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Citation: Allen-Baker, Georgia, Rhind, Daniel and Koshy, Valsa (2015) Enablers and barriers for male students transferring life skills from the sports hall into the classroom. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 7 (1). pp. 53-67. ISSN 2159-676X

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2014.893898>  
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2014.893898>>

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# **Enablers and barriers for male students transferring life skills from the sports hall into the classroom**

## **Abstract**

There is a widespread belief that sport can be used as a vehicle to promote positive youth development. In particular, using sport to teach young people various life skills has become popular over the previous decade. However, little research has looked at the transfer of life skills into other academic and life domains. The Transfer-Ability Programme (TAP) was a multi-faceted intervention, which sought to deliberately teach 20 underachieving, male students life skills through sport. Previous statistical findings from TAP show the intervention groups' academic grades significantly improved during the intervention to a level above teaching prediction. This suggests that teaching life skills through sport may reduce male underachievement. The purpose of this paper is to examine the enablers and barriers that may influence life skill transfer from the sports hall into the classroom. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eighteen (12-13 year old) male students from a secondary school in London, UK. Analysis revealed five higher order themes: Support from peers, Pride, Opportunities, Rewards, and Transfer experience. These findings are discussed with reference to how teachers and physical educators may teach life skills within their lessons, and how life skill transfer may enhance the school experience for students across the school environment.

**Keywords:** youth; sport; intervention; transfer; school

## **Introduction**

Previous research strongly postulates that sport can be used as a vehicle in order to develop and transfer life skills. Sport is seen as a valued social activity that most youths will engage with at some point (Camiré et al. 2012), using sport to develop life skills is becoming a growing trend not only advocated by the sport community but also through youth development campaigns and schools (Gould and Carson, 2008). It is widely recognised that organised sport provides favourable conditions for young people to engage in positive youth development (Larson, 2000) and is a significant factor in adolescent's development of identity and self-esteem (Danish, et al. 2005).

Positive youth development (PYD) has become a popular term in research. The main ethos of PYD is that all youths have the capacity for positive development (Lerner et al. 2005). Youths are no longer seen as damaged or problems to be managed but rather as resources which can be developed (Lerner et al. 2005; Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2003). PYD is the 'active promotion of adolescents' competence, confidence, character, caring, and connection' (Youngblade and Theokas, 2006: 58). Life skills are a concept that falls under the umbrella term of PYD. Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) state that youth development programmes increase the opportunities needed for healthy development. It is commonly believed and widely accepted that sport can provide young people with the skills and values needed to prepare them for their life ahead (Danish et al. 2004).

Danish and colleagues (2005) state the greatest risk to young people is the belief that playing with a ball alone is sufficient. Whilst they argue that school sport provides attractive opportunities to develop youths, they also stress that there is nothing magical about sport and it is not the game itself that facilitates development but rather the deliberate teaching of skills and attitudes. Despite the growing number of sports-based, life skill programmes that are implemented, Gould and Carson (2008)

recognise the lack of research focusing particularly on sport, especially when it is seen as such an important topic. This paper seeks to examine if 12-13 year old, underachieving male students can transfer life skills from the sports hall into the classroom. The Transfer-Ability Programme (TAP) was a once weekly, sports-based intervention conducted over one academic year at the participants' school. The programme sought to make twenty participants aware of seven life skills that could be learnt in a sporting environment and used in academic settings.

### **Life skills**

The term *life skills* is a complex concept and literature offers many definitions. In general terms, life skills have been broadly defined as the skills needed to deal with the demands and challenges of everyday life (World Health Organisation (WHO) 1999). Danish and colleagues have offered a more specific definition commonly used in sport literature as 'those skills that enable individuals to succeed in the different environments in which they live, such as school, home and in their neighbourhoods' (2004: 40). This was one of the definitions used when designing TAP. Papacharisis and colleagues (2005) state life skills can be physical, behavioural, or cognitive in nature and can be transferred into other life domains. Transfer was an important aspect of the programme and this definition was also used.

Researchers such as Papacharisis and colleagues (2005) and Camiré, and colleagues (2012) argue in order for life skills to be classified as life skills, they must be transferred and applied in other life domains such as school. However, we must ask ourselves if life skill transfer is a realistic and likely outcome. The concept that life skills can be transferred from one context into another is still a contentious issue in the research community. Danish and others (2005) recognise that individuals are likely to

be dissimilar to each other and therefore such differences have to be considered when developing life skill programmes. However, they also state that there is a core set of life skills that all individuals need to know and can be effectively transferred from one environment to another as appropriate. For example, all students require a core set of skills to succeed in school such as discipline, concentration and communication skills.

A number of large-scale, sport-based, life skills intervention programmes have been developed in recent years. Such programmes include Going for Goal (GOAL; Danish, 2002a), Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation (SUPER: Danish, 2002b), Teaching Responsibility through Physical Education and Sport (Hellison, 2003) as well as the First Tee (life skill programme through golf) (Weiss et al. 2013) and Play It Smart (Petitpas et al. 2005). Whilst these interventions are needed, it is often the case that research lags behind the applied application of such programmes.

Hellison (2003) looked at teaching responsibility through physical activity in a programme known as teaching personal and social responsibility (TPSR). The programme has five levels of responsibility: (a) respecting the rights and feelings of others, (b) understanding the role of effort in improving oneself in physical activity and life, (c) being self-directed and responsible for one's own well-being, (d) being sensitive and responsible for the well-being of others, and (e) applying what you have learnt in different non-sport settings. Hellison (2003) found that transferring skills was the most advanced stage of the TPSR programme and therefore was seen as the final goal that participants could achieve. Although transferring skills sounds like a common solution to deal with many situations, in reality it is complex and transfer often proves problematic for individuals. The issue is that skills do not transfer very readily (Gibbs et al. 1994). Gibbs and colleagues (1994) even went as far as to say that due to the limited evidence it is not convincing that skills are transferred from one

context to another. They argue that if skills are transferred then the contexts are often very similar.

For example, life skills taught through sport, such as teamwork have to be transferred into environments and situations that are not similar to the sporting environment in which the skills were learnt. This can make it difficult for young people to recognise that life skills learnt in sport programmes can be used effectively in different situations. Early research suggests that automatic transfer of skills should not be assumed. Transfer may be enhanced if the programme is designed to facilitate transfer and if similarities and opportunities for transfer are present in the intervention.

However, recent findings (Camiré et al, 2009) demonstrate that a large portion of their participants believed they had applied the life skills taught in the programme to their academic work. This suggests young people believe they can transfer life skills from the sports hall in to the classroom. Jones and Lavalley (2009) also examined life skill transfer with one participant. They discovered through in-depth interviews that Linda believed life skills learnt in sport could be transferred into other situations. Linda specifically discussed transfer of life skills such as communication and confidence from sport into academia. Jones and Lavalley (2009) highlight their findings were from a single case and similar results cannot be assumed in future studies.

More recently, Weiss and colleagues (2013) published an evaluation of the First Tee programme. The ability of the First Tee participants to transfer the skills taught on the programme into other life domains was examined. The findings highlight that the young people were able to learn and transfer the life skills they had been taught on the programme. However, despite recent findings, the transfer of life skills

specifically into academic domains needs further examination in order to clarify exactly why transfer may or may not occur.

In as early as 1993, Danish and colleagues suggested one of the main barriers to transferable skill programmes is that participants do not know and are not made aware of the skills they have learnt. It is argued that if the participants lack insight of the life skills that have been developed, how can one possibly expect them to transfer such skills into other areas of academic life? It is argued that life skills have to be systematically taught and participants need to be made aware of the skills they are learning. Petitpas and others (2005) have argued that young people rarely have insight and understanding of life skill transfer; youths do not often know how skills learnt in a sporting environment can be transferred into other domains.

In summary, the literature is still unsure of the limit, if any, of life skill transfer, despite decades of research and the development of recent frameworks. Gould and Carson highlight the belief that life skills learnt in sport spill over into other life domains but stress that ‘this assumption is seldom tested’ (2008: 74). This uncertainty around transfer needs attention and must be addressed in research in order to ensure life skill interventions are well designed and effective. This paper looks to address this argument by exploring the role of a life skill intervention that sought to deliberately make the participants aware of life skills and discuss transfer.

### **The Transfer-Ability Programme**

TAP is a multi-faceted intervention designed to facilitate the acquisition and transfer of life skills through sport. This programme was designed as part of a Ph.D. project by the first author and two supervisory researchers (also named authors of this paper). Six experienced coaches delivered the weekly sport sessions. The Case Study school

is a mixed sex school, located in inner city London. At the time of the intervention, the number of students eligible for free school meals was approximately double the national average, indicating a high level of social deprivation. Almost two-thirds of the students spoke English as a second language. The intervention targeted students in Year 8 (12-13 years old), where it was judged timely to make a difference to their attainment and attitudes to school.

TAP used a purposeful sampling approach, where participants had to meet specific eligibility criteria. Although this manuscript is not concerned with the academic achievement aspect, it was an important element of the programme. All participants had to be male, attending the same school and in the same school year, and underachieving in at least Science. This criteria was used in an attempt to standardise teaching and grade predictions, as all the participants were receiving a similar level and style of teaching. Only one female P.E teacher from the school was involved with the intervention. The school only allowed female PE teachers to teach female students and as a result she did not teach any of the male participants in the school,. Her involvement in the programme therefore did not result in any biased teaching or extra attention being placed on the boys within their academic environments.

Twenty male students were randomly selected from the 39 eligible students. The senior management team at the school firstly identified all eligible students and then selected the intervention group using a simple sampling technique. One student withdrew from the study after 6 weeks as he was excluded from the school. No data has been presented for that student.

TAP consisted of 23 sport sessions, each session lasting 75 minutes. This made TAP longer in duration than GOAL (10 x 1 hour sessions) and SUPER (18 x 30 minute



sessions). Sport sessions were delivered at the school, once weekly, over one full academic year. Each session focused on a specific life skill, where the participants were able to practice the skill through sport participation. Unlike GOAL, SUPER, and other life skill interventions, the participants conducted a focus group after learning each life skill for two weeks in order to discuss and facilitate skill transfer into other school domains.

The aim of TAP was to teach a variety of life skills by using a range of sports. Several sports and activities were used to offer the participants an opportunity to participate in a range of new sports (i.e., rock climbing and goalball), whilst including some traditional and popular sports (i.e., football). The programme could have taught many life skills using just one sport. However, it was hoped that offering a range of sports and new opportunities, the interest and engagement of the boys would be maintained throughout the programme. Seven life skills were systematically and deliberately taught during the sport sessions. American football was used to teach teamwork, martial arts was used to teach discipline, goalball was used to teach communication, concentration was taught using rock climbing and sprint hurdling, frisbee was used to teach persistence, boxing was used to teach goal setting and finally football was used to teach self-confidence and positive self-talk. The programme provided the participants with structured practice, information on each life-skill, encouragement, motivational support, and facilitated focus groups. The school and the first author selected the seven life skills based on previous life skill intervention research and student needs. More specifically the Case Study school felt these were the skills the majority of their students were lacking.

Frameworks developed by Gould and Carson (2008) and Petitpas and colleagues (2005) were used to plan and develop TAP. Gould and Carson's (2008)

model for coaching life skills is extensive and includes aspects such as internal and external assets, sport participation experience, life skills/ personal development possible explanations, positive and negative outcomes, and transferability. This paper focuses on the transferability component of the model, for a full discussion see Gould and Carson (2008). The transferability component is concerned with the transfer of life skills from the sport environment to other non-sport aspects of life, which was an element of TAP we were particularly interested in exploring.

Petitpas and colleagues (2005) developed a framework for developing an effective youth sport programme. According to their framework, youths are more likely to experience positive development in the presence of (1) an appropriate environment (context), (2) caring adults (external assets), and (3) they are provided opportunities to learn life skills (internal assets). All three elements were embraced when planning and implementing the programme within the participants' school. It was important that the participants were able to spend time with caring adults. The first author developed a positive relationship with the participants throughout the programme. However, the first author was only at the school one afternoon per week. During the times the first author was not at the school, the participants saw the female P.E teacher involved in the programme as a caring adult they could seek advice and support from on a daily basis.

## **Method**

### *Data Collection*

Prior to any data collection, the University Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval. Consent from the Head Teacher at the Case Study school, parental consent and participant assent were obtained. The participants were informed that they could

withdraw from the research at any time without consequences. An interview schedule was developed based on previous research (Gould and Carson 2008) to ensure key topics were covered. Probes were asked throughout the interview to determine meaning and understanding and to explore various responses in more details. Some of the probes used included; ‘Tell me more about that?’ ‘How did that make you feel?’ ‘What do you mean?’ or ‘Have I understood that correctly?’ The assumption for the semi-structure approach was to allow the participants to introduce new issues that may not have been thought of in advance. The interview guide was initially piloted with a twelve year old, male student who was not involved in the programme. The pilot interview was not included in the final sample but did allow for minor changes to be made to the interview guide.

The first author completed semi-structured interviews with eighteen participants during the last two weeks of the school year. One participant was ill during this period and was not available for interviews. All interviews were conducted in a private meeting room on the school premises and recorded using a digital voice recorder (VN-5500PC, Olympus Inc, Pennsylvania, US). Before each interview, the participants were reminded of the definition of life skills and the skills that were taught during TAP. They were also reminded of the transfer concept and encouraged to think of opportunities where transfer had occurred.

All the participants were informed and assured of complete confidentiality and anonymity. This was deemed most important as the interviews were conducted on school premises. Whilst this was convenient for the students and provided them with a familiar and safe environment, some participants were initially concerned that their teachers may be given information arising from the interviews.

After collecting verbal consent from each participant, the interview began by discussing what the participant thought about the programme and why they attended each week. The interview then explored the life skills (i.e. which skills they had transferred into the classroom and which skills they could not/ had not transferred). Each participant was asked to discuss the perceived enablers and barriers of life skill transfer. Finally, to gain any additional information on the programme, the participants were asked: 'If you were asked to design a programme like TAP what would you have done differently?' Interview duration ranged from 30 minutes to 55 minutes.

#### *Interview analysis*

The first author who conducted the interviews transcribed the interviews verbatim. In order to ensure anonymity, all participants were assigned participant numbers (Participant One = P1 etc.). The first author was engaged with the data for several months, reading and checking data with audio files numerous times in order to ensure accuracy. Interview data were then analysed using deductive-inductive content analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This analysis was used, as the first sweep of data was primarily deductive. The interview questions were based on previous research, and the categories involving life skill enablers and barriers emerged inductively from the participants' responses. Initially this involved reading and coding each of the 18 transcripts several times. The three named authors then read and sorted the data sets until raw data themes were developed. Content analysis was used to identify specific themes such as the barriers and enablers of transfer. Interpretations were then made about the meaning of specific quotes.

In order to determine methodological rigour, the first author was present in the school one afternoon every week, for one academic year ensuring prolonged engagement and persistent observations (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). This paper is only presenting interview data from the participants; however, data was triangulated from various sources including interviews with staff members and a parent, focus group with the participants, a life skills ability questionnaire completed by the participants and academic attainment scores. The data was discussed and analysed by all three members of the research team in order to reach consensus on meaning and prevent bias.

A member of research team acted as a ‘critical friend’ as suggested by Sparkes and Smith (2014). This researcher had no contact with the participants or the school and was able to help guard against researcher bias. This was particularly important when the first author gained a rapport with the participants. Rapport between the first author and the participants was an essential part of the research process. Due to the age of the participants, rapport was vital. This was made apparent during at the start of TAP, when the participants were reluctant to engage in conversation with the first author or each other. The critical friend was able to ensure the first author was aware of the relationship with the participants and prevent any potential over-rapport. Whilst we recognise the limitations of rapport, particularly with young people, rapport was an important and preferable aspect of TAP, particularly during the interview phase.

## **Results**

Five higher order themes were identified (see table 1); i) support from peers, ii) pride, iii) opportunities, iv) rewards, and v) transfer experience. These themes are

collectively known as the SPORT model. The barriers and enablers for each theme will now be discussed and illustrated with quotes.

Insert table 1 here

### ***Support from peers***

Peer support was an enabler many of the boys identified, particularly the support they all gave and received during the focus groups. The focus groups provided the participants with several elements of Gould and Carson's (2008) model including support and reinforcement of transfer. The focus groups provided a forum to discuss initial failures or setbacks in relation to transfer and provided some participants with an awareness and comprehension to transfer the life skills. One participant said: 'You got to empathise with people, see things from different perspectives and see how other people use them and it could affect how you use it' (P7).

The interaction and sharing of ideas amongst their peers was an effective way of discussing and providing information on transfer. The participants appeared to value the comments, suggestions, and support from their peers during the focus groups. Some of the participants who did not have their own ideas on transfer were able to listen to ideas from their friends, comprehend transfer, and acknowledge that transfer could be achieved. One participant said:

The feedback from the focus groups was great 'cause it shows if you've learnt anything in the lesson, like if you knew what you were doing in the sessions to succeed, and if you didn't really understand goal setting you could in the focus groups say I didn't really understand this (P2).

The focus groups allowed the participants to reaffirm their own ideas: 'I got to hear other peoples' ideas and stuff like what they were thinking and if they were thinking the same thing as me' (P10) and 'hearing other people's ideas made you think about the skill more and like, how I could transfer it' (P4).

The participants received support from each other throughout the programme. It appears they also spoke to each other outside of the programme and supported each other in other academic environments. The boys saw TAP as a fun programme and as a gang they were proud to be a part of:

I liked having something to do every Wednesday it was a routine. Something I knew would be safe to do, on the school grounds, no danger or and like if anything happens, if anything happened to me, umm I was with friends. I liked it, the programme, it was really fun and it made me feel like I was part of a big team and it was a really happy thing to do. If I was sad and it was a Wednesday I just knew I would be happy by the end of the day (P4).

Peer support was deemed to be an important enabler in promoting life skill transfer from the sports hall to the classroom. In particular, it appears the boys found their peer's testimonials of skill transfer to be more valuable in facilitating transfer than anything the coaches could have told them.

### *Pride*

The participants all demonstrated a sense of achievement during the interviews and this appeared to be a powerful enabler in facilitating and reaffirming life skill transfer. They discussed feeling proud that they had completed the yearlong intervention, learnt new skills and all the participants were all able to identify personal improvements: 'I feel happy and a different person like I have achieved something new' (P13). One participant was also proud that he had been selected to be part of the programme:

I felt privileged to be part of the group because um, some people don't get to do this kind of stuff like rock climbing and martial arts. It feels good, it's not just a club, it is an actual thing that you got chosen for and I feel proud (P8).

The participants were also pleased that their achievements had been recognised by their parents: 'I was really happy that my grades improved and my mum and dad were really happy as well because I improved, they were really happy' (P19). Whilst other parents were proud with the changes their child made in their behaviour: 'My parents have said like they are proud of me because I am getting better instead of just being naughty in every single lesson' (P3). One participant was equally proud of himself for showing an improvement to the boxing coach who worked with the boys on their goal setting:

When Hannah came in the first time she said that by the next time we see her, by the next time she saw us, we had to improve in the lesson we are not good at or achieve the goal that we had set, and it showed in my report that I have improved. I feel proud that I can do it, that I can achieve more in lessons and get higher levels (P6).



The boys seemed particularly proud and pleased by the recognition they received from their parents and seemed to be a powerful enabler and reaffirmed to them the importance of continued transfer.

### *Opportunities*

All of the participants highlighted learning opportunities they had experienced during TAP and discussed how this was an important enabler in facilitating transfer. When asked what they thought of the programme, one boy simply said: 'it gave us the opportunity' (P4). Awareness of current skills and knowledge of how and in what context skills were learnt were deemed to be important factors in life skill transfer according to Gould and Carson's (2008) model. TAP deliberately made students aware of their skills and discussed the context in which they could be used in sport and how that differed from using the skills in an academic environment. One participant said:

Since the start [of TAP] I have been going up in grades and I am getting better at things because we were learning, every lesson we learn a new topic that the sport was linked to erm, like a word or a meaning like persistence or communication. That helped with most things that I do in the classroom (P5)

Whilst learning opportunities were a commonly mentioned enabler, it appears that in some cases the participants deemed the learning opportunities insufficient: 'We could've done more sessions on the same skill, like goal setting we could have done more so we know exactly how to use it' (P9) and 'I didn't learn as much as I thought

I would about self-confidence. If there was more sessions I could use it more often and it would be easier' (P16). Such comments suggest that some skills such as goal setting and self-confidence were more difficult to understand and the participants felt they needed more time in order to fully learn, understand, and transfer the skill into other environments.

More commonly expressed however, was the limitation to use certain skills in the classroom. The most frequently mentioned barrier was the lack of opportunities to use goal setting and teamwork outside of the sports hall. This was identified by a participant who said: 'Team work, I don't know how you could use that in the class unless it's with problem solving but you can't exactly use it anywhere else except for sports' (P1) and 'Some of the skills are harder like goal setting. I don't use them that much. I don't really set goals' (P16). It appears that several of the participants found the concept of goal setting difficult and need more time to fully understand and learn how to use the skill effectively. This was an unexpected finding as the school had highlighted goal setting as an important skill for their students, yet the participants felt that the school environment provided them with limited opportunities to use and transfer such skills into classroom domains. That is not to say sport cannot be used to teach goal setting. Successful programmes such as GOAL and SUPER place great emphasis on young people learning goal setting through sport and using the skill in other domains. The boys in TAP highlighted that they had learnt goal setting but some required more time to fully understand and transfer the skill and some needed more opportunities to use goal setting within the school environment. Whilst the ability to set goals may be an important skill for young people, it appears unlikely that young people are required to set goals in an academic environment on a daily basis.

The use of sport as a vehicle to teach the boys life skills was what kept them engaged during TAP. Teaching the boys and allowing them opportunity to participate in new sports proved to be an enabler of life skill transfer. One participant in particular identified the use of sport as an important enabler:

A lot of people like sport so like when you're doing sport they will be more interested and keep coming back, instead of doing theory work or writing stuff. Most people like sports so like they'll be more persistent with it and they won't get as bored as easily (P2).

Another participant said 'it was better doing sports to learn the skills 'cause it's like P.E and it's more fun as well' (P11). However the choice of sports used in the programme may have had some impact on the learning of the life skill. The same participant also said 'I wasn't really good at Frisbee and I would have put in some different sports, like basketball and I would have done tennis 'cause I like them sports'. Although sport was seen as an important enabler that promoted engagement with the programme, when the boys were asked if they would do anything differently if they were asked to design the programme, they give the following responses:

It depends if you like the sport 'cause if it's something that you don't like then it would be harder to learn the skill. I would change the sport to something better maybe (P16).

The participants also identified some barriers concerning their engagement in school and the lack of opportunities to use skill when they become bored. Boring

lessons was a common theme that many of the participants highlighted as a transfer barrier:

Maybe there is not the excitement, like in rock climbing there was like a thrill but in lessons when it's just teachers speaking, it's boring and there is nothing really intriguing then my mind does wander and I forget about the skills (P11).

One participant recognised that boring lessons are problematic but do not necessarily need to be a barrier: 'In some of my lessons if it was really boring I wouldn't listen but now I try to listen before I wouldn't listen, and misbehave but now I don't' (P6).

Teacher attitudes within the classroom were also identified as a barrier to life skill transfer. Several of the participants felt that their teachers prevented them from using the skills effectively within the classroom:

The teachers made it harder to use the skill, some teachers they deliberately ignore you whilst your hand is up in the air waiting to answer a question even though you've been there for like an hour using persistence and the person next to you has been there for five seconds and they answer them and then you get angry that you have been waiting more (P12).

One participant again highlighted some teacher's attitudes as difficult whilst in the classroom but also explained how TAP had helped him to overcome this barrier:

Some teachers would just like annoy you. They would literally be in your face, shouting for nothing and usually you would get angry and say something back and get a big detention but because of the discipline like, it made you think nah there is no point so it made me better and more aware of my teachers (P11).

### ***Rewards***

The participants gaining intrinsic rewards and receiving extrinsic rewards appeared to be important facilitators of TAP. Gould and Carson (2008) identified that participants must have a belief that the acquired skills are valued in other settings. Many of the participants talked about their motivation to learn new skills and participate in new sports as well as their belief that the skills could be used in other academic environments. This appeared to have a significant impact on their engagement with TAP as they felt that by using the skills they were experiencing a reward. For example, one participant said:

It helped me with my lessons. I wanted it to go on 'cause it was kind of fun, it was enjoyable, the activities that were happening, and I knew that I was learning something and getting something from it  
(P9)

This suggests that as long as the individual feels they are learning a new skill or sport and value the use of the taught skills in other settings, enjoy the sessions, and feel they are gaining some form of intrinsic rewards within the classroom, they will stay engaged in the programme.

Another enabler mentioned by many of the participants was the extrinsic rewards they received within the school environment. It emerged that the boys were aware of rewards they received when they transferred life skills into the classroom: 'Now if I get tired or can't be bothered, I kept on going so I could get a merit or something, if I self-discipline myself maybe I get praised or something' (P8).

Similarly, a different participant said:

Before TAP I used to get a lot of detentions and get into trouble and now I can see that am more focused on task so I am getting more merits and less detentions with teachers. I feel good about myself 'cause I know I'm improving at school (P2).

### ***Transfer experience***

Many of the participants highlighted transfer experience as an enabler for future life skill transfer. Once the participants had successfully transferred one skill into a different academic environment, they were then motivated to transfer skills more regularly which was highlighted as an important factor in Gould and Carson's (2008) model. When asked about using the skills in other academic situations, they provided the following responses:

Well TAP helped because sometimes I would go to the lesson and not concentrate and try and be the class clown and make people laugh but now I think back to the session we had of rock climbing

and I would say right we need to concentrate and now it happens easier (P2).

The boys' felt that by participating in TAP and playing sport, the programme had helped facilitate improvements in the classroom, particularly with their ability to complete academic work. One participant even spoke of feelings of relief: 'I felt relieved using the skills 'cause like without TAP I wouldn't be focusing as much as I can in lessons now' (P8). Making the participants aware of their behaviour and discussing life skill transfer proved to be a powerful enabler as all of the boys' were able to identify aspects of improvement and they enjoyed the benefits that it brought.

## **Discussion**

The five themes identified (Support from peers, Pride, Opportunities, Rewards and Transfer experience) are collectively known as the SPORT Model. It appeared that providing a programme that appealed to the target audience was an important enabler in TAP. The programme was a yearlong intervention and the participants engaged with the full programme mainly because they enjoyed coming to the weekly sessions. The participant's felt as though they had been a part of something special, a programme they were specifically chosen for, and this proved to be a powerful enabler.

A number of transfer barriers were highlighted such as boring lessons and negative teacher attitudes and whilst there are no easy solutions to these barriers, they are worth noting when designing future school-based, life skill interventions. Future interventions, particularly school-based programmes should seek to eliminate many of

the barriers identified in this study. Although there were pockets of barriers identified within the programme, many more enablers were discussed and highlighted during the interviews. Unlike the findings from previous research that suggest life skills do not necessarily need direct teaching (Jones and Lavalley, 2009), this study argues young teenage boys need to be systematically taught about life skills and they need to explore ways in which such skills can be transferred into the classroom. This study has demonstrated that the participants perceived they had learnt life skills through sport participation but it can be argued that this is only the case as long as the programme is designed to facilitate such learning. As Danish and colleagues (2004) state there is nothing magical about sport; sport can only be used as a vehicle to facilitate life skill learning. The participants had not and may not have established the links between using skills in sport and in the classroom had they not been told about the skills.

The participants mainly discussed using the skills in classroom lessons but also used the life skills to improve their behaviour and attitudes around the school more generally. The findings demonstrate that life skills can be transferred into other life domains if transfer is discussed and facilitated appropriately. All the participants individually acknowledged at least one skill they had learnt during TAP and had transferred into other academic or life domains. The focus groups appeared to allow the participants who had considered transfer and had ideas on how to use the skills in other areas of the curriculum to share their knowledge with their peers. Their comments suggest that they valued and listened to their peers and respected each other's suggestions on transfer more than they would have done if the researcher had imparted the same information.

It appears some of the life skills were more easily used within other academic domains than other skills. Many of the participants had used the sport sessions to



practice using the life skills and had thought about the transfer process but then found the school provided them with little opportunity to use the skills, especially with goal setting. This was an interesting finding considering the school highlighted the skills as important for their students. Not all participants had transferred all of the skills with many of the students identifying goal setting and teamwork as particularly difficult skills to transfer into an academic environment. The fact that many of the participants failed to transfer goal setting skills and found it a problematic skill to use in the classroom is of interest. Particularly, as programmes such as GOAL and TPSR focus heavily on goal setting. The findings of this study demonstrate that young people may experience difficulty using and transferring some skills and therefore one argues that teaching children a range of life skills may be more beneficial than focussing on a select few.

When planning the programme, we were aware that a relationship with caring adults was likely to be an important factor. Research by Petitpas and colleagues (2005) highlights that context (sport), internal assets (life skills) and external assets (caring adults) are important aspects of any life skill programme. The role of external assets was also deemed important by Weiss and colleagues (2013) and whilst we recognised the importance of this relationship, the boys themselves did not recognise it. They recognised the relationship with each other as important but did not acknowledge any relationship with caring adults during the interviews. It is a limitation that this study did not explore that relationship further, however future research should seek to explore the relationship with caring adults in detail.

It is possible that schools and their PE departments could replicate the main elements of this study. Danish and colleagues (1993) found the main barrier to transferable skill programmes is that participants do not know and are not made aware

of the skills they have learnt. The participants in this study recognised the skills they were being taught but had not realised they could be used within the classroom. The participants also acknowledged that it was not the sports that were deemed important to them but rather the skills they had learnt and the manner in which they learnt them. They agreed that making them aware and discussing such skills in focus groups helped them to transfer the skill into the classroom. It is possible that PE teachers could teach students important life skills that could be used across the curricular.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

TAP had several limitations that need to be discussed. With interview data from 18 participants, the small sample size does not allow generalisations to be made. It should not be assumed that interventions similar to TAP would yield similar findings. TAP hoped to explore the perceived enablers and barriers of life skill transfer from a sporting environment into an academic situation. Findings however, come from retrospective recalls of the programme and may not be a true representation of enablers and barriers.

Whilst the results of TAP are promising, further research on transfer is merited. TAP looked specifically at young people learning life skills in a school sports environment and transferring such skills into an academic domain such as the classroom. Further research should seek to examine the extent of life skill transfer into other life domains. The participants in TAP were also younger than previous studies on life skill transfer. The findings show that participants who are 12-13 years olds can understand, learn and transfer life skills from the sports hall into the classroom as long as such skills are systematically taught. The participants were also able to identify

enablers and barriers that facilitated or prevented transfer. Future research should seek to examine the optimal age in which life skill transfer can have the most impact on academic achievement. We also support Jones and Lavalley's (2009) recommendation that future research should look to determine the importance of experience in life skill awareness and transfer.

## **Conclusion**

The present study explored the perceptions of eighteen male participants who had been involved in TAP for one academic year. TAP was based on the perspective that sport alone does not teach youths life skills. Therefore, the programme sought to deliberately teach the participants seven life skills through engagement in various sporting activities. More specifically TAP hoped to investigate the concept of life skill transfer from the sports hall into the classroom, and identify any perceived enablers and barriers.

Given the small sample size of this study, broad generalisations are not in order. However, five higher order themes were identified (see table 1) and are collectively known as the SPORT Model for life skill transfer. We discovered that providing a programme that will appeal to the target audience was particularly important in TAP. Several of the participants discussed how other students had asked about the programme and wanted to know if they could join. The member of staff involved in the programme was amazed at the number of students that came knocking on her door, asking what they had to do to be part of the programme. Each participant felt as though he had been a part of something special, a programme he had been specifically chosen for, and this proved to be a powerful enabler.

We support the notion that life skills can be deliberately taught through appropriately delivered sport sessions. We also found that the boys in this study perceived they could transfer the life skills taught in the programme into the classroom. Unlike findings from previous research that suggest life skills do not necessarily need direct teaching (Jones and Lavalley, 2009), we argue young teenage boys need to be systematically taught about life skills and they need to explore ways in which such skills can be transferred into the classroom. We argue that the participants in TAP were not aware of the life skills that they could develop during P.E lessons and did not know that these skills could also be transferred and used in the classroom.

### **Notes on Contributors**

Georgia Allen is a PhD student in the School of Sport and Education, Brunel University. She also works as a sport coach with children aged 2-16.

Daniel Rhind is a Lecturer on Youth Sport in the School of Sport and Education, Brunel University.

Valsa Koshy is the Director of the Brunel Able Scholars Scheme, Brunel University.

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