Creating a Sustainable Talent Development Culture

Context-driven Sport Psychology Practice in a Danish Talent Academy

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Abstract

This paper describes a one-year intervention aiming at creating a sustainable talent development culture by actively involving the director and leading coaches of the Academy in a research process, thus broadening their horizons, developing their self-reflexivity, and empowering them to improve their situation. The intervention proceeded in five phases. Phase one was exploring and reflecting on previous experiences and understanding needs. Phase two was about understanding past, present and future values and strategies to gain a foothold and stability in the new context. Phase three was co-creation of a cultural analysis which was important for constructing the identity of the academy and developing self-reflexivity. Phase four was designing the value-based compass poster, and phase five was sharing, evaluating and looking forward within the local sociocultural context.

Reflections on the program suggest that a context-driven approach to the creation of an environment for talent development can enhance the successful nature of the process.

Keywords: organizational culture, young athletes, community-based intervention, talent development environment
Creating a Sustainable Talent Development Culture: Context-driven Sports Psychology
Practice in a Danish Talent Academy

Context-driven sports and exercise psychology practice (CDP) was recently introduced in sports psychology literature (Schinke & Stambulova, 2017). This approach recognises that each context necessitates aspects of an idiosyncratic consulting approach that might include modes of communication, social norms, relational strategies, and how the practitioners position themselves, and the field of sports psychology, in relation to clients. No two contexts are the same (e.g. Terry, 2009). CDP is a matter of widening practitioners’ and researchers’ perspectives beyond the athletes, which means paying significant attention to the context and oneself (Schinke & Stambulova, 2017). Therefore, locally influenced reflection on practice is crucial to better understand, assess, and intervene within an organization in order to promote more effective functioning in terms of performance, relationships, and wellbeing (Storm & Larsen, in press). This article describes and reflects upon an intervention with the aim of creating a sustainable talent development culture.

Organizational life in sport is influenced by emotions and attitudes, stress and well-being, behaviour, and environments (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Wagstaff, 2017; Wagstaff & Larner, 2015). However, organizational culture is an aspect of sports psychology that is still in its infancy (see Maitland et al., 2015; McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018). Nevertheless, it has been argued that creating and maintaining organizational cultures is a key function of the sports psychology practitioner (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). For example, Mathorne, Henriksen and Stambulova (2020) recently demonstrated with a case study that the opportunity to work and collaborate horizontally within the local sports landscape is crucial to successful talent development, at least in a small nation such as Denmark. This case study illustrates successful coordination of talent development at local level, which could be a task for sports psychology practitioners.
To provide effective consulting at organizational level there is potential in including the genre of cultural sports psychology in favor of organizational identity and sense-making (McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019). Cultural sports psychology provides an insight into what it means for different people to be in organizations and the possibilities and limitations afforded to them (McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019). CSP critiques universal theories and provides an argument for researchers and practitioners to recognize the cultural values and identities within any population or group.

Organizational life should not be an exception. Contextually intelligent practice (Stambulova & Schinke, 2017) makes it possible to create the optimal environment for particular learners in particular contexts. However, there is still a need to understand the role that a sports psychology practitioner can play in this process.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a descriptive account of a one-year context-driven sports psychology intervention, the aim of which was to create a sustainable talent development culture at a Danish Academy. The intervention was designed to actively involve the director and the leading coaches of the Academy in a research process, thus broadening their horizons, developing their self-reflexivity (McGannon & Johnson, 2009), and empowering them to improve their situation.

The case has been constructed on the basis of the author’s field notes, including informal interviews, notes from discussions with colleagues, and notes from the formal evaluation with the director and leading coaches. The project adheres to the national ethical data protection guidelines. The individuals involved were provided with information about their rights (e.g., hidden identity, ability to withdraw at any time). The description of the process as it was narrated in a draft for this article was shared and discussed with the individuals involved, who reported that the narrative resonated with them. These member reflections (Smith & McGannon, 2017) provided new insights to what the process has meant to them.
Organizational culture forms an important part of the environment, but it is not a reflection of the whole environment. The environment is the surroundings with a particular structure of relationships between key individuals (e.g. coaches, parents) and key components (e.g. schools, federation) with different roles at micro- and macro-level. The organizational culture is a set of shared assumptions (i.e. beliefs and values) specific to a particular group. According to Schein (2010), all organizations are faced with two basic tasks. Firstly, the organization must ‘survive’ and grow by adapting to the external context. During such adaptation, the organization negotiates its core mission, goals and the means required to accomplish these goals. Secondly, the organization adapts by means of internal integration which, for example, involves adapting the social order and the criteria for what is valued and acknowledged.

The Danish Talent Academy and Context

The Danish Talent Academy is located in a middle-sized community in Denmark. It is managed by a director, and employs three well-educated leading coaches who are considered to play a key role in the organization. Approximately 100 young people were enrolled for the first year of the Academy, which is the period of time that this project relates to. The Academy was open to all the local young people and therefore no selection and identification procedures were established. The Academy is designed to complement local sports clubs. Most of the coaches in the local clubs are volunteers and have no formal training. The young people represent seven sports (handball, football, golf, swimming, boxing, taekwondo, gymnastics), and are between 10 and 19 years old. They represent different sporting levels, ranging from competing at regional junior level to representing youth national teams. They live in the local area with their families, and some of the oldest are living in a residence connected to the Academy.

The director and the leading coaches have managed a Talent Academy since 2010 in another area of Denmark. They received funding from local government and a private foundation to
start up this new local talent development environment after a long application process in which they had to cope with insecurity about their future. In Denmark, the local authorities (i.e. municipalities; Mathorne et al., 2020) play a crucial role in talent development, because they have the local knowledge and insight and have the opportunity to coordinate and integrate efforts.

**Professional Philosophy**

I consider myself a scientist-practitioner (Lane & Corrie, 2006). I hold a position at the university within a unit for sports psychology and have eight years of teaching experience. Concurrently, I have provided consultancy services for Danish municipalities, clubs and federations within the Danish elite sports system in several projects (e.g. devising talent development strategies and supporting coach development). My educational background is sports science and a PhD in talent development and sports psychology. According to the modern scientist-practitioner model, the practitioner can be seen as a researcher who relies on theory as he or she makes an assessment of a problem and decides on a strategy to resolve it. The theories a practitioner brings to an intervention guide his or her assessments, reflections and actions (Lane & Corrie, 2006). As a scientist-practitioner, my consulting philosophy was guided by ecological psychology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), organizational psychology (Wagstaff, 2017), and cultural sports psychology (e.g. McGannon & Schinke, 2015; Schinke, McGannon, Parham, & Lane, 2012). Within these theoretical approaches, the individual-context interaction is considered irreducible as a unit of analysis. Human (and thus talent) development is considered to be a mutual accommodation that takes place between a young person and his or her environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Since we all think through culture, the practitioner should acknowledge his or her own background and reflect on the ways in which one’s own world views influence the practice (Schinke & Stambulova, 2017). People are influential and influenced by their sociocultural contexts: “we cannot step outside culture, thus to ignore it would be to ignore a key matter that shapes all of us” (McGannon &
The holistic ecological approach to talent development in sport (HEA; Schinke, 2015, p. 5) and organizational psychology provides the basis for shifting the attention from the individual athletes to the broader contexts in which they develop, especially when providing services for young athletes, who are likely to experience organizational stress (e.g. balancing school and sport).

My professional philosophy is based on a constructivist approach to learning as a fundamentally social phenomenon reflecting humans as social beings, as "meaning exists neither in us, nor in the world, but in the dynamic relation of living in the world" (Wenger, 1998, p. 54). I believe in a situated approach to knowing and learning, which means that the working alliance between the SSP and the client is a context for learning and action. The consultation context influences service provision, the overall goal of support, the people’s engagement in the support and how the SSP is integrated into the environment and broader network. I believe that it is beneficial for the managers’, coaches’ and athletes’ learning outcomes to establish complementary pairings and relationships within the group, because learning and supervision is a dynamic transaction among the individuals, the physical environment, and the sociocultural context.

In keeping with the philosophy described, and based on the specific need for a sustainable talent development culture, the methods used were (1) creating social situations where the people apply their knowledge, reflect and discuss to develop a sustainable talent development culture (2) using dialogue and co-creation to connect the involved people, and engage them so they take ownership of their own learning processes. (3) supporting the learning processes of the individuals and the organization, so they reflect upon where they are, what they are coming from, and what they are to develop next.

Description of the Intervention
A few weeks before the Academy secured the funding, the director contacted me for support during the process of starting the new athletic talent development environment. I did not have any previous involvement in the setup. The director described the ambitions and dreams and voiced a concern about the relocation. We discussed how I could best provide support and agreed on a project which developed the leading coaches and created and maintained a coherent organizational culture (Henriksen, Storm, & Larsen, 2018).

The HEA suggests that some environments are superior to others in their capacity to guide young athletes in their transition to higher and more competitive levels (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017). A number of case studies have contributed to knowledge about the characteristics of such environments. One characteristic is a strong and coherent organizational culture (Henriksen, Larsen & Christensen, 2014). The intervention was designed to actively involve the director and the leading coaches of the environment in a research process, thus broadening their horizons, developing their self-reflexivity (McGannon & Johnson, 2009) and empowering them to improve their situation.

The process was informed by Lewin (1947) and inspired by the example of Henriksen (2015), since the intervention targeted development of a sustainable talent development culture. Lewin (1947) suggested that a culture change process evolves through three stages: the unfreeze stage, the change stage and the refreeze stage. In the unfreeze stage, the group members’ survival anxiety is greater than the learning anxiety and therefore they find it meaningful to change. This was already the case for the director and the leading coaches, because it was what stimulated them to initiate the contact. The change stage is the learning stage, where the members focus on learning new behaviors, skills and competences. The director and the leading coaches were highly motivated to learn. In the refreeze stage, the new behaviors, skills and competences are gradually incorporated.
and internalized into the basic assumptions that guides the everyday lives of the members (Henriksen, et al., 2018).

**Phase One: Exploring and Reflecting on Previous Experiences and Understanding Needs**

During the first two to three months in the environment, I focused primarily on building trusting relationships for learning and action, and I was present during their everyday practice, since I haven’t collaborated with them before and was well aware that they have had eight years of experience from the previous local area. My first task was to contribute to a full day kick-off arrangement for parents and athletes at the Academy. The director presented the overall structure, the leading coaches presented the structure of the training at the Academy, and I was asked to present the research that I would be informed by in my work at the Academy, which was research into specialization pathways in a Danish context (e.g. Storm, Henriksen, & Christensen, 2012) and characteristics of successful talent development environments in a Scandinavian context (e.g. Henriksen, Larsen, & Christensen, 2014).

The intention was to get everybody onboard because the director and the leading coaches were dependent on a good start and support from the local people in order to successfully adapt. During this day, I talked to many parents and athletes and had the chance to understand their expectations for the upcoming Academy. I conducted informal interviews with the leading coaches and the director about their expectations and previous experiences with talent development environments in order to understand them and their ideas, aspirations and needs. They all described their concerns about how the Academy could be sustainable and provide a meaningful contribution to the local area and the young people at the Academy and their parents. They reported that they found local club rivalry a threat to their vision of sharing their knowledge and supporting local volunteer-based clubs and club coaches. The director expressed concern about the potential conflicts at political level. These concerns were connected to their previous experiences. Previous examples of
accusations by clubs of stealing players were central in their narratives about previous experiences. These issues had reached a point where they influenced the reflections and ways of relating to new people and communities and thus became a day-to-day concern.

The first phase could be considered an acute adaptation phase, and my role and function was to support them in gaining a foothold as an organization after relocation. In doing so, we explored together their previous experiences and tried to understand how the experiences were steering their choices and immediate reactions. My role was to provide them with perspective, support their reflections and mirror their reactions, and we discussed them in comparison with previous experiences. We aimed to clarify a meaningful primary task and purpose for the organization as a local talent development environment.

At one particular meeting, the key people were obviously overwhelmed by starting the Academy (e.g. local media attention, which was mainly positive, but still a lot of new relationships to build). In this conversation we identified how they reacted in pressurised and in critical situations. In particular, their approach to collaborations with other organizations was influenced by previous experiences. Typically, they expected there to be rivalry rather than collaborative relationships with potential local partner communities. These patterns made it difficult for them to find a foothold in the new situation. In this conversation they also realised there was a different political climate to the one they had previously experienced and a local willingness to collaborate. Previous experience shaped their expectations. And for the people involved it was an eye-opener to become aware of their reactions in light of the past. However, they did also meet adversity (e.g. some local organizations that did not acknowledge the new local talent development academy because it was perceived as a potential threat to the local volunteer-based sports environment) and we planned that when they experienced adversity, they would approach it with openness and curiosity, rather than defence and exclusion.
Phase Two: Finding a Foothold and Stability in the New Context

There was a need to find a foothold and stability as an organization in the new context. This phase included three important steps. Firstly, we discussed their driving force (i.e. motivation and values). The key questions were: why is it meaningful to establish and run a talent development academy? What is important to you as coaches and/or the manager? This first step was centred around a comparison between their dreams for this new talent development setup and their previous way of practising as coaches and leaders. Most reflections included this differentiation, and in these discussions the director and the leading coaches realised that they could not build a new academy in the same way that they did before. They all had similar motivations that centred around a significant interest in developing young people. One of the leading coaches described during this phase:

"It is not enough to create a great training programme and support the athlete in completing at a high level to develop their potential. I have found that developing my relationships with the young people and knowing about their lives has a much better impact. This is one difference between how I related to the young people previously and how I do now."

Secondly, involving the athletic talent development model (ATDE model; Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010), we explored the structure of the environment. The ATDE model helps to describe the structure of the environment on two levels (micro and macro) and two domains (athletic and non-athletic) and the various components (e.g. parents, coaches, school, related teams/clubs) and the relationship between the people and communities within the environment. The aim of using the ATDE model was to visualize their embeddedness and co-create an understanding of how they were related, thereby developing their self-reflexivity. A clean version of the ATDE model without arrows and components, only the circles marking the microsystem and the macrosystem, the athletic domain and the non-athletic domain, was the point of departure. We looked at each component (e.g. other clubs, schools, family) one by one, talked about the role and
function of them, placed them as bricks in the blank model either at micro or macro level, we talked
about the most important relationships in order to explore strengths and weaknesses in the holistic
structure of the environment and drew the arrows on the model. During this process we identified
strong and challenging relationships and discussed which ones to develop. The strong ones were
internal relationships (e.g. strong community of young athletes and coaches respectively). The less
developed relationships were the inter-organizational one at macro-level (Mathorne et al., 2020).
This exercise was concrete and visualized the holistic structures of the organization for the key
people who were well aware that the holistic structure is dynamic and changing. Nevertheless, the
creation of a snapshot picture was helpful in the conversation about understanding past, present
and future structures of the organization. This was an important part of gaining a foothold and
stability in the new context.

Thirdly, we performed an exercise exploring strengths, weaknesses, threats and
opportunities of the Academy (Johnson & Scholes, 1988). Individually, the key people wrote on
post-it notes and we put them together on a large poster. Talking about each item and discussing
them we agreed whether we perceived it as a strength or a weakness, a threat or an opportunity.
This exercise served to enable negotiation between the director and the leading coaches regarding
how they saw the Academy in its context.

Phase Three: Co-creation of a Cultural Analysis

Phase three was a lengthy and challenging phase, because our aimed was to analyze the
evolving organizational culture. In retrospect, we agreed that this phase was important for
constructing the identity of the Academy and developing self-reflexivity among the director and the
leading coaches. During phase three we held three workshops that were divided into several
elements, all informed by research on successful talent development environments (Henriksen et al.,
The first workshop was initiated by the questions “What is important to us” and “what is important to me”, to remember that there are common values for the organization but also individual learning points and motivations shaping the everyday climate. ‘Think-pair-share’ was a principle structure for these types of exercises, which means that they were asked first to reflect individually and write on coloured cards, then asked to challenge their perspectives in pairs and, finally, share all together to negotiate a common understanding (see Slavin, 2014). The next step was to discuss a list of features based on research in successful talent development environments (Henriksen et al., 2014; Martindale & Mortimer, 2011). The list included long-term development focus, external support networks, role models, sharing knowledge, a broad basis in the training environment etc. They were asked to look at the scheme and descriptors of each feature, and then select the features characterising their organization at the moment, the features that are absent in their environment, and three concrete features they would like to develop and integrate as a part of the sustainable talent development culture. These three were (1) support of sporting goals by the wider environment, (2) support for the development of psychosocial skills, and (3) training that allows free initiative.

The aim of the second workshop was to explore their tacit talent perceptions. Christensen (2009) studied how top-level soccer coaches identify talent. This study challenges a common assumption that talent identification is a rational or objective process. She found that coaches use their practical sense and their visual experience to recognize patterns of movement among the players. And they had a preference for players that, from the coaches' perspective, exhibit a potential to learn, practice, and improve. In the workshop, the director and the leading coaches were presented with this evidence. They were asked to select a person they considered to be talented and
then describe this persona with regard to attributes, behaviour and skills. This specific persona was
the focus for discussions surrounding "what attitude do we have a ‘taste’ for?"; "what behaviour do
we value among coaches, parents and adolescents?". The metaphor of a flower in the sun and a
flower in the shadow was used do understand their respective chances of flourishing. We shifted the
focus towards the leaders and coaches’ behaviour in a practical sense. They imagined themselves
being the sunlight and the young people being the flowers. They were encouraged to challenge each
other regarding who their light was shining on. This exercise helped them to become aware of who
they acknowledge and give the most attention to and was an opportunity to discuss what it means to
the athletes’ development. This session was an eye-opener to the director and the leading coaches,
and they continuously referred to it as a turning point where they became aware of their own
professional background, biases, knowledge and interests (McGannon & Johnson, 2009).

The third workshop started with a summary of my perspective based on observations from
everyday life and the talent perception exercise. I presented what I saw as basic assumptions of the
organization and provided arguments with stories and observation. My draft was at the office for
two weeks so they could reformulate, respond and reflect. The director and the leading coaches
wrote comments and statements connected to the draft when they came to mind. In a joint
discussion, we agreed on four statements that described the basic assumptions: “Talent is curiosity,
openness and ‘displaying courage like a man’. These are important skills leading to success in our
organization”; “Close relationships are a precondition for learning and development”; "Relationships across sports optimize wellbeing, personal and sporting development”; “We have a
responsibility to develop our environment and adapt to the local culture. Our existence depends on
local acknowledgement”. This phase of co-creating a cultural analysis constituted an important part
of their learning process (i.e. change stage; Lewin, 1947), which was also important for
constructing the identity of the Academy and developing self-reflexivity.
Phase Four: Co-designing the Value-based Compass Poster

The fourth phase was to shift focus from basic assumptions and espoused values to values enacted in daily life at the Academy (i.e. from the change stage to the refreeze stage). Step one was that the director and the leading coaches were prepared with notes on what behavior they value and want more of. Step two was a collaborative process of sharing, challenging and organizing these notes. A number of themes emerged in a plenary discussion, they agreed that an age-related focus was a necessity. Age 10-12, age 13-15, and age 16-19 were meaningful categories. For example, a general focus was: “Making mistakes is a natural part of practicing. We teach everybody to try again”. The focus for the oldest group was “Developing talent goes beyond training. We empower athletes and support them in taking responsibility for their own development and that of others”, whilst one statement from the poster targeting actions for the youngest age group was “we shift between play, practice and competition”. These statements were further developed for four posters. All were accepted as the team’s compass. For a compass to be useful, one needs the ability to read a map and manage a compass. The director and leading coaches have to orientate themselves and the organization within their external context. A compass is an instrument that enables planning and guidance once they are on their way. The posters displaying the values were hung on the walls at the office and were visible every day to the leading coaches as a start. In this sense, the posters served as visible symbols of what they valued. The process of creating them constituted an important part of the development of self-awareness and did indeed empower them to improve their own situation.

This is just a few examples of the many actions we planned and reflected on to bring the values to life. Other actions included Friday meetings for leading coaches, networks for local coaches, sports psychology for young athletes developed by coaches, an inspiration map for coaches to solve immediate challenges, writing short stories for the social media, and so on.
Together, these actions served to support the long-term self-reflexivity among the key people in the environment and the holistic ecological development of the talent development environment.

**Phase Five: Sharing, Evaluating and Looking Forward within the Sociocultural Context**

The posters displaying the values were hung up representing an artifact, while stories concerning everyday life at the Academy were carefully developed and shared on social media and a workshop for parents and athletes was arranged with this particular focus of strengthening the Academy’s identity. We planned a closing event for the first year of the Academy’s existence. All parents and athletes were invited, the main idea was to share the good stories from everyday life that could support the creation of a sustainable talent development culture. This event was the first official sharing of the co-created values poster and we asked for feedback and reflections. The director and leading coaches had never before done anything similar and were excited to do this exercise. After I presented the cultural analysis result and the process, which were described as basic assumptions in phase three, one of the leading coaches presented stories from everyday life underpinning the values. For example, how they worked with sharing knowledge, openness and curiosity. The event was also an invitation to the parents and athletes to share their reflections in plenary and provide the key people with perspectives and further nuances. In general, parents and athletes expressed satisfaction and commitment. According to my notes, one parent stated, “this setup is so motivating for my son and can’t wait for the next year to come”. But some critical reflections to the contrary were shared, such as: “In our area some people would benefit from events like this, but located closer to us, just a suggestion”. Meaning that they were asking for even more local action. This was at the same time a step towards understanding the needs and interests of all cultural members and the wider cultural community (McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019). Evaluation of the intervention was by means of reflection and ongoing feedback. One week after this workshop, the director, the leading coaches and I met for a formal evaluation and look to the future.
This was a three hour meeting recalling the process and identifying key learning points. I asked what had had significant influence on the development of their Academy and on them. Co-creation was highlighted as important for the process of developing the organizational culture. During this evaluation meeting, all key people were satisfied and motivated to achieve further development of the environment in a joint collaboration.

The director stated how it was important to have someone ‘from outside’ coming and asking questions and keeping them focused on their development and helping them understand their own cultural blind spots, otherwise they would easily go back to doing what they usually did, and then reproducing their practices, which would not necessarily be good in this situation. The leading coaches agreed that becoming aware of their perception of talent and how it guides their attention and practice was a turning point. In the evaluation they told how they keep challenging each other to make sure that they deliberately create equal opportunities for athletes to develop in their environment. They discuss issues that go beyond the training of athletes. It would be relevant to follow up on this, one or two years after, to understand the long-term effects of this intervention.

**Reflections on the Program**

The purpose of this article was to provide a descriptive account of a one-year context-driven sports psychology intervention with the aim of creating a sustainable talent development culture at a Danish Academy. The paper provides a specific example, including exercises that support this process. This can serve as vicarious learning for other scientific practitioners within the field of sports psychology (Cotterill, Schinke, & Thelwell, 2016).

The program was designed to actively involve the director and the leading coaches in a research process, thus broadening their horizons, developing their self-reflexivity (McGannon & Johnson, 2009), and empowering them to improve their situation. This turned out to be important because creating a sustainable talent development culture is a lengthy process and it is closely
related to how personalized the relationships are between the leaders and the athletes. Throughout
the process, the director and the leading coaches developed their relationships with the athletes.
Schein states that the only way a leader is going to change culture is through personalizing the
relationships with those he or she is leading (Schein & von Ameln, 2019). They don’t have to be
best buddies, but they have to know each other well enough personally to have a high level of trust
and openness.

The last decade has seen an increase in ATDE research and an expansion of knowledge in this
field (e.g. Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017; Mathorne et al., 2020). The HEA, with its two working
models, has shown its value as a lens to aid the study of specific environments (Henriksen &
Stambulova, 2017), and recently the field was further developed with the study of inter-
organizational collaborations (Mathorne, et al., 2020). Most of this previous and current research
has focused on describing the holistic structure and explaining the success factors of the
environments, whilst the current case study is generating new applied insights in this area and
provide an example of how to create sustainable success features (e.g. a coherent organizational
culture).

Recent research (Mathorne et al., 2020) showcased personalised relationships between key
stakeholders with decision-making power and shared assumptions of the talent development
philosophy as success factors for effective coordination of talent development. From an applied
perspective, the current case study support this finding, and provides an argument for practitioners
to analyze the particular culture in collaboration with the stakeholders as a strategy to help less
successful environments to strengthen their efforts.

The role of the scientist-practitioner is to understand and develop the organizational identity
(McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019). For example, when the stakeholders take an active part in the
process of investigation, they become aware of the possibilities and limitations afforded to them.
The role in this process is to work with how people are connected to each other, to nurture trusting
and meaningful relationships, the internal and external collaborations, and to empower people to
improve their own situation.

Changing and managing culture is difficult (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012a, 2012b; Henriksen,
2015), and practical guidelines to inform such processes are lacking. The potential for change is
greater when working with the formal and informal leaders instead of merely consulting athletes.
The intervention described in this paper is one possible approach and one way of developing
organizational culture from a democratic approach that was effective to these particular people in
this specific context. We need to perform a greater number of context-driven interventions to
further develop recommendation that can inform and inspire researchers and practitioners in the
context of youth sport and talent development. This current study was a first step.

It has been argued that targeting the managers and organizational issues is a core task of the
sports psychology practitioner (Fletcher & Arnold, 2017; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). I would
argue that the task includes the deliberate work of empowering and disempowering people in the
community. There is still a need for more insight into the role of sports psychology practitioners.

But based on this case example, one lesson learned is that it is a collaborative task rather than
(solely) a task of the sports psychology practitioner. If the director and the leading coaches had been
unreceptive and unwilling to learn, the intervention would not have been possible. All sessions were
carefully planned to suit clients and contexts; however, it also included spontaneous contact
interventions to manage pressing issues in situ. I did not always have an answer in advance of the
problem (Hacker & Mann, 2017), which a context-driven approach provides significant scope for.

The work was based on the idea of supporting the flourishing of the people and their
communities. This participatory, democratic process was concerned with developing practical
knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participative worldview
(Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). This approach draws participants into a collaborative and democratic form of inquiry for and with people, thereby shifting the balance between scientific practitioner and participant (Schinke & Blodgett, 2016). This approach is different from what has previously been used in studies of ATDEs (e.g. Mathorne et al., 2020).

The current case example could be of use for sports psychology practitioners new to the field, perhaps entering into practice for the first time. Henriksen (2015) has previously provided an example of creating a high-performance culture in a national team, however only very few and specialized sports psychologists work with national teams and have the legitimacy to change a national team culture in an intervention. This particular case concerns youth sport and a talent academy, which is often the workplace or target group for the (new) sports psychology practitioner.

The first obstacle to overcome is moving more closely to becoming a cultural insider (e.g. Mellalieu, 2017; Larsen, 2017). This position was necessary to get access to in order to fully understand the given site and the culturally embedded mechanisms (Mellalieu, 2017). I did so by spending a good amount of time in the environment and paid significant attention to situations that were valued by the individuals in the environment. On the contrary, the ‘outside’ position (not outsider) was also important. This perspective should not be underestimated when performing interventions that target the culture. I did seek supervision and perspective by sharing dilemmas with colleagues. I assume it helped me ‘not become blind’ to the context I was embedded in.

Sources of knowledge and evidence to guide the intervention were also discussed with colleagues.

**Effectiveness**

The impact of sports psychology interventions is hard to measure, but evaluation through reflection and ongoing feedback is the basis for assessing effectiveness. The director and the leading coaches are satisfied with how the Academy is developing and with the project. They report
a very low drop-out rate and the athletes’ satisfaction and wellbeing as their measure of effectiveness.

Creating a sustainable talent development culture is not a one-off task, it is an ongoing endeavor. Therefore, the effectiveness of the intervention from a long-term perspective depends on the self-reflexivity and cultural competence of the director and coaches. They gradually changed behaviour during the process and displayed a willingness to confront themselves in a self-reflexive manner. An example of this is the meetings they hold each week which broaden their horizons. When I come by their office, new books are at the desks and they seek inspiration from outside their own field. Furthermore, the behavior has changed towards an open attitude to external organizations and they have established new collaborations with other organizations.

As a concluding remark, it is fair to say that a community-based approach (Schinke & Blodgett, 2016) is a suitable method for context-driven consultation processes targeting the creation of a sustainable talent development culture, since it puts engaged group discussion and dialogue at the forefront. Furthermore, this particular intervention points to co-creation as a promising aspect of holistic ecological sports psychology.


Appendix

**Figure 1.** The athletic talent development environment empirical model of the Danish Talent Academy
Figure 2. The environment success factor empirical model of the Danish Talent Academy