will be interesting to see, if the philosophy is strong enough to maintain these ideas in play.
Success of the collaboration. On a micro level, Henriksen et al. (2010a) suggested that the aim of talent development environments is to continuously develop elite athletes. On a macro level, De Bosscher et al. (2015) measured success by the number of medals won in summer and winter Olympic games on a score-based system. Between the macro- and micro-levels, the collaborators in the current study perceived success in their own way reflecting the collaboration quality.

They mentioned three different key indicators of success: “increased talent mass”, “supporting the development of young swimmers”, and “a joint talent development strategy”.

The Municipality-TDC elaborated on these indicators as follows:

We actually started the collaboration by discussing how we could get a bit more morning training for our sports class pupils. We had only 5-6 young swimmers in the sports classes. We now have 36 swimmers, we have expanded the capacity significantly, the whole club has become more professionalized and we managed to put a potential new swimming pool on the political agenda.

Sotiriadou et al. (2017) suggested three outcomes of inter-organizational relationships including: coach development, club development, and player development. In the current study the organizational triangle’s collaboration was centered on club development but in relation to the whole environment around the athletes (e.g., school-sport balance).

General Discussion

This case study contributed to the HEA in talent development by elaborating on the ATDE and ESF models (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017), which resulted in incorporating the concept of organizational triangle into the ATDE model and converting the ESF working model into the CSF working model. These theoretical developments were investigated by studying relationships and factors of successful
collaboration within the organizational triangle involving the Danish swimming federation, the specific municipality, and the local swimming club, and were revealed to be useful. The findings demonstrated how successful collaboration of the three stakeholders who invested time and efforts into the processes that were invisible to the local club swimmers (e.g., meetings, arrangements, joint projects) resulted in the visible and appreciated outcomes at the club level (e.g., improved training hours and dry-land training, realistic planning for a new swimming pool).

The HEA and the Organizational Triangle to Promote Local Talent Development

Denmark is a small nation and cannot afford to lose talented athletes due to poor organization. Storm, Nielsen and Thomsen (2016) expressed concerns about the unrealized potential of municipal involvement in Danish talent development. However, the findings of this study indicate that the Danish municipalities play a vital role in assisting the local ATDE. As Henriksen and colleagues (2010a; 2010b) found, there are eight shared features of successful ATDEs. The most relevant for this study were: integration of efforts, training that allows for diversification, a focus on long-term development, and a shared talent development and collaboration philosophy. This study revealed that the municipality can be a key stakeholder for facilitating such features within the local ATDEs. As an example, facilitated by the Municipality-TDC and recommended by the Federation-TDC, the swimming, gymnastics, and track and field clubs arranged mutual practices. Further, the Municipality-TDC contributed to arrangements with the municipality administration, strategic thinking, time planning, and promoting education at the club level. It is important that the municipalities have an opportunity to work and collaborate horizontally within the local sport landscape. When clubs and federations tend to care only about their own sport, the municipality is in a position to care about all the different sports and see potential overlaps.
and mutual interests. This position generates several opportunities, for example, to help
athletes find their true potential (e.g., creating a talent transfer center), facilitate sampling in
different sports (e.g., by letting sports schools’ practices include a broad spectrum of sport
experiences), and facilitate forums with coaches from different sports. All of these tasks are
key challenges in talent development (Baker, 2017; Côté, Lidor, & Hackfort, 2009) but may
not be top priority for a specific club inside a specific sport.

A focus on organizational triangles facilitates understanding of how macro- and micro-
level stakeholders interact in promoting the local talent development processes. We found the
talent development in Danish sport, but we also realize that other countries might have
different systems consisting of different stakeholders. We suggest that the ATDE model
(Henriksen, 2010a) is a useful analytical framework to identify various organizational
triangles and explore their stakeholders’ relationships and collaboration in their relevant
contexts.

The ESF model within the HEA inspired development of the CSF model that was used
in this study to guide data collection, analysis, and presentation of the results. The only
component of the CSF working model not confirmed in the CSF empirical model was dealing
with potential tensions and conflicts. However, we think it should be kept in the model as we
can expect tensions or conflicts of interest to arise when people enter a collaboration (Pierce
et al., 2018; Sotiriadou et al., 2017) or when collaboration is less successful than in the case
under this study.

Applied Reflections

Fletcher and Wagstaff (2009) called for further investigation of what the “twilight zone”
between the individual and organizational levels of ATDEs consists of. They suggested to
take a starting point on either the organizational, inter-group, intra-group, or individual levels. Findings of this study supported the importance of an additional fifth level, an inter-organizational one. Further, recent research in organizational psychology (Wagstaff, 2015; 2019a) suggested to move the function of the sport psychologist beyond individual psychology skill training to additionally focus on organisations around the athletes and how they collaborate. Sport psychology professionals and talent development coordinators are advised to focus on optimizing collaboration at the inter-organizational level where macro- and micro-level stakeholders interact and influence talent development in the local club. Unfortunately, practical guidelines to inform such processes are lacking and sport psychology practitioners often lack the education, expertise and experience to successfully work to optimize organizational and inter-organizational collaboration, which speaks to a need for revision of curricula (Wagstaff, 2019b).

For the talent development coordinators, the CSF model might be useful to guide collaboration between organizations. Initiating a new collaboration can be an overwhelming task, and the CSF model can serve as a template for a collaboration contract to match expectations of the stakeholders. The following questions derived from the CSF model can guide the design a collaboration: (1) what are the most important preconditions for the collaboration? (2) which processes do we expect in the collaboration? (3) why should we collaborate on talent development in our context? (4) how shall we handle potential conflicts and tensions? (5) what initiatives and projects can promote talent development in our local club? (6) what benefits do we expect from this collaboration? To support the above suggestions more case examples are needed to derive features of successful and less successful collaboration within organizational triangle(s) of ATDEs.

Methodological Reflections and Future Research
As mentioned by Hodge and Sharpe (2017), “A case study is expected to catch the complexity of a single bounded case” (p. 62). In this paper the complexity refers to the collaboration between the three stakeholders and the boundedness refers to the exclusiveness of this collaboration. In our case selection we asked the Federation-TDC to point out relevant stakeholders within the successful collaboration, and only one person from each organization participated directly in the collaboration. Thus, to respond to the study objectives, the three stakeholders were essential as participants. Three interviews can be seen as a limitation, but also optimal for this particular case, as we tested the concept of the organizational triangle and the CSF model.

When interviewing the Club-TDC, oftentimes the answers appeared brief and lacking depth. However, what the Club-TDC discussed was collaborated through multiple stakeholders, thus the quality of the data was not jeopardized. Even though the first author had experience conducting qualitative interviews and was familiar with curiosity-driven questions (Smith & Sparkes, 2016), the most experienced interviewer can occasionally struggle to facilitate rich examples during an interview. In the future, to help promote more genuine responses, we recommend mobile interviews (McGannon, Smith, Kendellen, & Golsalves, 2019) or guided walks (Seanor et al., 2019) when interviewing stakeholders in a local club. Moving around in the club environment would more likely stimulate examples and rich accounts.

Conclusion

Talent development research based on the HEA highlights the importance of the overall ATDE, but little is known about the relations between its macro- and micro-levels. This study on the example of Danish swimming showcased how a federation, a municipality and a local club collaborated to promote talent development within the local club. The study expanded
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the HEA with several new developments. First, we showed the ATDE model to be useful in analyzing and identifying talent development stakeholders. Second, we introduced the concept of organizational triangle which helped to explore the relationship between the three stakeholders and their influence at the local club. Third, we developed the CSF working model and piloted its usefulness to explain factors leading to the collaboration success within Danish swimming. Fourth, we presented the empirical CSF model which might inspire researchers to conduct similar case studies within their sport and sociocultural contexts. It is our hope that this study of successful collaboration within the ATDE will aid the work on creating environments that nurture sporting talents.
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Figure 1: The Athletic Talent Development Environment model modified with the Organizational Triangle incorporated

505x377mm (72 x 72 DPI)
Figure 2: The Collaboration Success Factor (CSF) working model

505x378mm (72 x 72 DPI)
Figure 3: The Collaboration Success Factor (CSF) empirical model: A strategic collaboration in Danish swimming

505x379mm (72 x 72 DPI)