Promoting reflective learning and empowerment through youth coaching

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Abstract
Some young people face challenges in managing society’s individualized freedom of choice and requirements. In relation to this context, youth coaching methodology is developing. Knowledge is needed on how coaching can facilitate youth empowerment through reflective learning. In-depth interviews with three youth coaches were conducted and related to a strategic search for literature. Analysis identified three topics; empowerment through collaboration, the ethical boundaries of a coaching contract and coaching to strengthen reflective learning. Aspects influencing the collaborative partnership between coach and young person need to be considered.

Key words: Reflective learning, empowerment, youth coaching.

Introduction
The growth of coaching can be seen in the light of today’s society being perceived as hyper complex. The individualised human being must deal with a number of compelling choices in a society characterised by increasing diversity and change (Sommer, 2012). Emphasis is placed on the human ability to reflect on and evaluate choices of action in order to choose a solution (Krange & Øia, 2005). Reflexivity becomes a necessary competence in order to navigate through today’s society (Stelter, 2009). In this context coaching has emerged and can be seen as a tool for self-reflection (Stelter & Law, 2010). Young people are growing up in a time when each person experiences responsibility for themselves, their actions and the consequences of these actions (Illeris et al., 2009). This individualisation contributes to increased freedom and choices. Where new forms of freedom open up for today’s youth, opportunities to fail also arise (Krange & Øia, 2005). A major challenge in today’s society is to ensure that young people master the transition from youth to adult, living in such a way that they are able to support themselves and live independent lives. The Norwegian cross-national Ungdata study shows that the current generation of Norwegian youth is well adapted, but stressed (NOVA, 2014). The challenges associated with the problem of dropout in school attendance in Norway are well documented (Sletten & Hyggen, 2013). This may be an explanation for why programmes for empowerment are increasingly targeted at youth (Mohajer & Earnest, 2009). Combined with the rise of coaching as a dialogue method in working with youth, the concept of youth coaching for promoting reflective learning and empowerment needs to be explored.

On empowerment and coaching
Coaching can be described briefly as a dialogue that aims to facilitate the learning and action of the person who is being coached, who is known as the coachee. Issues addressed
in coaching are related to the personal or professional development of the coachee, focusing mainly on the present and future (Tveiten, 2013). Key tools used during the coaching dialogue are open questions, promoting positive prospects and commitment to action (Roise & Börjesson, 2017). Open questions require reflective competence and insight into one’s self-identity (Giddens, 1991). They emphasise the ability of the individual to observe themselves, put emotions into words, justify actions and construct a narrative about who they are and about their relationship with their social environment (Aagre, 2014).

Research on coaching youth shows that coaching, which in part anchors positive psychology, has the potential to make an important contribution to youth mental health (Norrish & Vella-Brodrick, 2009). An extensive research project from the Netherlands indicates the important role that coaching can play in preventing dropout from vocational education (Steeg, Elk, & Webbink, 2012).

The term “empowerment” can be described as “the development and use of the individual’s resources and powers, as well as counteracting and reducing stress and strain the individual experiences as obstacles to experiencing control over his own life” (Stang, 2003: 142). Empowerment is about a redistribution of power from expert to user or coachee (Tveiten, 2007). The purpose of coaching is to facilitate such empowerment. With their mandates, their beliefs and ideologies, coaches have power and influence in the dialogue (O’Broin & Palmer, 2010). For example, sports coaches and teachers conduct youth coaching as part of their work. Their position of power and their relationships with the young coachees leads to ethical responsibility (Townsend, 2011). According to Mohajer and Earnest (2009), the relational aspect of empowerment in these relationships is unexplored and needs further study.

**Goal**

This article follows up on Mohajer and Earnest’s call and explores potential challenges in the coaching relationships when coaching youth in particular. It also highlights how coaching can help promote reflective learning and empowerment for young people. The following questions about coaching youth are investigated:

- What are the ethical responsibilities of youth coaches?
- How can a youth coach promote empowerment?

**Method and Analysis**

This article is based on research findings from a mixed-method exploratory study. The first data materials of this research project are based on in-depth interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Three key informants were selected, based on their extensive coaching education and long experience with individual coaching of youth (Patton, 2015). Informant 1 worked as a self-employed youth coach, Informant 2 as a teacher in a high school and Informant 3 was a national team trainer in an individual sport. The interview questions focused on how they specifically coached youth and the ethics of their coaching practice.

An interview protocol was used for obtaining information during the interviews.
Explanatory participant information was provided, enabling the participant to feel accepted as an expert on the topic. All the interviews were anonymised in the transcription to ensure that the informants could share freely from their thoughts and experiences. An analysis of the transcribed interview data was conducted with an inductive approach (Patton, 2015). One of the categories that emerged was ‘Empowerment’.

In order to further explore the category of empowerment in the context of coaching youth, an expanded strategic literature search was conducted on the databases Eric, Academic Search Premier, Oria and Oda, using the search terms “Freire”, “empowerment”, “coaching” and “youth”. The search was limited to articles published after the year 2000 and resulted in 89 hits. Articles related to the empowerment of young people with medical diagnoses and sports coaching were considered irrelevant. The following ten articles were included:


An analysis of the literature was done against the category ‘Empowerment’, which had resulted from analysing the interviews. The articles were analysed with the interviews in mind, in a deductive manner. The research focus was on finding similarities or tensions between the informants’ narratives and the main message of the articles. This resulted in the following interlinked categories:

- Empowerment through collaboration
- The ethical boundaries of a coaching contract
- Coaching to strengthen reflective competence

**Ethical considerations**

The researcher’s interpretative framework for the current study has been formed by practice as a youth coach and a university college teacher in the field of Coaching, Counselling and Youth Knowledge. The involvement in youth coaching can on the one
hand be regarded as a disturbing factor when doing research, while on the other hand this experience can be considered a resource (Tjora, 2012). Particular effort was made by the researcher to avoid selective attention or selective interpretation during data collection and analysis.

Although, based on three in-depth interviews, there are few grounds for generalisation of the findings, these analyses can act as a starting-point for discussion and the further development of empowerment through youth coaching.

Discussion

Empowerment through collaboration

According to Freire, “a dialogue requires an intense belief in man, a belief in its ability to create and recreate, to create and reproduce, believe in its pursuit of a richer human worth” (Freire, 1999: 75). Coaching is based on such humanistic values. It is based on the belief that humans have the ability and willingness to evolve if circumstances make it possible (Gjerde, 2010).

Such a form of trust is a precondition for dialogue (Freire, 1999: 75) and for the relationship between the coach and coachee to develop. In this collaboration, a coach can encounter dilemmas and situations that assume ethical awareness about what is right and wrong in human relations. The relationship between the coach and the young coachee is characterised by factors such as power, dependence and closeness. Thus we find ourselves in the ethical landscape by which all relationships between humans are characterised. According to Kversøy, ethics can be described as wanting to do good and wishing each other well. Without these elements, the concept of ethics and moral may have no purpose (Kversøy, 2013: 93). Or as the informants put into words:

*I think I am genuinely fond of them, I genuinely care.* (Informant 2, teacher, female).

*Not deciding what’s best for the person, it’s an ethical point of view. Believing in that person, all the questions I ask are about believing in the coachee.* (Informant 1, self-employed, female).

In the coaching literature, the meaning of symmetry in the relationship between the coach and the coachee is often emphasised (Tveiten, 2007). Symmetry can be seen as an ideal, something we strive for but never achieve (Stelter, 2012b: 57). As young people are vulnerable and influential, new perspectives on the coaching relationship, adapted for young people, are required. Youth coaching that is adapted to the complex society needs to emphasise, more than previously described in the literature, a form of power management between the coach and the young coachee. An ethical challenge in youth coaching is that the relationship between the coach and the young coachee is characterised by a power imbalance. Young people who are empowered often show perceptions of high self-efficacy and a sense of personal control (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004). How can the element of power in the dialogue be managed in a way that the dialogue contributes to empowerment?

In this study ethical challenges arose for coaches in terms of being both a teacher and a
coach, or being both the trainer of a national sports team and a personal coach. For example, the sports trainer expresses that talking to an adult in a position of power may seem paralyzing to a youth. The teacher experienced, when asking students about their future goals for their schoolwork, that students sometimes gave her the answers they thought their teacher wanted to hear. She perceives her students to be trained to expect that teachers want them to increase their performance. When we look into how this affects the relationship with the young person, we can see parallels with business leaders. A leader who wants to make use of coaching in his or her role will face different challenges from those faced by an external or internal coach without managerial responsibility. There are two reasons for this. First of all, the relationship between leader and employee differs from that between a neutral coach and the focus person. Secondly, the effect of tools and skills can be experienced differently by the coachee if the coach is his or her leader (Gjerde, 2010: 26). Just like the teacher and the sports coach, the relationship is not neutral. At a professional level, the teacher and the coach need to relate to society’s mandates. A teacher’s efforts are measured by curriculum goals and the sports coach’s are measured by results. Both are evaluated in relation to the prevention of dropout. A pitfall in the coaching dialogue would be if these mandates became their agenda for coaching with students and athletes. When informants say coaching does not always work, a possible explanation may be that this is related to their positions of power beyond the coaching dialogue.

*We’re in a relationship where I am perceived as a much bigger person of power than I am aware of. For some just talking to the national team trainer can be scary enough.* (Informant 3, national team trainer, male).

Besides their professional agenda, the relationship between coaches and youth is asymmetric in the sense that trainers, teachers or coaches have both specific competences and adult status that the young person is naturally lacking. Freeing this relationship completely from this element of power may be an unattainable utopian ideal. But the power in relationships between adults and youth can be managed so that young people can be empowered.

Power can be used in either a positive or negative way. The positive possibilities can be linked to the professional practice. ‘Power over’ is to be regarded as the private, non-professional demeanour (Damsgaard 2010). A constructive, professional perspective on power is to use it in a good, supportive way. In a positive sense, power can act by helping and supporting, searching for resources, finding and using them (ibid). This can be done by providing space for empowerment and mastery. In this provided space an atmosphere of trust needs to be created for the young coachees to utilise the personal power that is made available for them.

Power management is a precondition for coaching to benefit the coachee. Good power management can be defined by whether the dialogue partners appear to be competent, coping and active (Kversøy, 2013). According to Freire, the validity of the arguments can no longer be based on authority, but on both dialogue partners being mutually responsible for a common learning process (1999). This will terminate a contradiction in power between the young coachee and the coach. Now, the coach and the coachee are both experts and non-knowers (Stelter & Law, 2010). In order to apply this philosophical approach to dialogue, a coach needs to implement an almost heroic act, namely to *disempower* him- or herself in order to facilitate space for the empowerment of young
people (Blackburn, 2000). A coach needs to be prepared to respect the young coachee’s knowledge as being as valuable as their own, and be prepared to take on board the reality of a young person’s life (Blackburn, 2000). Then, the room for negotiation and understanding of each other’s perception of the world is needed (Mohajer & Earnest, 2009). This concept of reciprocity emphasises the exchange of understanding and learning through dialogue for both the young coachee and the coach (O’Broin & Palmer, 2010). By taking this reciprocity seriously, the coaching relationship can evolve towards being more cooperative and collaborative.

_coaching for me is no self-help strategy. It’s a co-strategy._ (Informant 1, self-employed, female).

This attitude provides the basis for learning and empowerment through coaching (Sloan, 2013). A collaborative perspective on empowerment and knowledge development can be specified by describing the process in a dialogue. Stelter and Law (2010: 160) suggest the following points:

- Both the coach and the focus person are experts and contribute to the process and production of meaning and knowledge.
- All participants are in change mode, where mutual development is possible.
- All participants appreciate the knowledge created, while appreciating remaining differences.
- Mutual exploration is based on a generous listening.

The coachee and the coach contribute to a process where knowledge is created and explored in partnership. In order to achieve such cooperation a coach has to be sensitive, open, attentive and productive. According to Aloni (2013), these personal characteristics are the most important tool in all humanistic dialogue.

**The ethical boundaries of a coaching contract**

The collaborative nature of the relationship between a coach and the young coachee can be described as a dialogue partners. Such a partnership requires a mutual understanding of responsibilities and the different roles of the partners. To facilitate this, the use of agreements or coaching contracts is often used. Such an agreement can be made orally or in writing, and may concern what the coach promises to do and what is expected of the coachee (Geldard & Geldard, 2010). Such an agreement can contain information about:

_for example, what i promise to do and what i expect from them. that i will provide structure and they provide the content. and i do not tell others what we talk about._ (Informant 1, self-employed, female).

A coaching contract formalises the partnership and distributes roles and responsibilities. It can also describe what is implied by confidentiality.

_They must be very sure that what we talk about stays between the two of us. I think that is very important._ (Informant 3, national team trainer, male).

The informants emphasise confidentiality as a precondition for trust and the willingness of young people to disclose. Youth expect confidentiality and loyalty in the counselling relationship in the same way that they expect it from peer friendships (Geldard & Geldard,
2010). But confidentiality is also linked to ethical challenges. On the one hand, confidentiality is a precondition for trust and productive collaboration. On the other hand, a coach can gain insight into aspects of the young coachee’s life that are not suitable for coaching. A coach may lack the competence or a mandate to be a suitable dialogue partner, or the situation may not be suitable for a coaching approach. The confidentiality that a coach can offer is limited and one needs to be open about that (Geldard & Geldard, 2010). For example, abuse, addictions or other psychiatric illness need medical and therapeutic treatment. When the coach becomes aware of such issues, he or she needs to discuss with the coachee a referral to other more suitable counselling. The informants express beliefs that not every personal issue a young person struggles with can be solved through coaching. The limitations of coaching and the coach’s confidentiality are expressed. The importance of dealing with referral in an appropriate, professional manner is also emphasised.

It’s also important that if I’m going to refer, I’ll tell the young coachee what information I’ll give and stick to it. (Informant 3, national team trainer, male).

This confidentiality and an articulated clarity about role distribution in the coaching dialogue is one way of managing the coach’s power and respecting the coaching partnership.

Coaching to strengthen reflective learning

According to Illeris, reflection can be defined as afterthought. One reflects or thinks more closely about a problem or an event (2006). Navigating today’s society requires an individualisation, a process which involves extensive reflectiveness and self-assessment. Stelter (2012b) describes empowerment as a term that emphasises people’s ability to counteract their disempowerment and prove themselves capable of doing something about their life situation. Feire calls this human liberation (Blackburn 2000). “The aim is social change as well as learning, which makes these ideas especially relevant to the structural injustice faced by marginalized youth” (Watts, Diemer & Voight, 2011: 43). Some young people possess the necessary reflective skills in order to make use of the freedom of choice and opportunity presented. Lash refers to them as reflexive winners. Others seem to experience challenges in dealing with such forms of self-management and are described as reflexive losers (Lash in Illeris et al., 2009: 50). One informant described the following:

It’s probably easier for some to ask very specific questions. And sometimes I can achieve more in a dialogue by being very specific. I have to consider how capable the coachee is of dealing with the open questions. The young athlete should not sit and feel stupid. They can do that if there are questions they cannot answer. (Informant 3, national team trainer, male).

This research shows that it can be challenging for young people to answer the coach’s open questions and to be self-reflective. They can, for example, respond by answering, “I don’t know” or being silent. The challenges of dealing with silence in the dialogue, when young people do not answer the open questions, are described. This is explained from the perspective that the young coachee does not yet have the cognitive capacity to reflect on the questions, or that they are modest or just that the open questions are unfamiliar.

I think it’s harder to deal with younger athletes because they may not have the
reflective capacity that adults have and they are not used to it either. (Informant 3, national team trainer, male).

In this example the youth that struggle with answering open questions are described as reflexive losers, incapable of utilizing the coach’s open questions at this point. This raises the question of if, in the coaching relationship, this perspective can be used as an excuse by the coach when the coaching process does not produce the desired results? In which way does this perspective inhibit an empowerment process?

The informants reflect upon this. It is mentioned that some youth do not dare to answer open questions truthfully, they answer only in order to please the coach. Then it may be useful to ask again what they want. If the open questions do not work, a coach is not to continue with the same questions. The most important thing is that the young coachee has a good experience with the coaching dialogue. When it seems difficult for young people to respond to coaching’s open questions, it is advisable to focus on getting to know one another better, enhancing trust and a sense of security, in addition to mapping the young coachee’s wishes and motivation for the coaching process.

At the start of the coaching, I think on a scale of one to ten, the youth’s trust in me is zero. (…) They may have had other negative experiences with conversations. And then it’s up to me to build trust. (Informant 1, self-employed, female).

Through patience and empathetic imagination, the coach will be able to facilitate a young coachee’s process of learning to reflect on his or her own behalf. Such a skill is the foundation of all coaching (Røise, 2013). As one informant puts it:

Take it easy, ask an open question and let them sit and think. It takes a long time before the answer arrives. Sometimes it takes a very long time (…) But, simply allow time to respond. (Informant 3, sports coach, male).

In addition, the purpose of such an empowering cooperative dynamic is to generate new knowledge, as well as to develop the ability of interpersonal and intercultural communication (Aloni, 2013). According to Aloni, this includes patience and tolerance, openness and attention, self-control and empathetic imagination. An element of learning in such a humanistic dialogue is emphasised. The coaching dialogue will help to develop communicative skills to handle self-reflectiveness. In this context it would be inappropriate and would inhibit learning to use terms like reflexive winners or losers. Instead, emphasis is placed on the coach’s ability to practise empathic listening, build relationships, create trust and contribute to simplification and sorting in a normal, complex life.

I also believe that life is very complicated and in order to understand the complicated, one has to make it simple. It’s an art. It’s art to turn the complicated into something simple. (Informant 1, self-employed, female).

Conclusion

This article set out to investigate how youth coaching can promote empowerment and what the ethical responsibilities of youth coaches are. The purpose of coaching is to
promote empowerment and learning through reflection. This study explores the relational aspect of empowerment when coaching youth. Empowerment can be strengthened by emphasising the cooperative nature of the relationship between the coach and the coachee. Both partners are mutually responsible for contributing to reflective learning and the generation of new knowledge. By putting this into action the balance of power in the dialogue is equalised. A coach needs to be prepared to respect the young coachee’s knowledge as being as valuable as his or her own. This attitude provides the basis for all reflective learning and empowerment.

The collaborative partnership between coach and coachee is formalised by a contract. Such a contract states the different roles and responsibilities in the coaching relationship. It also addresses confidentiality. This study highlighted the coach’s limitations when it comes to keeping information to him- or herself. The coach has an ethical obligation to be candid about such potential limitations. Under certain circumstances coaching might not be the most appropriate method and other help is needed. This limitation, and an articulated clarity about role distribution in the coaching dialogue, is a way of managing the coach’s power and respecting the coaching partnership.

Some young people struggle with reflecting upon the open questions the coach asks them. In order for youth to learn to reflect through the coaching dialogue, emphasis is placed on the coach’s ability to listen empathically, build relationships and create trust. Through this humanistic approach, a coach can facilitate reflective learning.

Coaching as a method is in continuous development and more research is needed to look into how the method can be used most effectively in dialogue with youth.

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