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A Methodology to Teach Life-Skills in Connection to Sport Practice

Marios Goudas

Department of Physical Education & Sport Science, University of Thessaly

Abstract

This paper describes a life-skills program for young athletes and physical education students that is taught in the sport-field in connection to sport practice. Life-skills taught in the program include goal-setting, goal planning, positive thinking, self-talk and problem-solving. The program requires minimal time investment by athletes and coaches and its implementation is not at the expense of sport-skills training. Rather, results from studies that evaluated the program showed that it facilitates the enhancement of sport performance. The related publications have provided only a brief description of the program. Therefore, the current paper outlines the program in more detail to facilitate those interested to implement it.

Keywords: *life-skills program, young athletes, teaching, sport-skills*

Corresponding address: Marios Goudas
Department of Physical Education and Sports Sciences, University of Thessaly
42100, Karyes, Trikala, Greece
Email: mgoudas@pe.uth.gr

Ερευνητική

Μια Μέθοδος Διδασκαλίας Δεξιότητων Ζωής σε Συνδυασμό με την Εξάσκηση Κινητικών Δεξιότητων

Μάριος Γούδας

Τμήμα Επιστήμης Φυσικής Αγωγής και Αθλητισμού, Πανεπιστήμιο Θεσσαλίας

Περίληψη

Το άρθρο αυτό περιγράφει ένα πρόγραμμα ανάπτυξης δεξιότητων ζωής για νεαρούς αθλητές/τριες και μαθητές/τριες φυσικής αγωγής, το οποίο υλοποιείται στο γήπεδο σε συνδυασμό με την εξάσκηση κινητικών δεξιότητων. Οι δεξιότητες ζωής που διδάσκονται στο πρόγραμμα είναι ο καθορισμός στόχων, η δημιουργία πλάνου επίτευξης του στόχου, η θετική σκέψη και η επίλυση προβλημάτων. Το πρόγραμμα αυτό απαιτεί ελάχιστο χρόνο από τους αθλητές/τριες και τους προπονητές/τριες και η εφαρμογή του δεν είναι σε βάρος της ανάπτυξης κινητικών δεξιότητων. Αντίθετα, τα αποτελέσματα της αξιολόγησης του προγράμματος έδειξαν ότι συμβάλλει θετικά και στην απόδοση των νεαρών αθλητών/τριών και μαθητών/τριών σε κινητικές δεξιότητες. Οι σχετικές δημοσιεύσεις από την αξιολόγηση του προγράμματος περιείχαν μόνο μια σύντομη περιγραφή του προγράμματος. Το άρθρο αυτό περιγράφει λεπτομερώς το πρόγραμμα για τη διευκόλυνση αυτών που θα ήθελαν να το υλοποιήσουν.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: *πρόγραμμα δεξιότητων ζωής, νεαροί αθλητές/τριες, κινητικές δεξιότητες*

Introduction

Athletes need to set goals and devise plans to achieve these. Often, they face obstacles and have to overcome these. They also have to act effectively within a team and communicate in the best possible way. Most of the times, they have to perform under pressure. Additionally, as success and failure are at the heart of sport, athletes need to handle these constantly. All the above processes are also common in everyday life. Therefore, several theorists consider “sport as a metaphor for life” and acknowledge its potential as an educational means (Danish, Forneris, & Wallace, 2005).

To this end, a number of educational programs have been developed aiming at teaching life-skills to athletes. The term “life-skills” refers to skills that facilitate effective living, psychological health and high-level human functioning (Nelson – Jones, 1990) while the World Health Organization (1999) defined life skills as “the ability for adaptive and positive behavior that enables individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life”. A skill to qualify as life-skill, it needs to be transferable to other situations than the one the skill was taught and additionally, the teaching process should provide for this transfer. Thus, sport and physical education programs designed for teaching life skills should involve specific components aiming towards the use of life skills in non-sport settings (Danish, Petitpas & Hale, 1993; Gould & Carson, 2008).

The Going for the Goal (GOAL) (Danish et al., 1992a, b) was the first program that utilized sport examples to teach life-skills. The program is designed to teach adolescents a sense of personal control and confidence about their future so that they can make better decisions and ultimately become better citizens. The SUPER (Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation) program (Danish, 1992; Danish & Nellen, 1997) is a sport-based adaptation of the GOAL program. The SUPER program is taught like sports clinics with participants learning life-skills related to sports in general. Gould (2008) and colleagues have developed the Captain’s Leadership Development Program (CLDP). This program teaches leadership skills to high school students selected as potential candidates for captainship on their team. The Rugby Advantage Program (Hodge, 2008), the Play It Smart program (Petitpas, 2001; Petitpas, Van Raalte, Cornelius, & Presbrey, 2004) which is related to football, and The First Tee (Petlichkoff, 2001, Weiss, et. al., 2013) golf-related program are examples of sport-specific life-skills programs that adapt life- skills teaching to a specific sport by using sport-specific situations as examples and teaching opportunities. Evaluations of the above mentioned programs have provided positive results regarding enhancement of young athletes’ life-skills [see O’Hearn and Gatz (1999, 2002), Hodge, Cresswell, Sherburn, and Dugdale (1999) and Forneris, Danish, and Scott (2007) for evaluations of the GOAL program, Brunelle, Danish, and Forneris, (2007) for the SUPER program, Petitpas et al. (2004) and VanGorden, Cornelius, and Petitpas (2010) for the Play it Smart program, Weiss, Bolter, Bhalla, and Price (2007) and Weiss, Bolter, and Kipp (2016) for the First Tee program, and Gould and Voelker (2010) and Pierce, Blanton, and Gould (2018) for the CLDP program].

The above mentioned programs are delivered in workshops or clinics separately from sport practice. However, athletes and coaches are usually in tight schedules and this often prevents them from taking benefit of or delivering a comprehensive life-skills program. Further, athletes are often skeptical for activities that take place outside their natural environment, the sports field. Similarly, physical educators have a limited time of teaching hours at their disposal to cover a wide curriculum. Therefore, it is our contention that life-skills programs should be taught in the sports field or in the gymnasium, in conjunction with sport practice. In addition, to avoid coaches’ and physical educators’ plausible hesitations, such programs should be easily implemented, require minimum time, and not be taught at the expense of sport skills. To this end, the methodology for teaching life-skills described in this paper was designed to be easily applicable by non-specialists and to be incorporated in practice sessions with minimum time requirements.

The methodology is applicable both in physical education and in youth sport settings and it provides for flexibility in the time required for implementation. It has been evaluated in different settings such as youth sport (Papacharisis, Goudas, Danish, & Theodorakis, 2005) and physical education (Goudas, Dermitzaki, Leondari, & Danish, 2006), in connection to sports such as football (Papacharisis et al., 2005), basketball and volleyball (Goudas & Giannoudis, 2008) or fitness skills (Goudas et al., 2006). Evaluation of the program included quantitative quasi-experimental designs as well as qualitative evaluations. Overall, the results showed that youngsters who took the program improved their knowledge about life-skills, were more confident in applying life-skills and improved their sport-skills. Qualitative evaluations provided evidence for the transfer of life-skills (Goudas & Giannoudis, 2010). A list of related publications with brief descriptions of the results is presented in Appendix 1.

As there were scholarly publications focusing on the evaluation of the program, a detailed description of the program was not included. Therefore, the current paper outlines the program in more detail to facilitate those interested to implement it.

Description of the program

Methods

Delivery methods of this program involve sport skill tests, brief lectures and sport skill practice related to life skills. These are described next. Further details of when and how to implement each method are presented in the next section.

Sport skill tests. Sport skill or sport conditioning tests are taken at the onset and at the end of the program. This is an essential feature of the program, as it allows for an objective assessment of performance, and more importantly, it provides young athletes or students with a specific outcome that serves as the basis for setting a goal and for appraising goal achievement. After taking the test, youngsters set goals for their performance on related worksheets. Then, they revise their goals based on principles of effective goal-setting and they make a plan to achieve them. After the program test scores serve as a means to appraise effort, for teaching adaptive attributions and for setting goals again. Thus, for example, a young footballer who gets a score of 10-sec. on a dribble test can use this score to set a challenging specific goal for improvement in dribbling such as for example, to improve by 1.5 seconds on the same test to be taken after two months. Thus, sport skills tests are the basis of this program as they are connected to goal setting, goal planning, and appraisal of goal achievement. Having said that, it is important to stress emphatically this connection to young athletes and point out that the tests are taken for personal improvement and not for social comparison within the team or the class. Specific sport tests used within this program are described in related publications. However, any valid and reliable sport-specific test may be used.

Brief lectures. These last 5 to 15 minutes and are provided at the beginning or at the end of the Life-Skills (LS) sessions (see outline). The aim is to introduce athletes to the LS that will be practiced. The language should be adapted for the age of the athletes.

Sport practice. In the LS sessions, sport practice should be structured to provide for the practice of the life-skill related to this session or an emphasis on the sport skill the life-skill is related to. For example, if athletes have been tested on a basketball dribbling test and have set respective goals for improving in this test, then practice in the LS Goal setting sessions should focus on basketball dribbling. During the rest of the week's practices, brief reminders of the life-skill taught in that week's LS session should be provided. For example, if positive thinking was taught in the LS session, then athletes should be reminded to use this technique during practice and especially when they fail on an attempt.

Components of the program

The program consists of four life-skills components: Goal Setting and Planning, Self-Talk, Positive Thinking, and Problem Solving, with the last one delivered optionally, when the content of the program is team-games. Additionally, life-skills transfer is sought by providing respective examples.

Goal setting. Drawing from goal-setting theory, the aim is for youngsters to learn setting short-term, specific, challenging yet realistic goals, which are under their control and to devise and follow a plan to achieve the goal. The practice method is setting a goal for the sport skills test, revising it according to the principles of effective goal-setting and developing a simple plan for achieving their goal.

Self-talk. Drawing from self-talk research, the aim for young athletes is learning to use appropriate key-words for learning and improving sport-skills.

Positive thinking. The aim is to introduce young athletes to the skill of changing negative thoughts regarding to their performance during sport practice to positive ones.

Problem solving. The aim is to introduce athletes to a simple problem-solving strategy and provide for the practice of this strategy during sport practice. Athletes are first taught a simple problem-solving method adapted from Danish (1992) and then they play modified basketball, volleyball, or soccer games requiring a novel solution. Next, they are asked to work in groups and to form a strategy using the problem-solving method, to apply it in the game and to evaluate it.

Outline of the program

The program is delivered within a 12-17 week period (depending on whether a problem – solving component will be implemented and whether 1-3 recapturing sessions will be implemented). One session per week is devoted to life-skills while the rest, normally 1-3, are devoted to regular sport practice, with brief reminders of the life-skills taught. Below, an outline of the program is presented, breakdown by week and by LS and regular sessions

Week 1: Evaluation of performance (sport tests).

LS session. Athletes are tested on a sport or fitness skills test and they record their score on a worksheet. 10-min brief lecture: a) Why it is important to set goals in life, b) the sessions that follow are about learning setting goals and other useful skills that will assist them performing better, c) The sports test was not to decide who is the best, rather, to see how much each one can improve. Young athletes are informed that they will take the test again within 2 or three months and they set in written on the worksheets a goal regarding their test performance.

Other sessions. Regular sport practice.

Week 2: Goal setting

LS session. 15- min. brief lecture: Characteristics of effective goal setting: Goals should be Specific, Challenging but Realistic and under one's Control. Students are asked to examine the goals they set in the previous LS session and to revise them based on the three characteristics of effective goal setting. Sport practice mainly focusing on the sport-skills athletes were tested on.

Other sessions. Regular practice with brief reminders of the goals students set for themselves.

Week 3: Goal commitment and making a goal plan.

LS session. 15- min brief lecture: Importance of goal commitment and making a plan to reach a goal. Athletes are asked to sign commitments/make a plan to reach their goal on a worksheet. Sport practice mainly focused on the sport-skills athletes were tested on.

Other sessions. Sport practice with brief-reminders of goals set and the plan to achieve the goal.

Week 4: Goal commitment and making a goal plan

LS session. 10-min brief lecture: Reminder of goal commitment and making a plan. Possible revision of goal planning. Sport practice mainly focused on the sport-skills athletes were tested on.

Other sessions. Sport practice with brief-reminders of goals set and the plan to achieve the goal.

Week 5: Self-talk

LS session. 10- min brief lecture: Cue words, what are these, why they help to improve performance. Examples of cue words related to the sport skills students have been tested. Sport practice with reminders to use the cue words.

Other sessions. Sport practice with brief-reminders of cue-words.

Week 6: Self-talk

LS session. 5- min brief lecture: Reminder of cue words. Sport practice with brief reminders to use the cue words.

Other sessions. Sport practice with brief-reminders of cue-words, the goals set and goal plan.

Week 7: Positive thinking

LS session. 10- min brief lecture: Positive thinking, what is it, why it helps to improve performance. Examples changing sport specific negative thoughts to positive ones. Sport practice with reminders to focus on positive thinking.

Other sessions. Sport practice with brief-reminders of positive thinking, cue words and goals.

Week 8: Positive thinking

LS session. 5- min brief lecture: Reminder of positive thinking. Sport practice with reminders to focus on sport specific positive thinking.

Other sessions. Sport practice with brief-reminders of positive thinking, cue words and goals.

Weeks 9, 10, 11: Recapturing and Transfer of Life-Skills

LS sessions. 10- min brief lecture: Recapturing goal setting, goal planning, cue words, positive thinking. Provisions of examples for using the skills in other settings.

Week 12 (or 9, if the optional recapturing sessions are not implemented): Re-evaluation of sport performance

LS session. Athletes are tested again – same sport skills test as in 1st session. They are asked to record their score on their worksheets and compare it with the goal they had set. Focus on improvement. 10- min brief lecture: Adaptive attributions and setting new goals.

Other sessions. 10- min brief lecture: Examples for using the skills in other settings. Sport practice.

Additional sessions for Problem Solving (Only in conjunction with team sports)

Week 10 (13): Problem Solving

LS session. 10- min brief lecture: A simple problem solving procedure: Think – Examine – Choose (TEC): Think as many possible solutions as you can. Examine the pros and the cons of each one, Choose the one with the most pros and the fewer cons.

Set an open problem by addressing a modified game (see Appendix 2 for examples). Ask students, in their teams, to use TEC to devise a strategy for the modified game. Start the game. After some time ask teams to discuss and re-examine their strategy. Resume the game. After some time ask teams to discuss and re-examine their strategy.

Other sessions. 10- min brief lecture: How to use TEC to solve problems that arise during the procedure of completion an action's plan and goal's attainment in skills tests.

Week 11 (14): Problem solving

LS session. 10- min brief lecture: TEC reminder. Sport practice with modified games and using TEC.

Other sessions. Sport practice with brief reminders to use TEC in a regular game.

Week 12 (15): Problem solving

LS session. 10- min brief lecture: Ask youngsters to use TEC for problems out of sport and provide examples. Sport practice with modified games and using TEC.

Other sessions. Sport practice with brief reminders to use TEC in regular game.

Week 13 (16): Problem solving

LS session. 10- min brief lecture: Ask youngsters to report using TEC for problems out of sport and encourage use of TEC. Sport practice with modified games and using TEC.

Other sessions. Sport practice with brief reminders to use TEC in regular game.

Week 14 (17): Problem solving

LS session. 10- min brief lecture: Ask youngsters to report using TEC for problems out of sport and encourage use of TEC Sport practice with modified games and using TEC.

Other sessions. Sport practice with brief reminders to use TEC in regular game.

Significance for Exercise or Physical Education and Quality of Life

Major organizations such as the European Commission and the Unicef have emphasized the necessity of including life-skills teaching in educational and sport curricula. Life-skills are considered essential skills for effective living in a fast-changing work and community environment. Physical education and youth sport have the advantage of addressing their content to a wide audience through enjoyable activities. To this end, the program described in this paper can add to the positive impact of physical education and youth sport on youngsters development.

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Appendix 1: Related publications

Papacharisis, V., Goudas, M., Danish, S., & Theodorakis, Y. (2005). The effectiveness of teaching a life skills program in a sport context. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 17*, 247-254.

This study examined the effectiveness of an abbreviated form of SUPER involving goal setting, positive thinking/self-talk and problem solving. The program was taught to young football and volleyball athletes. Results showed gains of the experimental group in sport skills performance, knowledge of life-skills and perceived ability for applying the life-skills taught.

Goudas, M., Dermitzaki, E., Leondari, A., & Danish, S. (2006). The effectiveness of teaching a life-skills program in a physical education context. *European Journal of Psychology of Education, 21*, 429-438.

This study examined the effectiveness of a life skills training program, adapted for physical fitness activities and taught as part of physical education lessons. Seventy-three, seventh grade students were assigned either in an experimental or in a wait-list control replication group and received an abbreviated version of GOAL, a school-based intervention designed by Danish and colleagues to teach life skills. The program focused on setting goals, making plans for achieving goals and on positive thinking. Students were assessed on physical fitness tests, knowledge about life skills, and beliefs about effective use of life skills. Results showed gains and retention on physical fitness, knowledge and self-beliefs regarding goal setting. These results show that life skills training can be effectively implemented within a school physical education context.

Goudas, M., & Giannoudis, G. (2008). A team-sports-based life-skills program in a physical education context. *Learning and Instruction, 18*, 538-546.

The study aimed at examining the effectiveness of a team-sports-based life-skills program taught as part of physical education lessons. One hundred sixty-five sixth and eighth graders were assigned either in an experimental or in a control group and received an abbreviated version of SUPER, a team-sports-based program. The program focused on setting goals, on positive thinking, and on problem solving. Students were assessed on four sport-skills tests, knowledge about life skills, and beliefs about effective use of life skills. Results showed gains of the experimental group on two of the four sport-skills tests, knowledge and self-beliefs.

Goudas, M., Karabekou, A., & Papacharisis, V. (2007). Έλεγχος εγκυρότητας και αξιοπιστίας ερωτηματολογίων αξιολόγησης προγραμμάτων δεξιοτήτων ζωής (Validity and reliability of questionnaires assessing life skills programs). *Exercise and Society*, 44, 32-38.

In order to evaluate life-skills programs, Papacharisis (2004) developed two instruments: a knowledge test and a self-belief inventory. The present study aimed to further improve and psychometrically test these two questionnaires. Initially, additional items were added to the questionnaires and their content validity was examined. Next, both questionnaires plus a social desirability questionnaire were completed by one hundred elementary school students (52 boys and 48 girls), aged 10-12 years ($M = 11.19$). Regarding the knowledge test the mean difficulty index and the mean index of differentiation of the items were .68 and .76, respectively. Regarding the self-beliefs questionnaire, exploratory factor analysis indicated the existence of four factors namely goal setting, problem solving, positive thinking and changing negative thoughts to positive ones, which explained the 58% of total variance, while Cronbach's α for the factors ranged from .54 to .80. The results of the present research support the possibility of use of these questionnaires for the evaluation of life skills programs.

Goudas, M., & Giannoudis, G. (2010). A qualitative evaluation of a life skills teaching program in a physical education context. *Hellenic Journal of Psychology*, 7, 315-334.

This paper reports a qualitative evaluation of a life-skills program in physical education. Participants in the program were 86 students of Grades 6 and 8. Data were collected from students' interviews, field notes of participant observation and students' notebooks. Results showed a positive reception of the program by the majority of the students as well as knowledge and transfer of life skills. However, there was also a group of students who were negatively predisposed towards the program. Drawbacks of the program that emerged were the absence of variety and the compulsory nature of goal setting.

Goudas, M. (2010). Prologue: A review of life skills teaching in sport and physical education. *Hellenic Journal of Psychology*, 7, 241-258.

This paper presents an extensive review of existing programs and respective research on life skills in the context of sport and physical education. The paper identifies three distinct lines of research within this area and discusses how the five papers of this issue fit into these research lines. The first of these lines focuses on the identification of athletes' and students' life skills needs, the second on factors contributing to life skills development, and the third on the evaluation of life skills programs. Further, two issues regarding future research are discussed: the transferability of life skills and the development of life skills measures.

Kolovelonis, A. Goudas, M., Dimitriou, E. & Hasandra, M. (2010). Ποιοτική αξιολόγηση ενός προγράμματος διδασκαλίας δεξιοτήτων ζωής στη φυσική αγωγή (A qualitative evaluation of a life skills training program in physical education). *Inquiries in Physical Education and Sport*, 8, 107-118.

The aim of the study was to examine the effectiveness of a life skills training program in a physical education setting, using a qualitative approach. Participants were 76 seventh grade students. The life skills program included goal setting, positive thinking and self-talk and consisted of 8 lessons which were implemented in connection with a physical fitness program. Sixteen interviews from 8 boys and 8 girls were conducted after the end of the intervention. Data were coded through thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) in the following dimensions: usefulness, satisfaction, function, transfer, and comprehension. Results showed that students comprehended the content of the program and found it enjoyable, interesting, useful and beneficial. In addition, students reported that they used the life skills, not only during physical education, but also in other subjects as well as in circumstances out of school.

Kolovelonis, A., Goudas, M., Dimitriou, E., & Gerodimos, V. (2006). Η επίδραση ενός προγράμματος διδασκαλίας δεξιοτήτων ζωής στον αυτοκαθορισμό των μαθητών (The Effect of a Life Skills Training Program on Students' Self-Determination). *Inquiries in Physical Education and Sport*, 4, 379-389.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the effect of a life skills training program taught in physical education settings on students' self-determination. Of the 73 secondary school participants, 35 comprised the initial experimental group and the 38 the initial control group. After the implementation of the intervention with the initial experimental group, the groups were reversed and the initial control group went on to receive the intervention. The life skills program included goal setting, the positive thinking/ self-talk and was carried out in connection with a program for the development of the students' physical fitness. In order to assess students' self-determination, the self-determination questionnaire in physical education (Goudas et al., 2000) was used. The results showed that students' self-determination increased in both groups after the intervention in each part of the study and the improvement retained in the initial experimental group in the second part of the study. In conclusion, teaching life skills through physical education can improve students' self-determination.

Dimitriou, E., Kolovelonis, A., Goudas, M., & Gerodimos, V. (2007). Η επίδραση ενός προγράμματος ανάπτυξης δεξιοτήτων ζωής στην αυτό-αποτελεσματικότητα μαθητών/τριών Α' γυμνάσιου (The effects of a life skills program on self-efficacy of junior high-school students). *Exercise and Society*, 45, 68-75.

This study examined the influence of a life skill program on students' self-efficacy. Participants were 35 boys and 41 girls 7th grade students who were divided at random in an experimental and in a control group. The intervention program which included goal-setting and positive thinking/ self-talk, was applied in two phases. In the first phase, it was applied to the experimental group, while, in the second phase, it was applied to the control group. Self-efficacy measures were taken in the beginning and in the end of the first phase, as well as in the end of the second phase. The results showed that the intervention program positively influenced students' self-efficacy in the initial experimental group. In the initial control group, the self-efficacy increased only regarding strength. In conclusion, the application of life skills programs can produce improvement in the self-efficacy.

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