An outcast from the team: Exploring youth ice hockey goalies' benching experiences

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Objectives: Anecdotal evidence suggests that youth may experience negative outcomes when benched, such as a lack of fun and intentions to quit (Prank, 2013; O'Sullivan, 2015). In the sport of ice hockey, it is speculated that amongst position players, including goalies, forwards, and defenders, the negative effects of benching may be exacerbated for goalies, presumably due to the public manner in which the benching takes place (Hertz, 2010, 2013). The purpose of this study therefore was to examine competitive youth ice hockey goalies' experiences of benching as a result of not playing well during a game.

Methods: Data were collected through semi-structured interviews of seven male competitive youth ice hockey goalies between the ages of 13–15 years. Data were analyzed using a thematic narrative approach (Riessman, 2008; Smith, 2016).

Results: Participant stories suggest that benching can be detrimental to an athlete's feeling of self-worth and relations with coaches and teammates when experienced as a form of punishment. Across all of the goalies' stories, notions of feeling like an outcast on their team after experiencing benching were articulated. Four overarching narratives were developed from their stories: the skate of shame, the banished bench, the lonely locker room, and the silent celebration.

Conclusions: This study advances current youth sport literature as it is one of the first to examine youth athletes' benching experiences empirically. Recommendations for future research and practice are suggested.

Ice hockey is a popular sport in which many male and female North American youth participate (Canadian Heritage, 2013; Peters, 2014). While sport is commonly cited as benefitting athletes' physical, psychological, and social development, athletes are not immune from harmful sport experiences (Coakley, 2011; Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). More specifically, researchers focused on the quality of youth experiences in the sport of ice hockey have criticized the aggressive, violent, and performance focused nature of the sport, which emphasizes body checking, fighting, and win-at-all-cost mentalities, as harmful to youth (Allain, 2008; Emery, McKay, Campbell, & Peters, 2009; Marchie & Cusimano, 2003). These sport ideals and normative practices often lead to increased injuries, such as concussions (Macpherson, Rothman, & Howard, 2006; Warsh, Constantin, Howard, & Macpherson, 2009), and may influence maladaptive coaching practices and thus negative sporting relations between the coach and athlete (Stirling & Kerr, 2013).

One of the ways in which athletes may experience harm from a coach is through the use of punishment (Battaglia, Kerr, & Stirling, 2017; Burak, Rosenthal, & Richardson, 2013; Richardson, Rosenthal, & Burak, 2012). Punishment is broadly defined as the application or removal of a stimulus following an undesirable response that decreases the likelihood of that response occurring in the future (Skinner, 1974). Punishment can be dichotomized into positive and negative forms with positive punishment referring to the direct application of an aversive stimulus and negative punishment referring to the removal of a potentially rewarding stimulus in attempts to alter or change unfavourable behaviours (McConnell, 1990). Exercise as punishment is an example of a positive punishment commonly used in ice hockey, and involves coaches directing athletes to engage in excessive amounts of skating until exhaustion following a team loss (State of the Game, 2011; Wharnsby, 2009). Given the documented negative effects of using exercise as punishment (Battaglia et al., 2017; Burak et al., 2013; Kerr et al., 2016), some authors have advocated for the use of benching as an alternative behavioural management strategy (Richardson et al., 2012; Rosenthal, Pagnano-Richardson, & Burak, 2010). However, we argue that depending upon how benching is used, it may be considered a form of negative punishment as it involves coaches withholding desirable playing time to address undesirable behaviour, such as poor
performance or lack of effort (Richardson et al., 2012). In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that youth may experience similar negative outcomes when benched as when punished through exercise, such as a lack of fun and intentions to quit (Frank, 2013; O’Sullivan, 2015).

With respect to ice hockey specifically, benching for goalies is a common practice that can occur in two forms. Goaltiers may be benched before a game, which is considered missing their rotation or scheduled starts, or they may be benched during a game, which is typically referred to as being pulled. The latter form of benching will be the focus for the current study and thus throughout the manuscript the terms benching and being pulled will be used synonymously. Importantly, although goalies may be benched for a variety of reasons, including strategic purposes, the following study will focus specifically on examining goalies’ experiences of being benched during a game as a result of not playing well.

When goalies are pulled during a game, a stoppage in play is required to allow the goalie time to skate off the ice to the bench. This occurs in a very public manner as coaches, teammates, opponents, and the audience watch until the goalie takes the bench before the game proceeds. This experience is very different from other position players who are benched without a stoppage in play. As a result, it is speculated that the negative effects of being benched during a game may be exacerbated for goalies, presumably due to the public nature in which benching takes place (Hertz, 2010, 2013).

To-date, no research has examined goalies’ experiences of being benched during a game in the sport of ice hockey or any other youth sports that require a goalie. The purpose of this study therefore was to examine competitive youth ice hockey goalies’ experiences of benching as a result of not playing well during a game.

1. Methodology

Narrative inquiry was chosen as the methodological approach for this study. Narrative inquiry aims to develop a detailed understanding of human experiences that are bound within social worlds and the multi-layered meanings people assign to aspects of their lives through the stories they tell (Riessman, 2008; Sparks & Smith, 2014). This methodological approach applies a relational research process; specifically, emphasis is placed on “understanding and meaning making of experience through conversations, dialogue, and participation in the ongoing lives of research participants” (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p. 542). Narrative inquiry was appropriate for this study given the purpose of gaining a detailed understanding of the youth goalies’ experiences of benching as punishment. Specifically, the focus was on eliciting youth goalies’ personal benching stories and examining the meanings associated with these stories (Smith & Sparks, 2009; Smith, 2010).

1.1. Research paradigm

Underpinning narrative inquiry is the philosophical assumption that stories are actively constructed from and through social interactions and cultural influences (Clandinin & Caine, 2008; Riessman, 2008; Smith & Sparks, 2009). Accordingly, the following study utilized a social constructivist paradigmatic position. Ontologically, a social constructivist perspective embraces a relativist view, which recognizes reality may be represented in multiple ways between participants as it is constructed through meanings developed socially and experientially (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Epistemologically, a social constructivist approach adopts a subjectivist/transactional view in which the researcher and the participants are actively involved in the development of knowledge (Lincoln et al., 2011).

1.2. Participants

The sample consisted of 7 male youth ice hockey goalies, 13–15 years of age. At the time of the study, all of the goalies played in local ice hockey leagues within a large Canadian city and were elite participants, competing at the highest level for their age group and spending roughly 4–6 days per week in sport-related activities. The average number of years of competitive involvement amongst the youth goalies was 5.1 years. All goalies indicated that their playing status on the team was equivalent with their goalie partner (i.e., there was no starter versus backup goalie designation). A youth sample was chosen as during adolescence, participants are trying to achieve important developmental tasks (e.g., competence and positive relationships; Holt, 2016) and thus the influence of benching in response to poor performance may be most pronounced. Competitive youth goalies were chosen as it was speculated that pressures to win at the highest levels might be associated with greater use of benching in response to poor performance. A maximum of one youth goalie per team was selected to enhance diversity and gain multiple perspectives (Sparks & Smith, 2014).

1.3. Recruitment

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University Research Ethics Board. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Sparks & Smith, 2014). The principal investigator initially contacted two known youth goalies who had been benched during a game, as well as the goalies’ parents, from references acquired through participants involved in previous investigations about youth sport. If the goalies were interested in participating, an interview session was arranged. Following interview completion, participants were asked to suggest other competitive youth goalies who had experienced benching during a game and may be interested in participating. All athletes were contacted by email, in which the purpose of the study as well as specific details for their involvement were described including the requirement that the goalies had familiarity with being benched during a game. Prior to study commencement, each youth goalie was asked to sign a Letter of Assent and parents of the youth goalie were asked to sign a Letter of Consent. Participants were assured anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process.

1.4. Data collection

Consistent with a narrative approach, the youth ice hockey goalies were invited to share personal stories of their benching experiences through the use of an individual face-to-face semi-structured interview (Chase, 2005). All interviews were conducted at locations of the athletes’ and/or their parents’ choosing (e.g., their house or coffee shops) and ranged in length from 60–75 min. With the participants’ consent, each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in approximately 115 pages of data. In narrative inquiry, the ability of the researcher to develop a trusting and authentic relationship with his or her participants determines the extent to which detailed stories are elicited (Clandinin & Caine, 2008; Sparks & Smith, 2009). In an effort to purposefully build rapport with the participants, the principal investigator shared his own sport background, invited questions throughout the research process, reiterated the voluntary nature of participation, and began each interview with introductory questions (e.g., “What led you to want to get involved in hockey?”; “How important is hockey to you?”; and “Describe some of your most memorable experiences in hockey.”). The participants were then asked open-ended questions, providing them an entry point to tell their benching stories and allowing the principal investigator to learn more about their experiences. For example, the participants were asked questions such as “Imagine your benching experiences can be told as a story. Describe this experience.” and “In your own words, what did the benching experience mean to you and what did it tell you about yourself as an athlete?” To further encourage participants to elaborate on their benching stories, probes such as “What happened?”, “How did you feel?”, and
"What were you thinking?" were utilized.

1.5. Data analysis

All personal identifiers were removed and pseudonyms were used during transcription and interpretation of results. Data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis focusing on the core patterns or overarching themes of participants’ stories (Smith, 2016). The content of the stories shared by the youth goalies (i.e., what the participants said) as opposed to the structure of the stories (i.e., how the participants told stories) was emphasized (Sparks & Smith, 2014).

The thematic narrative analysis began with immersion in the data through transcribing and repeated reading of the transcripts. Preliminary thoughts regarding common phrases (e.g., “I felt like a stranger” and “I was ignored”), characters (e.g., coaches and teammates), and events or plot points (e.g., skating to the bench and the locker room) were recorded. The next step involved identifying key themes and meanings from the youth goalies’ stories (Riessman, 2008; Smith, 2016). When reading through the data, the following questions were asked to stimulate the identification of themes and meanings (modified from Sparks & Smith, 2014): “What features within the team dynamic or more broadly the sport environment facilitate this theme?”; “What are the implications of the goalies’ benching experiences?”; and “What is the overarching story that each theme reveals about the goalies’ benching experiences?” The next step involved comparing and contrasting the most meaningful themes and advancing concepts across the participants’ responses (Riessman, 2008; Smith, 2016). For example, while the goalies’ benching stories were commonly associated with outcomes such as a loss of confidence and negative coach and teammate interactions, it became apparent that these negative outcomes were influenced by feelings of being ostracized or an outcast on their ice hockey team. The final stage of the thematic analysis involved writing a rich story that did not fragment the participants’ responses (Riessman, 2008; Smith, 2016). At the end of each interview, the principal investigator invited participant feedback on his interpretations of the goalies’ responses. These member reflections allowed the principal investigator to further clarify the goalies’ stories and meanings, make revisions, as well as improve his understanding of emerging thoughts and themes (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). However, participant feedback was not considered in terms of absolute truths (Sparkes & Smith, 2009), and thus a collaborative approach to data analysis was adopted. Specifically, the principal investigator organized and interpreted the data while the second and third authors provided critical perspectives throughout the analysis process by encouraging reflection, stimulating discussions regarding themes and relationships between themes, and questioning how the goalies’ stories may be interpreted in alternative ways (Sparkes & Smith, 2009, 2014).

2. Results

The purpose of this study was to examine youth ice hockey goalies’ experiences of benching as a result of not playing well during a game. All participants referred to their benching experiences (i.e., being pulled from a game) as punishment. The goalies’ stories emphasized notions of feeling like an outcast after being benched and were developed into four narratives: the skate of shame, the banished bench, the lonely locker room, and the silent celebration. The narratives presented are not unique to each goalie but represent overarching stories and common meanings identified throughout all participants’ responses.

2.1. The skate of shame

As goalies, being benched was a highly publicized and humiliating event given the stoppage in play that allowed everyone in the rink an opportunity to observe their failure. Jason detailed the first moments of one of his benching experiences:

The other team had just scored a goal on me … I was pissed so I tossed the puck out from the net, got up and sprayed water on my face. When I turned back around to get set in thecrease I saw the other goalie getting ready … at that point I knew it [benching] was coming … I was being punished for the goal I let in. The coach signaled to the ref that he wanted a switch … I pretended as if I didn’t know what was going on but there was no escaping it … it was so public. The other goalie skated to the net and gave me a tap to signal that my time was up. The skate to the bench was the worst … it was like a walk of shame … I felt like a loser … I kept my head down when skating but I knew everyone in the arena was staring at me. I couldn’t avoid all the eyes.

When asked to further describe his thoughts and feelings associated with the skate to the bench, Jason explained:

The skate to the bench is probably one of the worst hockey moments a goalie can have because everyone witnesses your failure. Every teammate, parent, coach, the other team, and pretty much anyone who came to watch the game all saw me get benched … it was embarrassing. I was experiencing the shame by myself … I was alone. I was worried about what my teammates and coaches thought when I was skating to the bench … I remember thinking ‘Were they mad at me?’ ‘Do they think I suck?’ ‘Do they want me on the team?’ You want your teammates and coaches to believe in your abilities. You want them to rely on you because it makes you feel needed and a part of the team … but when you’re taken off the ice it sends the message that you’re not doing anything for the team. Each stride I took, my confidence got lower and lower … by the time I got to the bench I believed I was the worst goalie. I questioned what I was doing and whether I belonged in the sport because only crappy goalies get benched.

Other goalies also told stories of the shameful process of being benched in front of an audience and the role coaches and teammates played in this experience. In describing one of his experiences of being pulled Daniel stated:

It happened so fast … I was in net and then next thing I know I was skating to the bench being judged and having people think I sucked … I guess that was my punishment for my mistakes. The whole situation was probably 30 seconds but it felt like an hour to get to the bench. It felt like all the eyes in the rink were on me when I was skating … kind of like there was an arrow pointed at me telling everyone there was something wrong with me. I just thought I was a shit goalie and believed everyone thought the same thing. Sometimes my teammates and coaches will say ‘don’t worry’ as I skate off but in that moment I got the feeling that they were pissed at me and just wanted me gone.

According to the goalies, being benched—more specifically, the skate over to the bench—was a shameful process as it not only made them aware of their lack of skill but also signified to others their inadequacies in contributing to the successful performance of the team. The goalies’ stories situated coaches’ and teammates’ potential negative evaluations as the most significant factors in making the skate to the bench a shameful experience.

2.2. The banished bench

The goalies described how the team bench, a place that was supposed to be associated with support, bonding, and acceptance, became a place that fostered isolation and made the goalies feel like outcasts when benched, furthering negative beliefs about themselves as athletes. Reflecting on one of his experiences that ensued as soon as he took the bench, Dave said:

It was a weird feeling … I went from wishing I could disappear when
I was skating off the ice because I thought everyone was looking at me, to no one paying attention to me on the bench and wishing that someone would talk to me or give me some attention. I remember getting some pats on the back as I was skating off and a few ‘you’ll get em next time’ but that was pretty much all the support I got. Once I stepped on the bench it was like I no longer mattered, I was invisible. I was just left there. My coaches didn’t look at me or tell me what I did wrong and my teammates kept walking past me to go on the ice. I was a ghost … I felt worthless … like I was just there to fill the other goalie spot on the roster.

The goalies' accounts suggested their inability to return to play influenced their sense of belonging and importance to the team. Dave highlighted this notion when he compared goalies' experiences of benching with those of position players:

I was sitting by myself at the end of the team bench ignored … I was on my own little island. As a goalie you don't have the option of going back on the ice like a defenseman or forward … I had no chance to feel a part of the team again. A defenseman or forward may feel like shit or like they don't belong when they are benched but that's for one or two shifts ... they get to go back on the ice and be a part of the team ... they still matter. When goalies get benched we become watchers … we have no value to the team once we are out.

Likewise, when recalling a past benching experience, Matt described how his perceptions of what the team bench signified changed in that moment as he stepped off the ice and sat for the rest of the game:

When I was skating to the bench I just kept saying to myself 'once I get to the bench everything will be okay, I'll feel safe surrounded by my team and coaches' but I was wrong. I think of my teammates and coaches as my sport family but when I got on the bench I just felt tension from them ... it wasn't a welcoming feeling. I felt out of place ... I wasn't treated like I was a part of the team family, I was treated like a stranger ... the coaches and teammates ignored me, they pretended like I wasn't there. I didn't feel accepted. I tried to be mentally strong but I had no one to support me. I kept my mask on so no one would see me cry.

Additionally, when asked to describe his interactions with coaches and teammates associated with this benching experience further, Matt commented:

It's hard to understand if you're not a goalie ... but pretty much when I was sitting on the bench it felt like my coaches and teammates preferred the other goalie ... they cheered him on and played harder for him ... I guess they thought I deserved to be punished and didn't deserve encouragement or attention because of how I played ... I didn't feel like anyone had my back. I sat on the bench with my teammates but I wasn't a part of the team.

Prior to being benched, the goalies believed that they were part of a supportive team environment. However, once they returned to the bench after being pulled, their perceptions changed as they came to feel like strangers on their own teams. These stories illustrate how the goalies felt ostracized from the team and experienced laboured interactions with their coaches and teammates on the bench, which were characterized by a lack of communication, avoidance, and perceived favoritism for the other goalie.

2.3. The lonely locker room

The goalies indicated that after being benched due to poor performance, the locker room became a negative setting where they continued to be isolated and segregated from the team. Mike described his post-game experiences in the locker room after being benched, and specifically the coach's role in shaping this experience:

Goals are easy targets to blame when things go wrong especially when we get benched because we are the only ones getting punished … but I also think the coach plays a big part in whether a goalie gets blamed. The players will react to how the coach treats the goalie ... if the coach talks about the whole team then that's okay but if the coach blames the goalie for the poor team play then the players will do the same. This one time when I was benched the coach came in the room and gave a speech after the game. I thought the whole team played bad but I felt like crap anyways because I wanted to help my team win an important game and I didn't play my best. I was upset … I didn't want to look at anyone so I put my head down. The coach started yelling at us saying we played like shit but then the coach said my name so I looked up ... he pretty much blamed me in front of the team saying 'we needed some big saves from you tonight but you didn't have it for us,' he made it seem like my mistakes were the worst and I was the only reason we lost. The coach ruined the team bond by singling me out and pretty much made it okay for my teammates to put the loss on me.

When asked to explain how his teammates interacted with him in the locker room after the coach's comments, Mike stated:

After the coach left the room I looked around and I could tell my teammates were on board in blaming me ... it was all on me. The way my teammates treated me was like the way kids at school get treated if they are someone that no one really likes compared to the popular kids ... I wasn't popular. I overheard some of them say 'the coach is right ... he didn't give us a chance to win ... he played like shit.' They talked to the other goalie more ... it wasn't like the other goalie played any better but he wasn't the one that was pulled from the game ... that was a sign that I didn't play well for the team. Even close friends on the team avoided me in the locker room ... when I tried talking to them they would give me one word answers and ignore me because they didn't want to the rest of the team to see them talking to me ... I was a loser.

Jake shared a similar story regarding his locker room experience with coaches and teammates after one of the occasions in which he was benched:

During the game I kind of understood why I was ignored ... the players had to focus and the coaches were trying to win but I didn't expect the same reaction in the locker room especially because my team came back and won after I got benched. When I was skating to the locker room I was happy trying to pat everyone on the back because I didn't feel so bad anymore ... but when I got in the locker room everything changed. The coach praised the other goalie and was like 'you led us to the win ... you helped us overcome our mistakes' and all the teammates cheered him on and were like 'you saved us... we really needed you.' Those comments were all jabs at me because I made the mistakes. Everyone was talking and laughing ... I was just there. In my head I kept saying 'don't worry you're over reacting it's not that bad' but it was ... the coaches didn't talk to me after the game and all my teammates were with the other goalie. When I tried to talk to my teammates they went silent ... I don't know if they were talking about me but it was like they had their own little groups and were having fun and I was just some random ... a stranger. I was wearing the team jersey but I wasn't a part of the team.

The locker room was seen by the goalies as a place for team bonding and support, however after being benched, this changed to reflect a negative space characterized by an unaccepting and unforgiving climate. Moreover, the goalies referenced the coach as having a significant influence on their teammates' exclusionary behaviour in the locker room.
2.4. The silent celebration

The goalies believed that after being benched they did not deserve to celebrate successes of the team, and recalled incidents on the bench, in the locker room, and after the game at team gatherings that emphasized this notion. For example, when reflecting on a previous benching experience, Gabe recalled times during the game when his team scored goals and he felt he was not permitted to celebrate because he had been pulled:

I hated sitting on the bench after being pulled but I wanted to be supportive for my team so I cheered them on. When my team scored I was really happy, I was bouncing the boards and cheering while walking up and down the bench but the coach just shook his head at me and told me to sit down. I didn't get why I couldn't celebrate. Same thing with my teammates... I tried to high five the players but they just shrugged it off. As I walked to the end of the bench to sit back down I even overheard some players say 'why is he cheering, we are in this mess because of him, he shouldn't be happy.' After that I didn't move or say anything for the rest of the game... I was kind of scared to show any emotion... I was afraid to cheer because the coaches and players made it seem like I didn't deserve to have fun or celebrate because I was benched.

Gabe elaborated on his exclusion from team celebrations in the locker room, “It was like I was supposed to feel like shit and be alone while everyone else was talking and having a good time in the room... that was my punishment.” Matt also recalled the following example of his inability to celebrate with the team in the locker room after being benched:

It was just so stupid... yeah I got benched but we won the game... wasn't that the most important thing? I thought losing playing time was enough of a punishment but I guess not. I received no acknowledgement from my coach or my teammates in the room. I didn't even think I played bad, I had tons of shots and I kept my team in the game as much as I could before I got pulled... I deserved to celebrate with the team... why couldn't my coaches and teammates see that?

A few goalies told stories of their negative interactions at team gatherings, reportedly reinforcing their beliefs that they were not a valued member of the team and did not deserve to celebrate. For example, Daniel recounted the following story of being at a team dinner immediately following one of the games in which he was benched:

We were out for a team dinner... everyone was talking to each other having a good time but I just felt alone... no one really said anything to me. I got the impression that my teammates didn't want me there because usually I'm laughing with them and just treated as one of the boys. I think by benching me and not really providing me with encouragement after the game the coach sent the message that I really played like crap and didn't help the team so then my teammates thought I didn't deserve to be a part of the team fun at dinner. It was so uncomfortable for me... I didn't know if I could laugh or talk to my teammates so I was just quiet because I didn't feel like I belonged. The team was celebrating but I was just there.

According to the goalies, engaging in team celebrations or team activities is a privilege reserved for players who are perceived to contribute to team success. As being benched during a game was believed to be a sign of failure, goalies reportedly felt excluded from the team and from celebratory activities.

3. Discussion

The current study examined competitive youth ice hockey goalies' experiences of benching as a result of not playing well during a game. Despite previous suggestions to replace the use of exercise as punishment with benching (Richardson et al., 2012; Rosenthal et al., 2010), the goalies in the current study perceived benching as a form of punishment. This study indicates that benching, when experienced as a form of negative punishment, can be detrimental to an athlete's feeling of self-worth and relations with coaches and teammates. The goalies emphasized their desires to be actively involved in the game (i.e., the rewarding stimulus), displaying their skills and contributing to the team; however, being benched—a repercussion for failing to achieve requisite performance standards—inhibited their ability to achieve these outcomes.

All of the goalies' stories reflected notions of feeling like an outcast on their team after experiencing benching. Four overarching narratives were developed from their stories: the skate of shame, the banished bench, the lonely locker room, and the silent celebration. The skate of shame narrative was characterized by stories detailing the process of being benched, which included a stoppage in play, a public skate to the team bench, negative self-evaluations, and perceived negative evaluations from others. The banished bench and the lonely locker room narratives included stories that described how the team bench and locker room—places generally associated with team cohesion, friendship, and acceptance—reportedly became unwelcoming and fostered negative interactions with coaches and teammates. Finally, the silent celebration narrative reflected the benched goalies’ sense of not feeling included or deserving of celebrating with the team on the bench, in the locker room, and at team gatherings outside of the rink.

The goalies' benching experiences were characterized by isolation, shame, and rejection, and considering the analytical generalizability of these findings (Smith, 2018) share many similarities with the concept of time-out. Time-out is a prevalent method of behaviour modification and a negative form of punishment used in parenting and education. Time-out involves the withdrawal of love, support and/or attention, and social exclusion of the child (Australian Association for Infant Mental Health [AAIMH], 2009; Turner & Watson, 1999; Wolf, McLaughlin, & Williams, 2006). Although the time-out literature focuses on younger children, researchers have indicated that being “grounded” is an example of negative punishment and time-out for older youth (Larzelere, 2000; Larzelere, Cox, & Smith, 2010). Throughout the following discussion, comparisons and inferences will be drawn between the goalies' benching experiences and previously identified consequences of time-out including a lack of learning, negative self-worth, and damaged relations with others.

3.1. Consequences of benching

Lack of learning. Underpinning the use of time-out are the pedagogical assumptions that it will teach the child that his or her behaviours are unacceptable and actions have consequences, and that the child will take the time to reflect and think about behaving in more acceptable ways (Turner & Watson, 1999; Wolf et al., 2006). However, researchers in the parenting and education domain have refuted these claims indicating that while the caregiver (e.g., parent or teacher) administering the time-out may view this tactic as a learning experience, time-outs are a form of negative punishment and are viewed as such by the children (AAIMH, 2009; Readdick & Chapman, 2000; Turner, Nida, & Williams, 2007). Punitive practices, such as time-outs, do not result in the child learning appropriate behaviours but instead result in the child learning what not to do or how to avoid situations in which he or she is likely to be punished (Gartrell, 2001; Schreiber, 1999). Similarly, the goalies in the current study labelled being benched during a game as a punishment and indicated that this practice was delivered without information or feedback regarding why they were being benched or how they could improve. As such, being benched was not perceived to be an experience that fostered learning; instead, it conveyed the message that to avoid being benched again they had to play better but without information provided about how to do so.

Negative self-worth. Self-worth refers to an individual's beliefs or
evaluations regarding his or her sense of value as a person (Harter, 2006). In the current study, self-worth refers to the participants’ beliefs about their athletic abilities as well as their value and purpose to the team. While researchers have argued that time-outs fail to teach children about appropriate and acceptable behaviours, one message that is reportedly conveyed to youth through time-outs is that they are unwanted and they are only accepted when they are on their best behaviours (AAIMH, 2009; Readick & Chapman, 2000; Turner et al., 2007). These notions were supported in the current study, as the goalies believed the benching and the loss of ice time associated with this tactic conveyed that their performance was unacceptable, and as a result, they needed to be removed from the game because they were not helping the team. Social exclusion and isolation, elements embedded in time-outs, are associated with fostering feelings of shame, rejection, negative self-evaluations, and negative evaluations from others in the social environment (Newman & Newman, 2014; Turner et al., 2007; Williams & Nida, 2011). Similarly, as a result of being excluded and isolated from the team when benched, the goalies reported negative self-evaluations and evaluations from others regarding their skills and worth as an athlete, such as “My coaches and teammates probably think I suck.” Interestingly, in the skate of shame narrative, the goalies’ stories suggested that their negative perceptions were exacerbated by the highly public nature of their skate to the bench. The goalies explained that having to skate off the ice alone while being observed provided a visual reminder to parents, players, and coaches that they did something wrong and were being rejected, further stimulating their negative self-evaluations and concerns regarding negative evaluations from others.

**Damaged relationships.** Researchers have suggested that the withdrawal of support and enforced isolation associated with time-outs inhibits youth’s needs to feel connected and develop positive relationships (Appleyard & Berlin, 2007; Carlson, Sampson, & Sroufe, 2003). Punitive parenting, which may include the use of time-out practices, can interfere with creating a positive parent-child relationship by inciting children to be fearful and avoidant of the parent, stimulating negative emotional responses, and eroding bonds of closeness and trust within the relationship that are needed to foster healthy development (Appleyard & Berlin, 2007; Carlson et al., 2003).

Similarly, the goalies conveyed that benching negatively influenced their sport relations throughout the banished bench, the lonely locker room, and the silent celebration narratives. In the current study, sport relations encompassed the perceived nature and quality of the athletes’ relationships, specifically with their coaches and teammates. For example, when experiencing benching as punishment the goalies were worried about their coaches’ evaluations, as indicated by such statements as “They [coaches] liked the other goalie more” and “The coaches don’t want me on the team.” The participants described negative interactions with their coaches when benched, such as the lack of communication or positive feedback, lack of support, being avoided and ignored, blamed for poor team play, and favouritism for the other goalie.

Researchers have also argued that time-outs may teach youth that social isolation and exclusion are acceptable methods of interacting with peers, which in doing so, may foster negative peer dynamics (AAIMH, 2009; Larzeler et al., 2010; Readick & Chapman, 2000). In fact, as children age, they form cliques or in-groups and learn to reject or exclude peers who share different values, beliefs, and interests (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). When applied to the sport domain, athletes learn to value performance outcomes at a young age, and as a result, the types of peer interactions (e.g., rejection or acceptance) youth experience are significantly influenced by their physical competence (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006; Weiss & Stuntz, 2004). The goalies indicated that since benching was considered a sign of their athletic incompetence and that they were not helping the team achieve their goal of winning, they expected negative evaluations from their peers and reported detrimental teammate interactions, which embodied isolation and avoidance. The goalies explained that while performing well stimulates praise and acceptance from teammates, when performing poorly, as with benching, teammates ostracize and reject them. Researchers have indicated that while the sport domain may foster positive peer interactions, peer dynamics may also be negative, especially when certain athletes are perceived as responsible for poor team performances (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Weiss & Stuntz, 2004), an outcome identified by the goalies after being benched.

Throughout the banished bench, the lonely locker room, and the silent celebration narratives, the goalies perceived that the coaches’ behaviours towards them after being benched influenced their teammates’ actions, further supporting the premise that social exclusion and isolation may be learned behaviours (AAIMH, 2009; Newman & Newman, 2014). The participants in the current study explained that when coaches ignored them, praised other players, and made comments that suggested they were to blame for the team’s performance, the coaches created an environment that permitted the teammates to engage in negative interactions (e.g., “I was ignored by my teammates”) after being benched. A coach’s ability to influence team dynamics has been supported by researchers who report that coaches who implement punitive practices are likely to negatively impact team cohesion and create a hostile environment where athletes learn to distance themselves from one another (Turman, 2003; Weiss & Williams, 2004).

Similar to the message associated with time-outs (AAIMH, 2009; Turner et al., 2007), benching conveyed the message that only when goalies are performing well are they accepted and included by their coaches and teammates. It is speculated that goalies may continue to feel isolated from their team as a result of being benched until coaches and teammates perceive them to perform adequately although this remains to be explored. Youth rely heavily on teammates and coaches for positive development in sport (Holt, 2016) and yet the findings of the current study suggest that the isolation and social rejection experienced by benching goalies appears to be inconsistent with satisfaction of the psychosocial need for connectedness with others (Newman & Newman, 2014).

**3.2. Future directions**

Although the study was specific to the sport of ice hockey and goalies’ perspectives, considering naturalistic generalizability (Smith, 2018), it is speculated that the rich description of responses presented regarding participants’ benching experiences may also resonate with goalies from other sports or other athletes more broadly who have been benched. However, age of the athlete and the level of competition are speculated to be factors that may influence the extent to which the reported benching experiences in the current study are perceived to be similar or different for other athletes.

As this study was one of the first to explore athletes’ benching experiences, several areas of interest emerge for future research. Although the current study explored goalies’ benching stories and the immediate aftermath of these experiences, goalies’ thoughts and feelings regarding their return to the ice the following game after being benched were not assessed; this remains a question for future research. More specifically, it would be interesting to explore the duration of the isolation experienced by the goalies when bench and whether these feelings persist until they are able to prove themselves again to coaches and teammates through a strong performance. All goalies in the current study were playing at an elite level, and as a result, the pressures to win may have influenced the frequency of benching and the extent to which goalies perceived consequences for being benched. Future research would benefit from exploring the extent to which benching occurs at different levels in ice hockey (e.g., house league) and in other youth sports as well as how youth athletes at different competitive levels interpret benching. Further research is also required to explore the potential qualitative differences regarding interpretations of benching for goalies who are starters versus back-ups. As all of the goalies in the current study were male, questions exist about potential gender differences in
the experiences of benching.

In the current study, benching referred to being pulled during a game as a result of performing poorly. However, benching for goalies may occur for other reasons, such as poor attitude, shifting momentum during a game, or strategy, and may also take the form of missing scheduled starts. Research is needed to examine youth ice hockey goalies’ experiences of benching in these various circumstances. Although all goalies in the current study identified being benched during a game as a form of punishment associated with negative outcomes, benching may not be viewed as a punitive tactic from the perspective of coaches. For example, a coach may view benching as an opportunity to give the goalie a chance to rest and recover if the game is out of reach, or a coach may implement benching as a strategy to give the team the best chance of winning if the goalie is not playing to his or her potential. Future research is needed to examine coaches’ perspectives on benching, as researchers have indicated that coaches’ self-perceptions of their behaviours are often incongruent with how these behaviours are perceived by athletes (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009).

Exploring the link between coaches’ punitive tactics, such as benching, and the subsequent nature and quality of teammate interactions would also contribute to the extant literature. More specifically, future research would benefit from exploring the goalie-goalie dynamic to address questions such as “Do goalies support each other when the other gets benched or is the benching of the other seen as an opportunity to advance one’s value on the team?” and “How do inner-team goalie rivalries influence how benching is perceived?”

Given the reported similarities regarding the negative outcomes of time-out and being benched during a game, alternative coaching strategies are worth considering. A method that has been advocated as an alternative to time-outs in the parent and education domains is a time-in approach. A time-in approach involves addressing the needs and feelings of the child through comforting and supportive behaviours, allowing the child to feel safe when expressing emotions and fostering problem-solving skills, and learning of appropriate behaviours (Siegel & Bryson, 2014; Weininger, 2002). Future research would benefit from examining whether a time-in approach can be applied in the sport context by coaches and team authorities to mitigate the potential negative experiences of benching during a game for goalies.

4. Conclusion

In summary, benching during a game was perceived as a punitive practice by the competitive youth ice hockey goalies who participated in this study. The goalies shared their personal stories about being benched and how the public nature of this experience fostered negative self-evaluations and relational dynamics. The negative outcomes reported with benching when perceived as punishment are consistent with the numerous negative consequences of time-outs identified in the education and parenting domains (AAIMH, 2009; Turner et al., 2007). This study advances current youth sport literature as it contributes empirical attention to understanding youth athletes’ benching experiences during a game and may be used to inform strategies for diminishing the potential negative experiences associated with this practice.

Declarations of interest

None.

References


Smith, B. (2010). Narrative inquiry: Ongoing conversations and questions for sport and