

Natural Learning and Fencing: A Case Study of Two Fencers' Lockdown Training Programme during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Renuka Ramroop

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7333-2124>

Jesika Rachael Singh

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6372-5493>

Abstract

Natural Learning (NL) as an approach to life and learning is slowly gaining momentum as more families explore alternatives to the current mass schooling approach. This has particular value during the COVID-19 pandemic as the lockdown measures implemented by the Government have impacted all sectors of society, including sport, which is the focus of this study. The study used purposive sampling to select two teenage fencers and explored how the tenets of the Natural Learning Approach (NLA) underpinned their training and development programme during lockdown. A case study design was used to explore and describe how the fencers, guided by NL, used creative strategies to maintain their fitness and skill development. Interviews and documents (reports and a diary) were used to collate the data, and qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the data. The results show that the fencers displayed high levels of motivation, self-discipline and creative-thinking skills that they easily transferred to developing, executing and maintaining their training programme. These results are important as it highlights and soundly embeds NL as a viable educational approach to life and as a philosophy about life and learning. Recommendations on how fencing can be adapted to become a viable sport during the pandemic and how the characteristics of the NLA can be incorporated into broader sporting and learning contexts post COVID-19, are briefly explored.

Keywords: Natural learning, fencing, creativity, motivation, unschooling

1 Introduction

The current global COVID-19 pandemic has spread all over the world (Evans 2020), infecting millions and causing thousands of deaths. It has brought the whole world to a standstill as many countries, including South Africa (SA), battle to combat the spread of the virus. On 26 March 2020, SA instated lockdown measures that placed severe restrictions on travel and movement, allowing people to only leave their homes to buy food, seek medical help or under extreme circumstances (SA Government 2020). As countries attempt to flatten the curve (curb the spread of the virus), sport and sporting events were not exempt from the stringent measures, thus, bringing sport to a grinding halt. For example, under the national lockdown, all fencing clubs in SA have been closed until further notice and all competitions and events cancelled. Recognising that a single athlete could be the vector for this disease, all sport gatherings have been banned (Mann, Clift, Boykoff & Bekker 2020) and the postponement of the 2020 Olympics can also be seen as a testament to the impact this virus has had on the sporting world (Schinke 2020). Further impact of the lockdown on sport is beginning to emerge as most clubs rely on membership or donor fees for coaches' livelihoods (Evans 2020). The fitness of athletes is also concerning as their exercise routines and athletic careers have been disrupted. This has led to unprecedented changes and online platforms are now being used to continue training programmes to ensure the long-term survival of a particular sport. Evans (2020) states that in sport, where techniques and physical skills are of paramount importance, coaching effectiveness could be limited because of the lack of proximity between coaches and athletes, and therefore, it requires appropriate changes to coaching programmes.

While most sectors seem to be experiencing difficulties adjusting to the lockdown measures, the home education sector has adjusted more easily to these drastic changes because by its very nature it is primarily home-based. Natural learning (NL), an approach to learning and living within the home education movement, is particularly suited to adapting to changes as the home environment is fluid in its day-to-day living and the children in these homes can direct and manage their own learning development.

Fencing is a combat sport with some contact between fencers (Turner *et al.* 2014) which therefore can be seen as a significant risk during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, for fencers, especially the high-performance fencers who are on the national team, the ban on training can have a negative impact

on their skill maintenance and development. Due to this possibility, two fencers who follow the Natural Learning Approach (NLA) came up with an innovative format to train and ensure that skills training and development, as well as club camaraderie continued during the lockdown period. This therefore raised the question: How does NL impact on fencers' ability to develop and maintain a viable training programme during the COVID-19 pandemic?

This paper brings together the concept of NL within the sport of fencing to explain how the tenets of NL helped two fencers develop and maintain a successful training programme during lockdown.

2 What is Natural Learning?

The NLA is broadly embedded in the constructivist approach to learning in that it values the autonomy of the learner, and therefore, 'place[s] the reins for directing learning squarely in the hands of the learner' (Ormrod 2016:174). According to Ramroop (2019:8), NLA is a range of life philosophies 'that centres around the understanding that children have an innate desire to learn and are able to direct that desire and therefore manage their own learning growth'. This approach often falls under the broad category of home education, where children are provided with the space and opportunity to learn through life experiences and through the process of living together (Dewey 2015; Ramroop 2020). NL and home education are not new phenomena as home-based education predates formal schooling (Blok 2004; Gray 2013). NL is commonly referred as 'unschooling', a term made popular by John Holt (1977), a modern pioneer of the idea that children can learn with freedom rather than in schools. In this study, the term NL is favoured as it allows people to reclaim and re-assert the naturalness of learning. Learning in the NL environment is seamless and living and learning happens naturally and authentically. This echoes the view of Hondzel and Hansen (2015) that 'human behaviour need not be shaped and controlled by elders who propose education be conceived as a preparation for life rather than life itself'. Holt (1989) observes that in a NL setting the learning is enjoyable and enduring because the child is learning to satisfy his/her own curiosity. Free play, a tenet of the NLA, is a predictor of individual adaptability to problems and obstacles (Greve & Thomsen 2016).

Parents who implement this approach have the fundamental belief that children are natural learners, capable of learning with little or no adult

intervention (Holt 1989; Gray 2013). The responsibility of the parent is to remain available and to provide a rich home environment and other opportunities that will help optimise the child's learning interests. Thus, parents become the avid supporters of the child's learning interests and partners in their learning trajectory (Ramroop 2020). Parents nurture the quality of curiosity in their child and create a home that supports the holistic wellbeing and development of the child, while ensuring the enjoyment of life and the pleasures it brings. Respect for the child is also fundamental to NL. NL families are generally more open to a democratic family life and respecting the child as one would another adult (Ramroop 2019). It should be noted that traditional subjects and tuition is often included in a NL home if the child requests it as part of their own learning goals.

In general, children who follow the NLA are intrinsically motivated and self-disciplined. According to Huang (2014), since learning is an innate part of living, people learn best when their motivation is intrinsic. Furthermore, intrinsic motivation is also maintained because the fundamental values of freedom and self-decision-making place the desire, the drive and the responsibility in the hands of the child. They show high creative skills and by the very definition of NL, are highly independent learners (Hondzel & Hansen 2015).

3 What is Fencing?

Fencing as a sport has its roots in medieval times and slowly evolved to become a sport, which has spread from the masters of Italy, Germany and France to the entire world. It was introduced to the Olympic Games in 1896 for men and 1924 for women (Pitman 1990). SA first embraced fencing in 1898 and fielded their first Olympic representative in 1908. Since then, although remaining a minority sport, it has grown in popularity and there are clubs in most provinces and universities in the country that regularly participate in international tournaments.

Fencing is essentially a combat sport, with two fencers competing on a piste. The aim is to make a hit on the opponent with an épée, foil or sabre, and the one who reaches five points in a poule match and fifteen points in a direct elimination match wins. Fencing is a high intensity sport that requires intense focus and quick thinking and is often seen as physical chess (Humphrey 2009). To be successful in the sport, a fencer needs to have the

following qualities: physical fitness, speed, quick reaction, coordination, endurance, power, rhythm/tempo, focus, creativity, observation and deduction, mental toughness and self-control (Roi & Bianchedi 2008).

4 Methodology

A case study design was used for this research as a ‘basis of a thorough, holistic and in-depth exploration of the aspect’ (Kumar 2011:126), which for this study is the link between NL and two fencers’ lockdown training programme. Merriam (2009) explains that the key characteristic of a case study design is that it is richly descriptive so that the reader enjoys the vicarious experience of the research. Sampling, according to Kumar (2011), is the process of selecting a few from a bigger group. In this study, purposive sampling was used, using two fencers from one family (who have been following the NLA) and their two coaches. The focus was on how the tenets of the NLA underpinned the development and implementation of their lockdown training programme.

Qualitative methodology provides the researcher with tools to study a complex phenomenon within its own contexts and through a variety of lenses, revealing the multiple facets of the phenomenon (Kumar 2011). In-keeping with this understanding, different instruments were used to collate data; a strategy that also enhances data credibility. Interviews were conducted with the two fencers and with two coaches to help corroborate the data. To ensure confidentiality (Saunders, Kitszinger & Kitszinger 2015), participants were given labels with letters for identification (Enago Academy 2019). Thus, the fencers are referred to as Fencer A and Fencer B and the two coaches are referred to as Coach A and Coach B. According to Merriam (2009), interviews in qualitative research is a common, key data collection instrument because it is a way to obtain feelings, thoughts and intentions from the interviewee (Kumar 2011). Semi-structured and open-ended questions were used for both interviews, as suggested by Merriam (2009). This ensured the flexibility to probe and to allow the natural flow of the discussion to unfold. As recommended by Kumar (2011), documents, a valuable source of information, were examined to get information and gain understanding. The documents used for this study were a training programme, reports and a parent’s diary. Triangulation is often used in qualitative research to increase the credibility and the trustworthiness of the findings (Merriam 2009) as it ensures the

corroboration and correspondence of the results from the different instruments, helping to ‘confirm and to improve the clarity or precision of a research finding’ (Maruster & Gijzenberg 2013:10).

5 Data Analysis

Content analysis focuses on content and the contextual meaning of data (Hsieh & Shannon 2005) and it was therefore appropriate for this research. Content analysis provides the researcher with a flexible and pragmatic way to organise large quantities of data into fewer categories (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). The goal of the study was to determine if there is a relationship between NL and the development of the training programme. With data from each instrument, the analysis began with an immersion into the data to ‘obtain a sense of the whole’ (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). Raw data was edited so that it was complete and free from inconsistencies (Kumar 2011). Data was systematically analysed by making notes, identifying patterns, forming codes and categories, and noting down impressions and thoughts. From the themes that emerged during the analysis, the data was interpreted to provide explanations.

6 Findings and Discussions

The interviews with the two fencers revealed that when they were faced with lockdown measures, they devised a training programme together which they presented to Coach A.

When asked why a training programme was developed, Fencer A gave the following response:

We needed training ... so we started thinking about the best ways we could train at home and still involve all the club members ...
Fencer B added: ...to have a certain level – rather than everyone doing their own thing, focusing on different things on different days ... we can coordinate with each other.

At first Coach A was hesitant about the format, but they asked him to give them a week before a final decision was made, to which he agreed. Children from NL homes tend to be less afraid of trying because failure is recognised as a requirement and driving force for learning (Visser 2001), and these risk

and mistake-making processes are supported by the secure home environment (Priesnitz 2020). On the other hand, failure in schools is met with stress and anxiety because the emphasis is often on standardised tests and conformity, which generally leaves no room for creativity, innovation or individuality (Black 2018).

According to both coaches this training programme was a profound idea. Coach A, proving that this instance of fencers taking the initiative for their training was unique, reacted as follows based on his past experience and what he has seen at other clubs:

If the coach forgets, all keep quiet and hope no one reminds the coach. Like in school where no one will remind the teacher about homework ... not many people will take the initiative when they see the coach is slacking.

However, in the NLA, children taking initiative is normal as children are free to choose, explore and develop an interest and then take the initiative to access information and resources, with or without the help of a parent (Ramroop 2019; Holt 1989). The child taking initiative to fulfil his/her learning needs, is the cornerstone of the NLA.

6.1 Innovation, Creativity and Parental Support

According to Hondzel and Hansen (2015), creativity is a fundamental quality and a unique human characteristic. Coach B's response that '*... clearly the fact that they put this training programme together and taken their coach along shows innovation and creativity*' reveals that the fencers were able to adapt to change by using their abilities to combine and improve upon ideas. This is seen in the format of the training programme:

... the format is a challenge ... each day has a set amount of exercises and repetitions that needs to be completed, either according to time or number of repetitions, as well as fencing-specific exercises, e.g. footwork and/or bladework. For example, between five club members 200 push-ups, 10 minutes of plank, 20 minutes of running, and 10 minutes of footwork needs to be completed ... everyone contributes as much as they are willing or able ... at the end of the day we tally up

the total ... for each day the team (five club members) complete the total you get one point, and for a certain amount of additional repetitions or time you get another bonus point ... the aim is to accumulate as many points as possible ... challenge format makes it difficult to skimp on repetitions because it is a team effort, meaning that if you let yourself down, you let the team down. It is a fun variation and makes people want to push harder

They used creativity and innovation to consider all aspects of a general training programme: the fitness routine, the fencing-specific techniques, the team spirit, and a challenge element to keep them motivated. In accordance with Evans's (2020) suggestion, the programme focussed on strength and conditioning. The fencers were asked why they used this format and their responses show that they were able to use their knowledge and experience of fencing to develop the programme, while at the same time creating a plan that kept up the motivation and skill level of the members. For example:

Fencer A: '... with boring dull exercises like continuous footwork or strength exercises people get demotivated, bored and simply tired'.

Fencer B: '... and start skimping and cheating'.

Fencer A: '... and using poor form The idea was to make it enjoyable for everyone ... to complete boring but essential exercises without the team and companionship element that normally makes it fun during training'.

Gute, Gute, Nakamura, & Csikszentmihály (2008) state that creative people grow up in homes where parents encourage uniqueness but also provide stability, are highly responsive to their children's needs while also challenging them to develop skills and pursue their interests. The fencers confirmed the role of their parents with Fencer A stating that *'they play a supportive role. We decide what we want to do and they help facilitate our development by driving us to practise, getting coaches, training camps, discussing issues, watching fencing videos ...'*. This view is also supported by Fearon (2013), who states that creativity flourishes in an environment that is supportive and rewarding of creativity. Interestingly, if the environment is well resourced but lacks support, creativity is also lacking. In a NL home, both the psychological safety and psychological freedom of the child are valued. The child is accepted

as having unconditional worth and is understood empathetically. The home is free from external evaluation and the child can engage in unrestrained expression (Fearon 2013). The simple and uncomplicated notion of families spending time together seems to have a key influence on creativity (Gute *et al.* 2008). These traits seem to be evident in the environment of the two fencers. However, this environment cannot flourish at schools because of the structure of schools where standardisation, testing and the need to achieve content standards over and above creative thinking and meaningful problem-solving are entrenched (Hondzel & Hansen 2015).

The fencers also showed their creativity by making their home suitable for training. It was recorded in the diary that they made a pull-up bar in the garden, using their knowledge of sailing knots to keep the bar strong and in place. Fencer B confirmed that ‘... *we use the equipment we have at home to do the exercises ... we use water bottles, beds, bricks, chairs ...*’. The coach stated that the fencers are very creative and added that ‘*everything they present to me is well-researched ... they explain to make me understand ... give me the pros and cons*’. This extract from Fencer A’s planning notes shows their deep engagement in and understanding of the sport:

Week 1: General body strength and speed. E.g. agility drills, punches

Week 2: Explosive power. High intensity, low repetition. E.g. skipping, push-ups

Week 3: Muscular endurance. Isometric exercises. E.g. plank, lunges, squats

Week 4: Recovery. Exercising little used muscle groups and stretching for injury prevention. E.g. yoga

Daily: Mindfulness and meditation. Five-minute audio guide provided. Footwork and stretching

From the above planning notes, it became clear that the fencers have a deep understanding of all aspects of their sport, including the socio-emotional aspect by their inclusion of mindfulness and meditation. According to Gute *et al.* (2008), the fact-finding and deep research that the fencers engaged in are vital stages in the creative process. Furthermore, according to Kogler (1993), fencers need to be observant, creative and innovative in order to successfully overcome their opponent. Thus, the above findings do reveal that the stability of the NL environment helped the fencers to be free to invest in creativity

rather than dealing with unnecessary negative emotions and time-wasting activities that children often experience in institutional environments (Gute *et al.* 2008).

6.2 Motivation

Both coaches confirmed that the fencers' level of motivation for the sport is exceptionally high. Commenting on the fencers' commitment, Coach A said, *'I will give them a solid ten for commitment. They do not get tired of fencing, speaking about it, finding new ways to train, challenging themselves'*. Coach B observed that *'Fencer A was always highly committed ... and in recent times Fencer B seemed to have equalled the level of commitment ...'*

The fencers also confirmed that their motivation came from their love and enjoyment of the sport. Fencer A stated that *'I love fencing ... fencing is my favourite sport because there is so much in it ... its technical, its physical, its mental ...'*. Fencer B explained that his motivation also came from enjoyment:

Two years ago, ... I went to national competitions, got thrashed, but I just enjoyed the sport and continued fencing and training ... then I did well ... the one time I tried to put pressure on myself to win a medal I did the worst After that I just chilled ... chose to just enjoy it ... went to the African Championships in Algeria ... now I work to maintain my place in the national team because I enjoyed it a lot and want to get there again.

Coach A summed up their motivation quite succinctly by stating that he finds them easy to work with and that *'... they are not people who need to be constantly chased to do anything. They are self-motivated ... so I can focus on more technical stuff...'*

According to Ormrod (2016), motivation is an internal state that spurs a person into action in a desired direction and keeps the person engaged in certain activities. This encapsulates exactly what the fencers did with the training programme. Huang (2014) states that people learn best when motivation is intrinsic. In a NL home, individual choices and interests are nurtured and respected, and thereby, intrinsic motivation is maintained. NL is driven by freedom and self-decision-making and puts the desire, drive,

motivation and responsibility for life and learning in the hands of the learners. The motivation that the fencers displayed in their training programme is therefore not surprising.

It must be noted that during general training, external motivation has some benefits. However, according to Levin-Gutierrez (2015) when external rewards are used to increase motivation, they are more harmful and may lower intrinsic motivation. Apostoleris (2000) finds that motivation declined with age in the average school child, but it remained consistent and even increased in home-educated children. The development of the training programme is evidence of consistent intrinsic motivation in the fencers.

6.3 Commitment and Self-discipline

The coaches were asked if they saw a characteristic in these fencers that stood out from other fencers and they both mentioned that their commitment was impressive. Coach A elaborated as follows:

... I see people who are passionate ... but their commitment and their training go beyond ... determination ... they want to do well now ... they did not see themselves slacking during lockdown ... this sets them apart from the others as they push themselves

Coach B agreed, stating that ‘... they are different ... dedication to getting it right is impressive Fencer A demands an incredible level of performance ...’. To further corroborate the data, they were asked what they see in these fencers that they would like to see in others. Coach A answered as follows:

... commitment ... dedication ... discipline ... for two top-ranked fencers they work hard as if they are at the bottom of the ranking. In most cases you will find fencers who reach a certain level tend to lose focus and think they have made it—they don’t listen to the coach and start being disrespectful towards others. I wish more fencers were as humble, committed and disciplined as the two fencers ... they go the extra mile. I have never seen it anywhere else, so I come to appreciate it even more.

Coach B agreed that they were disciplined fencers and added the following:

They have an understanding of what is required ... that to be able to perform at an international level they need to be so much more dedicated – that’s an insight a lot of fencers don’t have ... this helps them in realising what they need to do to be able to compete, and the discipline and dedication to do it.

Commitment and self-discipline generally go together with intrinsic motivation because ‘mastery as a link to intrinsic motivation is having the desire to surpass in excellence at performing a task’ (Levin-Gutierrez 2015:37). In other words, as observed in most NL children, once the child is interested in something they delve deeply into the subject matter. Chabot-LaFlamme (2012) describes how one natural learner imposed a six-hour a-day practice regime on himself to perfect his guitar playing and went on to become a musician and composer. This example solidifies the notion that self-discipline cannot be forced but can only be born out of a passionate need to achieve mastery in a chosen field. Both Fetteroll (2019) and McDonald (2018) contend that when a child is given freedom of choice he/she embraces the responsibility wholeheartedly and this demonstrates self-discipline. McDonald (2018) elaborates further by stating that when people immerse themselves in their meaningful passions they will commit to mastery of skills and content with astonishing enthusiasm and grit. In the same way, the fencers, out of love for the sport, showed commitment and grit by imposing their own discipline in their fencing pursuits. The lockdown training programme stands as one example that encapsulates the three elements (autonomy, mastery and purpose) of intrinsic motivation (Levin-Gutierrez 2015). Moreover, according to McDonald (2018) qualities that are epitomised in natural learning are self-discipline, self-direction and self-regulation. These are key attributes for fencing too.

6.4 Personal and Social Development

The fencers were asked if they ever thought of cheating during the lockdown training and Fencer B’s response was simple: ‘*I suppose I could but that would be stupid ...*’. Coach A confirmed this integrity by stating that he knows ‘*they will do it and they will do it properly. I can trust them*’.

The parent diary confirmed that the fencers worked through their programme every day. In week three the parent noted the following:

[Sometimes the fencers] spread their training throughout the day. Sometimes Fencer B runs out of time and then does it all between 6 and 7. They always make the deadline of 7pm ... watching them train I see that they never cheat—they don't do less repetitions than what is required. They choose to do it properly, yet no one is watching. That's integrity, and it makes me happy to see it.

Often, children in an NL home will gain impressive expertise in their subject and their intrinsic motivation drives their self-evaluative process. This develops their reflective and critical skills. In other words, NL 'centres on the notion that meaningful learning results from a dynamic process which is driven by both concrete action and reflection' (Sherman 2017:81). The coaches acknowledged that both fencers are aware of and understand where they are and what they could be doing. They further stated that in their experience most fencers do not seem to see beyond where they are at the moment. Coach B gave the following example:

Although other people thought Fencer A's recent win was a great win, she was able to contextualise it and say that in the bigger picture it was not much of a win. The ability to see where they are in context and understand—that is so important ... they can see beyond just the technical ... they think ... when you have a fencer who is thinking, your discussion between bouts are more about what options they have because they have the ability to take that information and immediately process to apply it.

Coach A stated that he saw them as valuable members of the club, not only because they were dependable in all aspects but also because they bring up ideas, encourage others, they take the lead when needed and are very good at peer teaching. He further observed that they are confident in their knowledge and because of NL they are not limited and have freedom in their learning pursuits.

What the fencers brought from their NL into the fencing world was a difficult question to answer because according to Fencer B, '*I wouldn't really know because it's just how I do stuff ... I have never known anything different*'. Fencer A explained that they have not been to school and continued as follows:

I think we bring a different attitude to training and winning or losing ... it is not only the achievement that counts, it's the journey ... the training ... we are very used to pushing ourselves and being motivated by something within us instead of having a parent or teacher or coach make us do stuff ... the wanting to do it comes from us ... the coach or parent just helps us to do it when we need help.

A popular myth is that people who home educate lack social skills, but Fencer A debunked this by stating that in NL ‘*children are socialised with different age groups and situations, which I think is quite beneficial to fencing because we have to socialise with referees, officials, fencers, parents, spectators in a high-pressured environment*’. Fencer B confirmed this with the following statement:

The stereotype might not come from nowhere, but I think in our case it's certainly not the case ... we are definitely social, we know people from different countries, we have lots of friends ... we always volunteer to help at the fencing hall.

According to Romanowski (2006) the issue of socialisation in home education is a widely held misconception. NL embraces the notion that ‘the process of socialisation usually occurs in a child’s daily activities as he or she interacts with individuals, the community and the culture at large’ (Romanowski 2006:126). Various studies (Gray 2013; Romanowski 2006; Springer 2016; Rolstad & Kesson 2013) show that home educated children have a more positive self-concept and fewer behavioural problems than schooled children. As stated by Fencer A in the above finding, they socialise with a wide range of mixed-age friends which gives them an advantage to being more socially mature and flexible, as corroborated by Gray and Riley (2015). Furthermore, from the data presented, the fencers developed a training programme that included club members to maintain the team spirit rather than working by themselves. This shows their remarkable social interconnectedness (Mann *et al.* 2020).

The fencers have also developed a reputation as dependable armourers, which entails the fixing of weapons. Their road into armouring further shows their deep engagement with fencing. Fencer A wanted to be able to fix weapons when they broke rather than having to rely on someone else.

Fencer B confirmed that most fencers in the fencing community do not know how to fix their weapons and rely on others. Their knowledge of fixing weapons highlighted their resourcefulness and ability to access information and skills. Fencer A made the following statement:

[I] just pestered our ex-coach and senior fencers until they showed me how to fix stuff. We also managed to get an e-manual, and I managed to figure out a lot of stuff from there and of course just trial and error—taking it apart, accidentally breaking it and trying again.

Fencer B added that when they go to national competitions they ‘*always help with weapons check ... people bring their weapons to us to be fixed*’.

An extract from the parent diary also showed that at an international training camp in Germany that hosted fencers from more than 15 countries, the parent was complimented because the fencers were the only ones in the camp who had a proper working knowledge of armouring and offered their help when needed.

These findings clearly indicate that when learning is passionate and self-determined it becomes deep, meaningful and most enduring for the learner (Mcdonald 2019).

7 How can NLA be Incorporated into the Broader Sporting Context?

Coach A realised that giving the fencers the space to develop and implement their training programme was a learning experience for him in terms of working with young people. Incorporating the NL idea of freedom and autonomy (Gray 2013; Holt 2004) by placing the learning and training in the hands of the athlete with the expert guidance of the coach will give the athlete the responsibility for their development. This would increase intrinsic motivation, giving the athlete the space to engage in the sport in ways that will develop the ability to critically assess situations and find solutions for areas which they need to work on. Through this process, Coach A realised the importance of peer coaching, that club members have their own language, and that he needs to give the young athletes space to develop within themselves. This also strengthens the team spirit of the club. Coach A mentioned how the fencers challenged one of his footwork exercises and that when he explained

it, they were far more understanding of why they had to do it. From their questioning he learned that he needs to re-think how he engages with young people in that explanations, rather than an authoritarian style of coaching, seem to be more positively received by the fencers. It is argued that encouraging fencers to bring different ideas to further their training will also help empower them in their own development. This will also increase their intrinsic motivation, which will increase their commitment and discipline (Levin-Gutierrez 2015).

8 Is Fencing a Viable Pandemic Sport?

As fencing is considered a combat sport, it needs various safety measures to be considered safe. Some aspects of safety are already in place as fencers wear 350 Newton clothing, long socks and a glove. A modification to the current protective mask to make it suitable for the pandemic has been developed by leading international fencing brands. Spaces and social distancing measures can be easily controlled by the coach, adapting and ensuring that there is no contact during training. However, on the piste there can be contact, and therefore, the Fencing Federation of SA is currently working on protocols that would further ensure the safety of fencers, allowing it to become a viable pandemic sport.

9 Recommendations from the Study

The results of this study bring to mind a statement by John Holt (1972) that every time we try to teach, coerce and manage the lives of children, we lose the chance to see how they might have managed their lives on their own, and we lose the chance to learn what we might have learned from observing them doing it. Coach A's agreement to let the fencers take the reins for their lockdown training created an enriching experience for everyone. The coach realised the value of peer training and the fencers gained a lot of knowledge and skills. The development of the training programme by the fencers themselves highlight the notion that learning does not always have to be shaped or controlled by elders. Respecting young people and democratising training halls will not only further intrinsic motivation, as seen in the discipline of the fencers in their daily training, but it will also allow creativity to flourish, as seen in the research into the development of the exercises and

the creative use of common items because of the lack of their usual equipment. This, therefore, has implications for all current learning institutions and the home environment. The findings of this study displayed the sound educational principles and values in just one aspect of the fencers' lives. Further research on how the NLA impacts other aspects of young people will deepen the understanding and the acceptance of this approach as a viable and valuable approach to life and learning.

10 Conclusion

This study highlights that NL as a life philosophy can have far reaching advantages for people in different situations, including sport. As stated by Priesnitz (2020), a free learning environment that supports risk and mistake-making, encourages curiosity, exploration and the pursuit of new challenges and knowledge, will develop flexible, resourceful natural learners who live happy and productive lives.

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Dr. Renuka Ramroop

Research Associate

Research and Development Department

University of Limpopo

Polokwane

Renuka.Ramroop@ul.ac.za

Prof. Rachael Jesika Singh

Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation & Partnerships

DVC: Research

University of Limpopo

Polokwane

Jesika.Singh@ul.ac.za