Students’ Perceptions of Learning, Post-school Options and Status in Two Elite Athlete Programmes

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify who participates in elite athlete programmes (EAPs), student athlete selection of EAPs and perceptions of physical skill improvement, enjoyment, post-school options, and programme status. Research exploring EAPs has mushroomed since the 1990s. Much of this literature focused on coach development or coach education and the identification of gifted and talented athletes. Less frequently studies investigated the perceptions of elite athletes’ learning, enjoyment, physical skill improvement and post-school options in the talent development environment. A small survey from a New Zealand pilot study on student participation was used for two purposefully selected case sites. Non-parametric statistical tests were used to test for differences within and between the two case sites. Results indicated that the talent development environment exerts a small effect on student athletes’ perceptions of physical skill improvement and that these influences need to be considered by EAPs interested in student athlete success.

Introduction

Over the past couple of decades, governments have increased their awareness of the value of elite sporting success, dedicating their resources to identify and develop elite athletes (Abbott, Collins, Martindale, & Sowerby, 2002; Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002). Examples include the introduction of the 1994 Talent Search scheme to identify and develop talent in Australia, the introduction of the New Zealand Academy for Sport in 2006 (Sport & Recreation New Zealand, 2006), and UK Sport’s recent commitment to large resources to the creation of a world-class sporting system (Abraham & Collins, 1998). Martindale, Collins and Daubney (2005) stated that many of these programmes have focused primarily on the early identification of young talent, often in the “hope that they will be the most likely to become the best adults, while the more crucial process of nurturing and development has been, at least by comparison, somewhat neglected” (p. 353).

There are many factors that have influenced the development and achievement of elite athletes (Cassidy & Kidman, 2010). However, most of the research has focused on coach development (Abbott, Button, Pepping, & Collins, 2005; Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2009; Schwandt, 1995) and the identification of elite athletes (Abbott, et al., 2002; Cassidy, Mallett, & Tinning, 2008), offering little research on student athletes’ personal perspectives.
on EAPs. Only two studies have examined elite athlete experiences in these programmes in New Zealand (e.g., Hapeta & Palmer, 2009; Purdy, Jones, & Cassidy, 2009).

Drawing on research conducted in New Zealand, this pilot study compares and contrasts two EAPs participants’ views with a focus on participant EAP selection, improvement of physical skills, enjoyment, post-school options, and programme status. The significance of the study lies in generating a deeper understanding of the students’ perception of EAPs in New Zealand. The study builds on earlier work (Martindale, et al., 2005) in seeking to develop a more comprehensive grasp of elite athlete’s experiences of the talent development environment. In order to maximise the potential of elite athletes, stakeholders such as coaches, schools, parents and policymakers need to be aware of student perceptions of EAPs (Nasey, 2004). Evidence of student athlete perceptions can help educators, schools and policymakers develop pedagogies, strategies and a more coherent EAP philosophy to improve students’ learning experiences and available post-school options.

**Nurturing the Development and Achievement of Elite Athletes**

The study of elite athletes and the talent development environment is a small, yet burgeoning area of scholarship. Earlier research focused on the role of coaching in the development of talent (Silverman, 2005) with the focus shifting in the late 1990s from the behavioural assessment of coaches and the assessment of coaches’ knowledge-base to examining coaches’ cognitive skills (Abbott, et al., 2005). The research has also identified psychological characteristics of successful elite athletes such as motivation and commitment, coping skills to deal with distractions, a well-developed routine or plan, goal setting, an ability to regulate anxiety, heightened concentration, self-confidence, and visualization that coaches and parents needed to develop for the athlete’s peak performance (Cassidy & Kidman, 2010; Silverman, Subramaniam, & Woods, 1998). More recently the literature on the role of coaches has shifted focus from coaching education to coaching development, with coaches not only obtaining accreditation and certification but receiving ongoing professional development informed by an applied athlete-centered philosophy (Abbott & Collins, 2002; Cassidy, et al., 2009). Though there has been ongoing research on the role of the coach and on identifying psychological characteristics of elite athletes, few studies have investigated the perceptions of elite athletes in the talent development environment (or in the case of this study, sports academies or elite athlete programmes).
Developing Elite Athletes in New Zealand Secondary Schools

New Zealand sports academies have been on the rise over the last twenty years. Grant and Pope (2007) stated that “the 1989 Education Act allowed for schools to take much more control over how best to satisfy educational goals; to be more creative in how they packaged some programmes” (p. 257). This policy allowed schools to initiate sports academies across New Zealand. Tristram and Batty (2000) reported a ‘boom’ in the number of sports academies in New Zealand secondary schools from 1992-2000. They reported that sport academies came in many different forms and structures and identified three types of models:

- The “Talent Programme” Model, characterized by a small committee composed of the principal, head of department (HOD), a senior teacher and the sport coordinator with no involvement by coaches, parents or other stakeholders in the decision making process.
- The “Skill Development” Model, focused on formal development toward the achievement of standards and qualifications (such as a First Aid Certificate, Coaching New Zealand courses and Outdoor Education Certificates) with most decisions being made by the sports coordinator in consultation with the principal or HOD.
- The “Multiple-Clubs” Model, where there is a director of sport or committee in charge of each sport with decision-making responsibilities on the policies and procedures of the academy.

Tristram and Batty (2000) concluded that the three types of sports academies had different aims and objectives such as focusing on the development of gifted athletes, improving skill level, preparing students for post-school careers, creating an alternative form of education for students who lacked motivation or qualifications, and boosting the profile of sport in the school.

Hapeta and Palmer (2009) also found that an alternative sport-related model was developed to establish a varied curriculum that focused on academic, sporting and cultural pursuits for students using a combination of high quality coaches/teachers/mentors with whānau (family) being the cornerstone of the programme. Their findings indicated that an alternative sport-related model promoted excellence in sport and education, connecting Māori and non-Māori elite athletes to their whānau and allowed them to reach their full potential.

Despite the ‘boom’ in sport academies, Tristram and Batty (2000) noted that very little research had been conducted into the students’ narratives. Most of the research draws on descriptive studies on how sport academies enhance Māori youth development (Hapeta & Palmer, 2009) or on the elite athletes’ use of power in an elite men’s rowing programme.
(Purdy, et al., 2009) with few comparative studies evaluating the differences of student athlete perceptions. This pilot study is the first phase of a research project that aims to fill this gap in the literature. Research questions that guide the study explore the student profile (in terms of age, sex, nationality, English proficiency, ethnicity, Year at school, and socio-economic status) and their perceptions of physical skill improvement, enjoyment, post-school options, and the status of two EAPs.

**Methods**

**Research Design**

The project was a pilot study involving two rural case sites in New Zealand. Two case sites (that both developed elite athletes) were purposely selected (Monti, 2004) to provide diversity in sex and age as well as sports within the case sites. Students enrolled in EAPs were invited to complete a paper-based questionnaire to ascertain their gender, age, nationality, year in school, socio-economic status, and ethnicity, in addition to their perceptions of skill improvement, enjoyment, post-school options, and programme status. The questionnaire was also used to determine the students’ willingness to participate in interviews and observations to add further depth to the project. However, the focus of this paper is on the results of the survey data.

The survey was distributed to the two case sites: School A, a coeducational state school, and School B, a private school. Data were collected when the students were ages 13-18 (mean age = 15.38 years) and were studying in Years 9-13. There were a total of 25 valid responses out of 72 EAP participants from School A and 33 valid responses out of 33 students enrolled in School B. School B achieved a superior response rate of 100% compared with 33.3% for School A. Distributing the surveys after morning announcements to students enrolled in the School A EAP contributed to the lower rate amongst students in comparison to School B, a private school focused only on elite athletes.

**Participants**

The participants were 48 female and 10 male high school students enrolled in EAPs in the two case sites. School A comprised of a total of 25 students, 19 (76%) female and 6 (24%) male students, 17 (68%) Pākehā (non-Māori New Zealanders of European descent), 6 (24%) Māori, and 2 (8%) Pākehā/Māori. School B comprised of a total of 33 students, 29 (88%) female and 4 (12%) male students, 3 (9%) Pākehā, 25 (76%) Māori, 3 (9 %) Pākehā/Māori, and 2 (6%) other. The participants’ main sports were soccer, hockey, taekwondo, athletics, netball, golf, and rowing. The key objective of both EAPs was to offer a holistic academic and sporting programme that enabled elite athletes to excel in their chosen sport or discipline, academic studies, and cultural pursuits. Both EAPs were based on the alternative

sport-related model designed to provide elite athletes with a balance between their sporting, academic and family commitments.

**Data Analysis**

Three dependent variables from the survey were used in the data analysis. These were: ‘I am improving my physical skills’, ‘I enjoy participating in the Sports Academy’, and ‘I am anticipating a career in the sport and recreation industry’. Each was measured on a five-point Likert-scale, from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Preliminary examination revealed that the data were not normally distributed. Therefore non-parametric tests were used to look for differences in the data between groups of participants based on age, gender, nationality, language, ethnicity, year level, and between the two case sites. Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to determine whether mean ranks of the groups were significantly different from one another.

In addition to the demographic and Likert-scale questions, the students were asked to respond to several open-ended questions. These asked the students to indicate why they enrolled in the EAP, to give their perceptions of EAPs and the students who choose to enroll in one, and to further explain their responses to the Likert-scale questions. The students’ responses were analysed thematically and were used to add depth and context to the quantitative data.

**Results**

**Participant Data**

We used the survey to investigate who participated in EAPs in New Zealand in terms of gender, age, year level, nationality, ethnicity, language ability, and parental or caregiver socio-economic status. The demographics of the participants can be found in Table 1. The majority of participants were female (48, 83%), with only 10 (17%) male participants. The participants were distributed fairly evenly in terms of age, with 8 (14%) aged 13, 11 (19%) aged 14, 12 (21%) aged 15, 8 (14%) aged 16, 16 (28%) aged 17, and 3 (5%) aged 18. The year level in school distribution of the participants was as follows: 13 (23%) were Year 9, 15 (26%) were Year 10, 3 (5%) were Year 11, 14 (24%) were Year 12, and 13 (22%) were Year 13.

The majority of the participants were born in New Zealand (53, 91%), with 3 (5%) born in an English-speaking country outside New Zealand, and 2 (3%) born in a European non-English speaking country. In School A, a majority of the participants selected Pākehā as their ethnicity (17, 68%) compared to School B where the majority selected Māori (25, 76%). Few participants usually spoke a language other than English at home (8, 14%), with 50 (86%)
usually speaking English only at home. The majority of participants (27, 47%) reported that both the mother or main female caregiver and father or main male caregiver worked full-time. The mother or main female caregiver mainly worked as a professional (16, 28%) and the father or main male caregiver worked as a manager or administrator (10, 17%).

Table 1: Demographics of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Case Site A (n=25)</th>
<th>Case Site B (n=33)</th>
<th>Total (n=58)</th>
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<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19 (76%)</td>
<td>29 (88%)</td>
<td>48 (83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6 (24%)</td>
<td>4 (12%)</td>
<td>10 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td>6 (18%)</td>
<td>8 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>5 (20%)</td>
<td>6 (18%)</td>
<td>11 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>6 (24%)</td>
<td>6 (18%)</td>
<td>12 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>3 (12%)</td>
<td>5 (15%)</td>
<td>8 (14%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>8 (32%)</td>
<td>8 (24%)</td>
<td>16 (28%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>18 years</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Year level</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td>11 (33%)</td>
<td>13 (22%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year 10</td>
<td>9 (36%)</td>
<td>6 (18%)</td>
<td>15 (26%)</td>
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<td>Year 11</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>7 (28%)</td>
<td>7 (21%)</td>
<td>14 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 13</td>
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<td>13 (22%)</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Nationality</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand born</td>
<td>22 (88%)</td>
<td>31 (94%)</td>
<td>53 (91%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other English-speaking country</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-English-speaking country</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
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<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Speak English at home</td>
<td>22 (88%)</td>
<td>28 (85%)</td>
<td>50 (86%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak another language at home</td>
<td>3 (12%)</td>
<td>5 (15%)</td>
<td>8 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pākehā/New Zealander</td>
<td>17 (68%)</td>
<td>3 (9%)</td>
<td>20 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Māori</td>
<td>6 (24%)</td>
<td>25 (76%)</td>
<td>31 (53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pākehā/Māori</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td>3 (9%)</td>
<td>5 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
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<td><strong>Parental work patterns</strong></td>
<td><strong>one or both parents</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works full-time</td>
<td>24 (96%)</td>
<td>30 (90%)</td>
<td>54 (93%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works part-time</td>
<td>7 (28%)</td>
<td>10 (30%)</td>
<td>17 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doesn’t work outside the home</td>
<td>4 (16%)</td>
<td>8 (24%)</td>
<td>12 (21%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Selection

Students at both schools responded that they selected the EAP because they enjoyed sports, identified as elite athletes and wanted to improve their sporting skills and fitness. A majority of the School A participants’ comments suggested that they selected the EAP because they enjoyed sports and identified as elite athletes who wanted to improve in their sports related skills and fitness. “Because I wanted to get fitter and more flexible for my sport” (Ron, a male, Year 10 student, representative of others in School A). However, School B participants also commented on the need to be healthy and to achieve not just in sports but also academically and culturally. “To be better at netball, gain more experience and knowledge. Get a better education” (Sherry, a female, Year 13 student). “I am enrolled because I want to travel the world for sports and to have a healthy lifestyle” (Judy, a female, Year 9 student, representative of others in School B). Overall, School B participants responded that their EAP provided them with an enriching environment to reach their sporting, academic and cultural potential to mainstream schools. This differed from School A participants who stated that they selected the EAP mainly for enjoyment and to achieve in sports.

Improvement of Physical Skills

In total 24 (41%) participants strongly agreed and 24 (41%) agreed that they improved their physical skills, while only 6 (10%) stated neutral responses and 4 (7%) participants did not respond to the question. The few neutral responses from School B participants indicated that they had indeed improved their physical skills because of their training, but did not improve their sports related skills for their chosen sport. “Yes because of my coach and the facilities we have in the academy it helps to increase my physical skills greatly over the years I’ve been here” (Lisa, a female, Year 13 student). “I have definitely improved my running but not really netball skills because I haven’t been playing” (Judy, a female, Year 9 student). This differed from School A participants who stated that they had not improved their skills because of their lack of motivation or time management and the unsupportive environment of the EAP. “I have a coach but I’m getting no support or motivation from them” (Kylie, a female, Year 13 student). A Mann-Whitney U test revealed a significant difference between the two schools at the p<.05 level. Students at School B (median response = 5) were
significantly more likely to agree that their physical skills were improving than students at School A (median response = 4), $U=252.000$, $p=.038$. The effect size for this test was $-.28$, indicating a small effect.

**Enjoyment**

In total, 27 (47%) participants strongly agreed and 22 (38%) participants agreed that they enjoyed participating in the EAP, while only 6 (10%) stated neutral responses and 3 (5%) participants did not respond to the question. Students at both schools agreed that they enjoyed participating in the EAP because it allowed them the opportunity to improve their sports skills, socialize, and build relationships with other athletes. “I enjoy participating in Sports Academy because of what I learn and how I benefit. It is also a good way to make friends” (Jessica, a female, Year 11 student from School A). “DEFINITELY DO, the people and the environment helps me to enjoy this” (Rhonda, a female, Year 12 student from School B). However, participants that responded neutrally to this question in School A indicated that they did not enjoy the EAP because the coaches needed to spend more quality time with them rather than focusing all of their attention on the athletics students. “It’s alright it is not that good if you’re not into athletics” (Cassie, a female, Year 10 student).

Post-School Options

In total, 13 (22%) participants strongly agreed, 16 (28%) agreed, 8 (14%) disagreed, and 7 (12%) strongly disagreed that they were anticipating a career in the sport and recreation industry, while 11 (19%) stated neutral responses and 3 (5%) participants did not respond to the question. In both School A and B the majority of participants wanted to play professional sport and pursue a sports science degree (with School B participants specifically stating that they selected to study physical education at university). “I want to be a pro golfer” (Jim, a male, Year 10 student from School A). “I would like to study sport science when I have finished school” (Monica, a female, Year 12 student from School A). “Next year I wish to study at a university to study a degree in sport and exercise and major in education (teaching)” (Rebecca, a female, Year 13 student from School B). Some participants at both School A and B wished to pursue other interests and others were undecided in selecting a post-school option. “I am not sure what I want to do” (Cassie, a female, Year 10 student from School A). “While I enjoy sport I don’t want a career in that particular industry because I have other interests I prefer to pursue” (Phoebe, a female, Year 9 student from School B).
Further findings indicated that in total, 29 (50%) participants intended to study at university, 7 (12%) intended to get a job in the sport and recreation industry, 8 (14%) intended to play professional sport, while 6 (10%) intended to get a job outside the sport and recreation industry after graduation, 4 (7%) responses stated ‘other’, and 3 (5%) did not answer the question. We used a chi-square test to examine whether there was a significant difference between the participants’ perceived post-school options and the main occupations of the adults in the household in which the participants usually live. We found that there was a tendency for participants to perceive university as a post-school option if their caregivers or parents were managers or administrators. However, these results were not significant.

**Status: The EAP Suits Students Who are...**

A majority of the School A participants’ comments suggested that the EAP suits students who are determined, dedicated, committed, passionate, and sporty, elite athletes. “Passionate about the sports they are involved in” (Samantha, a female, Year 12 student, representative of others in School A). Participants in School B gave a variety of responses to who was suited to participate in the EAP from just being motivated and committed to achieve in sport, striving for excellence in sport, academics and cultural pursuits. “Dedicated to their sport and studies, and understands...the values of culture” (Rebecca, a female, Year 13 student, representative of others in School B). The School B participants had similar responses to School A participants but elaborated further on the EAP suiting students who strived for academic and cultural achievement.

**Status: Students Perceived the EAP as...**

School A participants perceived the EAP as a place to train and improve their sports skills and to make friends and meet other athletes. “A good opportunity to combine school and sport and train with people who do different sports” (Kim, a female, Year 12 student, representative of others in School A). School B participants gave a greater variety of responses than School A. “I think that this school is about helping young Māori people succeed in a different way of life, it also gives us something to strive for” (Violet, a female, Year 12 student, representative of others in School B). School B participants differed from School A participants in their perceptions of the EAP. School A participant responses focused on the EAP as a training ground for athletes to socialise and achieve in their sport, while School B participants viewed the EAP as place for them to achieve culturally and academically, as well as succeed in their sports.

**Status: Others Perceived the EAP as...**

There were also a variety of responses to the question of how others perceived the EAP. Most of the School A participants perceived that other people viewed the EAP as a place for elite athletes to train and excel in sports. “Supporting people that are good at sport to excel” (Kelly, a female, Year 10 student). However, a few of the participants stated that
others viewed the EAP as “pointless, teambuilding, being big and tough, listening to” the coach (Chris, a male, Year 13 student) and “Some people think it is a waste of time, I think” (Charlene, a female, Year 10 student). School B participant responses varied as well. The majority of the participants perceived that others viewed the EAP as a place to support elite athletes. “A good place to follow your sports career which has a lot of talented people there” (Judy, a female, Year 9 student). Some students commented that people have negative views on the EAP. “Abnormal, crazy, why would you want to train so much?” (Sherry, a female, Year 13 student). School A and B participants’ responses varied in that the students perceived that others viewed the EAP as place to support elite athletes, but also that others view the EAP as not having any educational value or perceived it as physically damaging.

Discussion

Internationally, governments recognise the importance of nurturing the development of elite athletes to reach their potential in sporting pursuits and have increased funding sports in schools, in spite of a global recession (Silverman, Kulinka, P., & Crull, G., 1995). For over twenty years, EAPs have offered an alternative to physical education within the New Zealand school curriculum. EAPs have been discussed in the literature, but only a few studies have focused on student voices (Erueti, 2005; Hapeta & Palmer, 2009; Tristram & Batty, 2000). Nasey (2004) concluded that student voices empowered and engaged secondary education EAP students. The results of the current study support previous findings in the physical education literature that a nurturing environment that fulfills the diverse needs of students, along with providing a balance between academic, cultural and sporting pursuits, and developing a labour market literacy were essential to the success and achievement of elite athletes.

The teacher/coach, the talent development environment and student athlete time management were the primary factors that determined students’ perceived improvement of physical skills. Several factors mentioned in the literature may contribute to the improvement of physical skills, such as time and appropriate practice (Escartí & Gutiérrez, 2001; Larson & Silverman, 2005), skill progression, and task presentation (Bernstein, Phillips, & Silverman, 2011; Ravizza & Stratton, 2007), and motivational climate (Quicke, 1999; Subramaniam & Silverman, 2002; Subramaniam & Silverman, 2007). Student athletes that did not perceive physical skill improvement responded that the teacher/coach was unsupportive and it affected the amount of time and energy that they devoted to their sport. Larson and Silverman (2010) stated that “Teachers who conduct their work from a caring perspective often make it a priority to foster interpersonal relationships with their students” (p. 175). The teachers’/coaches’ role in developing interpersonal relationships
with student athletes, along with demonstrating appropriate teaching/coaching practices had a significant effect on student athletes’ perceptions of physical skill improvement.

A majority of student athletes enjoyed their participation in EAPs in both School A and B, but this perceived enjoyment depended on environmental factors. In physical education classes the environment created was an important factor in student enjoyment (Higgins, Nairn, & Sligo, 2010). Student athletes agreed that they enjoyed socializing and improving their skills in a positive environment. Physical education students perceived a positive environment as a caring and nurturing environment (Yli-Piipari, Wang, Jaakkola, & Liukkonen, 2012). Student athletes perceived factors such as teachers/coaches focusing all of their attention on high-status athletes and regulating their sporting option (to one sport) as contributing to their dissatisfaction with the EAP. Similar findings indicated that students in physical education who were not presented with a positive environment, held negative attitudes towards the subject (Burrows & McCormack, 2011; Morgan, Kingston, & Sproule, 2005).

Half of the students intended to study at university, with some intending to get a job in the sport and recreation industry, play professional sports or pursue work outside sport or recreation. In both schools the results indicated a tendency for participants to perceive university as a post-school option if their caregivers/parents were managers or administrators. Quicke (1999) argued that helping students transition to work beyond school is an implicit goal of schools. From the results, both schools may be implicit in social class reproduction in the curriculum and instruction. Luke (2010) stated that social class reproduction “is about how the enacted curriculum, in tandem with overall school ethos effectively structures and codes knowledge differently, in effect constituting different epistemic stances, dispositions and attitudes towards what will count as knowledge” (pp. 179-180).

The responses of School A and B participants perceived EAPs to be high status and described the athletes as determined, dedicated and passionate. School B participants elaborated further that the EAP developed them to not only achieve in sports, but to also assist them in valuing their culture and academic pursuits. However, the participants perceived that others may view the EAP as not having any academic value or as a place for “dumb jocks”. Brown and Macdonald (2009) stated that schools have “the power of different curriculum spaces to shape students’ identities and opportunities” (p. 237). These perceptions may influence participants’ engagement and experiences with EAPs.

Results showed that for both schools, the EAP contributed to the participants’ perceptions of enjoyment, improvement in skills, and status as elite athletes. However, participants in School B differed to School A in their responses, as School B focused primarily on fulfilling
the needs of Māori athletes to reach their potential in academic, cultural and sporting pursuits. These findings are supported in the writings of Erueti (2005) and Palmer (2007), who found that students participating in EAPs with this focus on the diverse needs of students; develop their sense of identity, and help them maintain a balance between academics and sports training. Hapeta and Palmer (2009) further noted that whānau support in schools contributed to successful engagement for Māori elite athletes individually and collectively.

Conclusions

This study documented the student athlete profile, EAP selection and perceptions of physical skill improvement, enjoyment, post-school options, and programme status within two case sites. Participants included more female than male student athletes, with an age range of 13-18 years. The majority of the students were born in New Zealand to parents who worked full-time in a professional or managerial role. The two case sites differed in their student profile in terms of ethnicity, with School A consisting of mostly Pākehā athletes and School B of Māori athletes. Further differences resided in the purposes of the two case sites. School A focused on training athletes to improve fitness and skills while School B had a holistic approach that reflected the aspirations and needs of the learners that focused on athletes’ short, medium and long term goals.

Statistical analysis of the data, using Mann-Whitney U for two groups of participants and Kruskal-Wallis for three or more groups of participants, revealed that there were very few differences between the groups. In terms of age, gender, nationality, language, ethnicity and year level, there were no differences between the responses for the survey questions about enjoyment, learning, or anticipation of a sports-related career. This was true both across the two case sites and within each case site. However, a Mann-Whitney U test to look at differences between School A and School B for the question ‘I am improving my physical skills’ was significant at the p<.05 level. We also found that participants tended to perceive university as a post-school option if their caregivers or parents were managers or administrators, but the result of this chi-squared test was not significant.

Teachers/coaches need to create a talent development environment that considers the diversity of learners involved with EAPs. Participants perceived an improvement in physical skills when teachers/coaches showed they cared not only about their athletic training but also their academic and cultural pursuits. However, teachers/coaches may consider forms of regulation, such as allowing elite athletes to participate in only one sport or just focusing attention on a certain cross-section of elite athletes (such as athletics in School A) in a particular sport as possibly counterproductive to participants’ enjoyment. Teachers/coaches may also consider developing what Higgins, Nairn, and Sligo (2010) referred to as a “labour
market literacy and vocational imagination” that requires youth “to work on identity formation, to discover and develop their abilities, and to recognise relevant opportunities and constraints, all within an infrastructure that allows” (p. 13) post-school options and pathways to be mapped. A supportive talent development environment that allows for athlete choices in a caring and supportive EAP that goes beyond just training for sport is essential in improving physical skills and demonstrating the educational value of EAPs. The results from this pilot study provide a basis to rethink and reexamine the way EAPs are presented in the school curriculum and ultimately the ways students value their learning and achievement in sporting pursuits. Although some interesting implications have emerged from this study, it was small and not representative of all students in New Zealand. Future research (perhaps a large-scale project) that examines the issues raised in more depth is necessary, particularly in attempting to understand how multiple programmes (for example, recreation, physical education, health education, elite and non-elite sports programmes) across the Health and Physical Education subject area influence students’ perceptions of learning, enjoyment, subject status, and post-school options.

Implications

The findings from this study have implications for all of the stakeholders involved, particularly teachers/coaches in developing an EAP with a broader programme that develops academic, sporting and cultural pursuits. The narrow focus on training for sport in School A had students concentrating more on doing than on thinking or reflecting about their learning experiences. School B participants gave more in-depth responses as the purpose of their EAP was to encourage and develop not only sporting success but achievement in academic and cultural pursuits. However, School A participants enjoyed the social aspects of training with other elite athletes and being able to select more than one sport. School B participants were regulated to concentrating on one sport that appeared to detract from their enjoyment of the EAP. The results of this study focused primarily on the student athlete responses to the talent development environment. Future research focusing on both students’ and teachers’ perceptions of student learning and achievement would be beneficial in examining EAPs implemented in schools.

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