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Maureen M. O'Neill

University of the Sunshine Coast, moneill@usc.edu.au

Angela A. Calder

University of the Sunshine Coast, acalder@usc.edu.au

Beverley Hinz

University of the Sunshine Coast, bhinz@usc.edu.au

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Student-Athletes in my Classroom: Australian Teachers' Perspectives of the Problems Faced by Student-Athletes Balancing School and Sport

Maureen O'Neill¹,

University of the Sunshine Coast and Australian Catholic University

Angela Calder

Beverley Hinz

University of the Sunshine Coast

Abstract: This paper emerged from a larger project about Australian high performance school age athletes self-identified problems in balancing their academic and sporting lives. Teachers of student-athletes are ideally placed to observe stresses faced by these students, but little is published about teacher perspectives on this topic. A qualitative analysis of interview data from 10 teachers, across 10 Australian secondary schools, revealed critical information about the similarities and differences in their perspectives compared to those of student-athletes and parents. Teachers identified five main areas where student-athletes required dedicated support, and provided examples of solutions to address these. Their practical strategies complement the characteristics of the 'athlete-friendly' school and serve as examples of best practice support that other schools could adopt. On analysis, these strategies align with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers. Consequently, the focus of this paper relates to the teacher perspectives and how this impacts teacher practice.

Introduction

Australian school teachers can be faced with increasing numbers of high performance athletes in their classes. These student-athletes often require extra attention or specific adjustments to their academic programs in order to balance their school and sporting commitments. This is not only a challenge for the student-athlete to manage personally, but can also prove difficult for teachers and schools to accommodate. Although some schools have strategies and programs to support young high performance athletes, there is no national approach offering guidelines as to what or how to best support student-athletes specifically, despite the fact that the number of high performance athletes at school is increasing.

The increase in student-athlete numbers in Australian schools is due to a greater range of sporting activities available to Australian students and, together with the expansion of international competitions, there are now more opportunities for young athletes to perform internationally than was possible 25 years ago. At the Rio Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2016 there were 33 Australian athletes that were school-age (Australian Olympic Committee [AOC], 2016; Australian Paralympic Committee [APC], 2016). This is not

unusual as there have always been young competitors in international sport. Dimitrios Loundras was 10 years and 218 days old when he won a bronze medal in gymnastics for Greece in the 1896 Olympic Games (Wallechinsky & Loucky, 2008, p.702). Traditionally, sports such as gymnastics, diving, swimming, coxes in rowing and lightweight categories in combat sports have been advantageous for younger competitors. More recently, extreme sports such as snowboarding, BMX, surfing, aerial skiing and skateboarding are examples of newer sports where younger athletes excel. The expansion of junior sport and dedicated Talent Search programs have led to an increasing number of school-age athletes representing Australia at Olympic and Paralympic Games and World Championships. Additionally, the introduction of the Youth World Olympic Games in 2010 (for athletes between 14 -18 years of age) has provided more school age athletes with exposure to international competition.

The Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) was established in 1981 and by 1993 had joined with other state and territory training centres to form a national high performance network (AIS, 2010) for the development of high performance athletes through national talent identification and talent search programs (Australian Sports Commission [ASC], 2009; 2016a). The labelling of talented school-age athletes as high performance athletes complements the same concepts surrounding gifted and talented students in Australian education (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2016). However, high performance athletes have some unique requirements that differ from students whose high performance is measured in the classroom. The classification of the high performance athlete is done externally to the classroom and this brings with it many extra demands that are outside the control of the school or teacher (O'Neill, Allen & Calder, 2013). Consequently, over the last 25 years, an increasing number of Australian athletes have been exposed to high performance training programs during their adolescent school years. This has led to a variety of educational responses to address both the need to provide access to Australian education curricula, while simultaneously supporting student-athletes with their high performance training demands.

The overall aim of the larger project *High performance school-age athletes at Australian schools: A study of conflicting demands* (O'Neill, 2012) was to examine the perspectives of students, parents and teachers concerning their understandings of how these talented athletes cope with balancing fulltime commitments to sport and study. More specifically, the focus for this paper examines the way teachers support these young people to cope with huge physical workloads as part of their sport and manage their school commitments, despite frequent absences from school. Importantly, strategies teachers employed to support these students to cope with both their educational obligations and their overall well-being were identified from the data. Regardless of the situation of student-athletes and the difficulties faced by teachers in educating these young people, the Melbourne Declaration on *Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008) is the overarching framework which informs the practitioner, along with the requirements of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers [APST] (AITSL, 2014).

In contrast to many countries, Australia has not adopted a one-model approach to providing for the development of student-athletes (Emrich, Fröhlich, Klein & Pitsch, 2009; Radtke & Coalter, 2007; Rens, Elling, & Reijgersberg, 2015). In order to address the specialist needs of Australian student-athletes, it would be expected that the APST standards would be at the forefront when planning programs for these students. Australian educational models include programs delivered by government schools, non-government schools, sport schools, and specialist sport high schools, with some of these linked to school excellence programs, sporting scholarship and leadership programs and specialisation pathways. Additionally, these are often associated with external bodies such as a regional, state or

national sporting organisation or an Institute or Academy of Sport (ASC, 2010). This diversity is as much a reflection of the socio-political variances between Australian states and territories, and their respective approaches to providing the national curricula as it is about the different structures and requirements identified by individual sports.

Australian School Models

In the following section, a snapshot of this Australian context is provided, along with a brief outline of the theoretical positioning and methodology adopted for this study. Subsequently, the findings of this study are discussed, with specific reference to pertinent AITSL Standards. This paper concludes with recommendations for teachers with student-athletes in their classes.

Government Schools

There are relatively few Government high schools that specifically target the needs of high performance athletes. Lake Ginninderra College and Dickson College in ACT are unique examples of the latter (Department of Education, 2010) in that they offer high performance school-age athletes access to the AIS programs and facilities such as training and medical support and career advice. Some government schools provide student-athletes flexibility in study options by allowing for an extra year to complete the secondary school syllabus (O'Neill, 2012). Additionally, there are government schools with specialist sports programs within their curricular. Examples of these include but are not limited to Mountain Creek High School in Queensland, Jindabyne Central School in New South Wales and Rowville Secondary College in Victoria plus others located throughout Australia. Some government schools chose to nominate themselves as specialist sport schools by promoting sport as a focus for the school rather than just a specialist sport program within the curricula.

Sport Schools

The principal aim of Sport schools is the provision of a flexible curriculum for the development of student-athletes in both academic studies and high performance sport (Radtke & Coalter, 2007). In Australia, the establishment of these schools is determined by the individual school itself and is often pursued as part of a strategy to create a distinct identity for the school. Westfields Sports High School in New South Wales, established in 1991, was the first Australian sport school with over 1600 students (Westfields Sports, 2016). The school liaises with the ASC and national and state sporting bodies representing the 19 sports that it provides. These links enable student-athletes to develop academic and study plans around their competition and training schedules.

Currently there are 30 sport schools operating across Australia, 27 of which are government schools and three are non-government schools (ASC, 2016b). All these schools have targeted sports programs with ancillary curricula and courses to support both the sport and academic development of student-athletes. A comparison of these ancillary programs across all 30 Australian sport schools highlights the range and distribution of these athlete-friendly programs (Figure 1). All sport schools have professional training facilities and equipment and most have specialist sport coaches and dedicated sport staff such as strength

and conditioning coaches. A few also have dedicated pastoral care staff and personalised learning support for student-athletes; but most schools offer this type of support through mainstream student services.

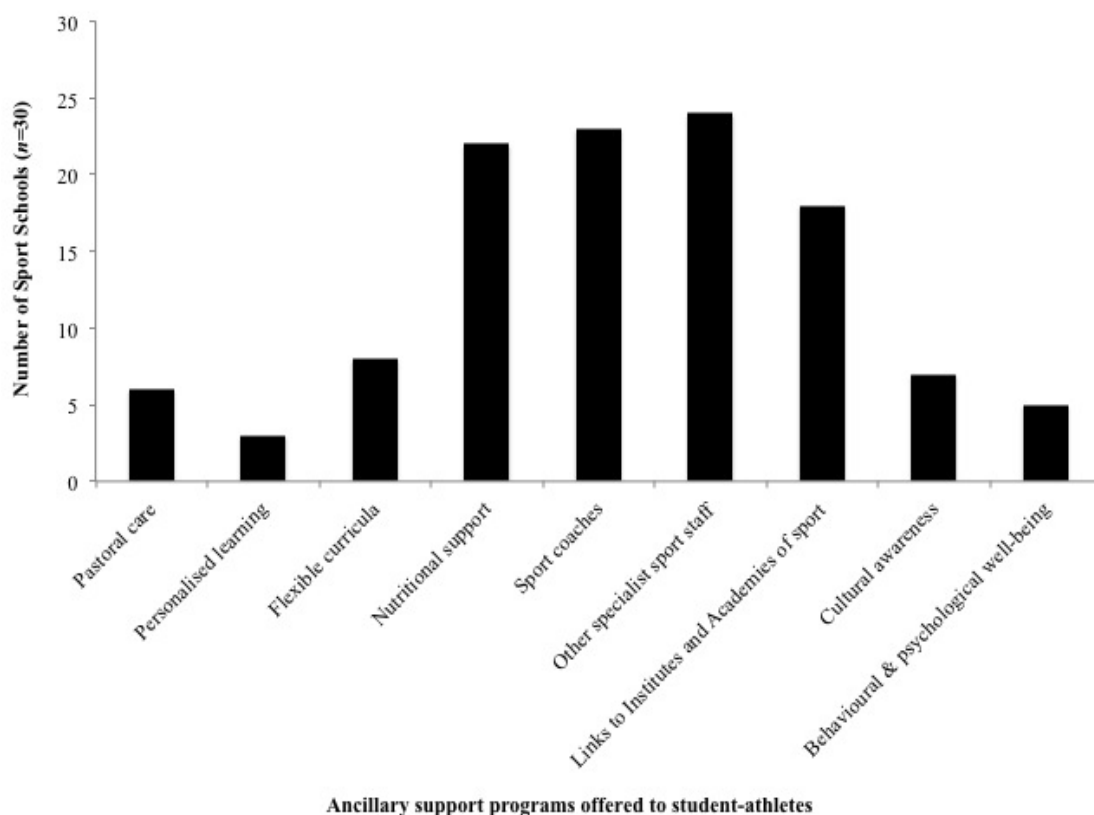


Figure 1 Ancillary support programs offered to student-athletes in Australian Sport Schools (ASC, 2016b)

Specialist Sport High Schools

These schools offer opportunities for student-athletes to specialise in a particular sport within the operation of the normal school curriculum. However, the number of sports offered by these schools is not as extensive as the range offered through Sport schools. For example, Kent Street Senior High School in Western Australia specialises only in cricket and is regarded as a breeding ground for upcoming Australian cricketers (Kent Street Senior State High, 2017) and Maribyrnong Specialist College located in Victoria.

Non-Government Schools

Non-government schools have no zone boundaries but have higher school fees than government schools. Extra funding allows for additional specialist teachers and coaches plus more specialised facilities and equipment, thus improving the integration of both school and sport requirements within the school environment. Notably, non-government schools emphasise the importance of pastoral care and some have appointed dedicated staff to support student-athletes in this area (O’Neill, 2012).

In School Excellence, Scholarship, Leadership and Specialisation Programs

Some other schools offer excellence programs involving leadership specialisation programs for a range of disciplines such as music, art, drama or sport. These schools provide student-athletes with the normal educational curricula and also offer opportunities for them to specialise in a specific sport excellence program. For example, the Pacific Lutheran College in Queensland offers scholarships and leadership opportunities in kayaking by providing specialist equipment and a Level 3 credentialed kayak teacher/coach (Pacific Lutheran College, 2016). The curriculum supports student-athletes competing at interschool championships, thus enabling them to complete one module of their Year 11-12 Physical Education curriculum in sprint and marathon kayaking. These types of excellence programs are offered in both government and non-government schools throughout Australia (Department of Education & Training, 2016).

Specific Pathway Schools

Several schools operate a sport academy for student-athletes to attend during the school day whilst undertaking mainstream core subjects. For example, Mountain Creek State High Queensland has a Dance Academy where the dancer is able to undertake national dance accreditation courses, joining mainstream classes to complete core subjects in Mathematics, English, Science and Humanities (Mountain Creek State High School, 2016). Additionally, national, state and regional institutes and academies of sport and relevant sporting organisations liaise closely with schools to support the development of student-athletes. These external sport agencies often influence the content and delivery of high performance sport programs to school-age athletes (Department of Education Employment & Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2016).

The Australian educational environment provides diverse options for the development of school-age high performance athletes who are fulltime athletes and students to achieve their sporting and educational goals. Seemingly 'One size does not fit all' unlike other countries that adopt a one model approach to the development of these talented adolescent students (Emrich, Fröhlich, Klein & Pitsch, 2009; Radtke & Coalter, 2007; Rens, Elling, & Reijgersberg, 2015). The common factor for high performance school-age students, no matter what country they are in, is the challenge in balancing their school and sport commitments. For a holistic approach to this issue, knowledge of the perceptions of students and parents is relevant for understanding the difficulties student-athletes face at school. Thus, a short summary of these issues identified by parents and students is presented.

Issues Identified by Student-Athletes Regarding School and Sport Balance

Several studies have reported the main pressures and stresses that student-athletes experience through their school years in coping with study and sport (Brettschneider, 1999; Lamb & Lane, 2013; O'Neill et al. 2013). Australian student-athletes report that they experience persistent fatigue, they have time management and procrastination issues such as catching up on missed classes and juggling the submission of late assignments (O'Neill, 2012). Their psychological mindset affects how they cope with the pressures of academic and sport workloads, especially as they make personal sacrifices both social and financial. Unfortunately, bullying is common in Australian schools (Cross, Shaw, Hearn et al. 2009; Rigby, 2012) and student-athletes are not immune to this. Many experience unequal

treatment at school such as being victimised as ‘Tall Poppies’ by their peers and even by teachers (O’Neill, Calder & Allen, 2014). Some student-athletes have reported using social drugs and alcohol through peer pressure or as an escape from the emotional stresses they experience (Doumas, Haustveit & Coll, 2010; O’Neill et al. 2013).

Issues Identified by Parents of Student-Athletes about Balancing School and Sport

There is limited research on parents’ perspectives of the issues their children experience in managing two workloads and the data indicates similarities and differences between parent and student-athlete views (Knight & Harwood, 2015; O’Neill, Calder & Allen, 2015). Parents and athletes recognise the effects that huge physical workloads have in producing constant fatigue, and the importance of nutrition and sleep to enable the athlete to cope with training and adolescent growth. While the student’s time management skills were identified as important by both parents and athletes, parents also found difficulty in apportioning their time between the student-athlete and other siblings in the family. This dilemma often resulted in sibling rivalry, which was exacerbated if inequitable time and financial support were required for the student-athlete compared to other siblings. Parents also noted that student-athletes could be stressed by exposure to the ‘pushy parents’ of their competitors (O’Neill et al. 2015). This study of 10 Australian parents indicated that, while some parents identified that their child had issues in balancing school, sport, family and friends, parents were unaware, unconcerned or reluctant to report on the victimisation and bullying that their children experienced at school (O’Neill et al. 2015). No parent mentioned that alcohol or social drug use were a concern for their children; yet these are important issues confronting student-athletes. Consequently, while there are many similarities in the views of both student-athletes and their parents, the discrepancies about some issues highlight the need to explore the views of ‘significant others’ who interact with student-athletes almost daily. Accordingly, the major project also included teachers’ views on this topic in order to capture a more complete picture of the issues from an educational perspective. This paper reports on this aspect of the main study.

Research Design

Theoretical Position of The Study

This study adopted an interpretivist paradigm (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative methods were used to unveil the perspectives and understandings of teachers of student-athletes in relation to the educational and sporting lives of their students (O’Neill, 2010). Veal (2005) contends that interpretivism is the study of a phenomenon in a particular context. This constitutes a set of assumptions about the ‘social world’, which are held by the participants (teachers) (O’Donoghue, 2007; Wills, 2007). Furthermore, Veal (2005) suggests that interpretivism assumes that firstly, “people experience physical and social reality in different ways” (p. 24). Secondly, reality is socially constructed through “...language, norms, values and beliefs...” (ibid, p. 24). Finally, the researcher becomes fully involved with individual subjects’ perceptions (ibid, p. 24). The goal of the researcher adopting an interpretivist approach is to understand the “...lived experiences of humans...” (Willis, 2007, p. 6-7). Central to questions used in interpretivist research are issues of ‘human choice and meaning’ creating an interpretivist description that extracts thematic patterns and commonalities (Erickson, 1984). Qualitative methods were used to identify specific themes and commonalities from the data collected for this study.

Symbolic interactionism is one of the classical traditions within the interpretivist paradigm (Morrione, 2004; O' Donoghue, 2007), and is a lens through which the researcher seeks to understand meanings of phenomena and their interaction. Additionally, symbolic interactionism views a human society as people engaged in living that is "...ongoing activity where the participants develop lines of action in countless situations they come across..." (Blumer, 1969, p. 20). Thus, it is an appropriate approach for this study, as attention is given to two perspectives. The first is how the perspectives of teachers about student-athletes in their class are interpreted and reinterpreted by these teachers. The second is how these teachers then engage and respond to the everyday activities of the student-athletes. It is the teachers' knowledge, interpretations and perceptions of their experiences and interactions that are the properties of the social reality, which the research questions and guiding questions are designed to explore and examine. In this study the researchers sought to understand the meanings the teachers held of the phenomena and how their perceptions informed their actions.

Research Questions

Teachers with regular day-to-day contact with student-athletes are ideally suited to observe the stresses experienced by student-athletes having to juggle academic and sporting commitments. The review of literature showed that little has been published from a teacher perspective about the specific issues faced by these students. Based on the research of O'Neill (2012), this paper aims to address the gap in understandings and contribute to a more comprehensive overview of the issues encountered by these student-athletes at school. The following questions were examined:

1. Drawing on observations of student -athletes in their classes by participant teachers, what issues did these teachers identify as problematic for the student-athlete? How did teachers respond to these issues?
2. Taking the experiences of the student-athlete into consideration, as well as the parent(s) plus caregivers of student-athletes, what similarities and differences emerged when comparing the observations of all three groups?
3. Finally, as a consequence of the observations and experiences described by teachers, what are the common characteristics that support an athlete-friendly school?

Methodology

The study was part of a larger research project that involved in-depth interviews with 19 (female $n=12$ female and male $n=7$) internationally ranked student-athletes from a range of different sports. Ten parents and care givers of student-athletes and 10 teachers of student-athletes were also interviewed (O'Neill, 2012). Ethics approval for the research was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (University of the Sunshine Coast in Queensland). Data pertaining to the student-athletes and parents has been published (O'Neill et al. 2013; O'Neill et al. 2015).

Participants

A random sample of ten Australian teachers from the Eastern seaboard of Australia (Queensland, New South Wales and ACT) were selected for interview based on gender,

school type, teaching experience and their role as teachers of high performance student athletes. Additionally, various sporting organisations and parents of internationally ranked athletes made recommendations about specific teachers they felt would be suitable for interview. In total five males and five females agreed to participate in this research. These teachers taught in a variety of government (5) and non-government schools (5) and included one sport school, a specialist sport high school, and schools with in-school scholarship and excellence programs (Table 1). One teacher had extensive experience working as a teacher solely within the Australian national sports institute, subsequently becoming the Principal in a government school that provided support for athletes from a national sports training institute. This teacher was ideally situated to observe other teachers working with student-athletes across a number of disciplines, and was ideally positioned to provide these teachers with advice in managing student-athletes.

Participants	Gender	School type	Type of sport program	Teaching role
T1	Female	Government	Mainstream school no specialist programs	HPE teacher
T2	Male	Non-Government	In school excellence program	Deputy Principal and Coordinator of HPE
T3	Female	Non-Government	In school excellence program	HPE teacher
T4	Female	Non-Government	In school excellence	Coordinator of Sport
T5	Male	Government	Sport school	Coordinator of Sport
T6	Male	Government	Mainstream school – no specialist programs	HPE teacher
T7	Male	Non-Government	In school excellence program	HPE teacher
T8	Male	Non-Government	Specialist sport pathway	Science teacher
T9	Female	Government	Specialist sport pathway	Math teacher
T10	Female	Government	Targeted servicing of athletes at a national training centre	Principal

Table 1. Teacher (Years 10-12) participant characteristics

Data Collection and Interview Procedure

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. Interviews were face-to-face across two states and a territory in eastern Australia. All lasted one hour in duration and these were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and returned to the relevant participant for confirmation before data analysis began. Not one participant requested to withdraw their statements or to modify their transcript. The main questions focused on the teachers' perceptions of what student-athletes in their classes experienced in juggling sport and school, and what support was offered by the school to assist student-athletes to balance and manage two workloads. For example, *'Can you tell me about experiences of high performance athletes at your school?'* And *'What do you see as problems for young people with commitments to full time sport and schooling?'* This

approach allowed each participant to incorporate any information they felt was relevant about the problems facing student-athletes and what specific strategies were required to support them.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo 10SP6™. A four-stage schedule was used to analyse the data through descriptive, topic, analytic and drawing conclusion stages (Edhlund, 2011; Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). This process involved data being sorted from lower to higher order themes through the four stages of analysis. NVivo statistical and analytical tools (known as *queries*) were used to discern and interpret the data from each participant with reference to each of these themes. More complex aspects of the themes were undertaken using running queries (Bryman, 2008), specifically related to the impact of managing school and sport and identifying strategies to address this. Chi-squared analyses were used to generate coded references and concentrations of data from participants.

Findings and Discussion

Data analysis revealed five thematic categories. In this section, these overarching themes are presented as evidenced by comments from the teachers interviewed. The issues identified are discussed with regard to the identification of specific problems for student-athletes, their relationship to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School leadership [AITSL], 2014), followed by teachers' recommendations about how to address these.

Connectedness to School: 'These Young Athletes Miss so Much Work During the School Year'

The amount of missed class time due to training and competition puts added pressures on student-athletes to 'catch up' with subject content and assignments on return to school.

*Some of my elite athletes that are away on selection camps are where we find some of the troubles creeping in for these elite players to maintain their grades and complete the necessary sports training. This means the boys are away from my school for eight weeks at a time every year from 16 year olds onwards. This does impact on their studying capacity for their senior years. T7*²*

*We need to try to help those elite athletes that miss the face-to-face and need greater help in learning. T1**

The challenges associated with missing school also impacted on student connectedness to the school with the subsequent unsettling of peer and overall school relationships. Classroom dynamics and the culture of the school environment are important experiences for student-athletes to enable them to build strong connections to their school and peers. Teachers promoted connectedness to class peers and to the school in a variety of ways.

*We often get the kids together and explain they are not alone. T5**

² *Refer to Table 1 for details of teacher participants

*Rather than have a blanket approach to all of the kids we need to solve this problem of when athletes are away and miss the classroom time how they can still get on. T2**

*We try to build up a big rapport with these students to have open communication with the home, kids and many discussions occur around what will happen at school for them. T4**

Other solutions identified by teachers to absences, missed school work and keeping athletes connected with their school, included using a wide range of technological teaching aids. Communication programs such as skype™ and Twitter™ and uploading educational resources to intranet platforms such as BlackBoard™ and Schoolology™ were solutions adopted by several teachers. Teachers felt that by populating student intranets with useful resources this would support athletes who were travelling or away from school. Other teachers created group Facebook™ pages to enhance communication between the travelling student-athlete and other classmates. For some, the chance to have face to face contact into the classroom environment through Skype™ kept the athlete up to date and connected with daily classroom events; but, more importantly, mainstream students were reminded that their athlete peers were not ‘missing in action’.

*When student-athletes come back to school after being away for a long time because we've been skyping on a regular basis this has kept the student athlete visible to the rest of the science class. T8**

*By using Facebook they get the explanation of the work which means they are not falling behind the rest on my math class. T9**

Some schools provided student-athletes with laptops or tablets to enable convenient completion of assignments whilst travelling, particularly if they were going overseas. While this was an obvious solution to this issue, there was a downside. Resentment and friction occurred from some classmates who were not allocated these devices, as they perceived being disadvantaged in contrast to their student-athlete classmates (O'Neill et al. 2014). Consequently, a cautious approach is needed in managing this situation so that it does not alienate students and provoke jealous rifts between the two groups. This issue is reinforced by AITSL Standard 4: *Create and maintain safe learning environments*, specifically in relation to supporting student participation in the learning program

Flexibility in Delivering Schooling: ‘They Need Someone to Cut them a Bit of Slack’

All teachers recognised that it was unrealistic for student-athletes to manage two full-time workloads if there was little or no flexibility in the delivery of the curriculum. Several examples were provided of flexible strategies adopted by individual schools.

*The way this is possible is for the extended senior year's option, which is known as ‘variable progress rate’. T3**

*They need more time so they can do senior over three years, which is possibly an option as this extra year of school allows them more time to do their study and complete their commitments to sport. T1**

The curriculum is sufficiently flexible to encompass the requirements of high performance sport training plus the educational needs of student-athletes. Importantly, high performance athletes through their sports training, acquire more personal competencies than just sport specific skills. To be successful, high performance athletes need exceptional organisational and management skills, realistic goal setting and life skills to perform in different countries and cultures. These can be recognised within the modules for some subjects such as Health and Physical Education (HPE), to reduce the in-school work

required to complete that subject. For example, these students could obtain credit for a module of their HPE Year 11-12 subject, or were exempted from mainstream HPE activities with the vacant time slots or 'spares' being allocated to doing homework, study or assignments.

*We say to the kids that they don't have to do these make-up lessons instead devote it to other subjects T6**

One teacher questioned the relevance of specific subject content for student-athletes and suggested that content should be more relevant to their lives, yet still fit with the curriculum guidelines.

*It's ridiculous to make the elite athlete read Shakespeare when a travel journal of their experiences on tour would reflect better to their life and certainly provide the student with better life skills. T10**

Some teachers were flexible with the submission of assignments when student-athletes were involved in National Championship or had increased competition demands.

*There can be a little bit of leniency in Grand Final Week or National Championship weeks. T5**

*For my student-athletes in terms of assignment deadlines, I am a bit more flexible as opposed to just stating it has to be in on a specific day. T3**

These diverse responses are a reflection of the flexibility that already exists in some schools to meet the requirements of the curriculum within student-athletes' time constraints. However, the response of teachers to having a flexible approach to delivering the curriculum does not solve this issue unless student-athletes themselves have good time management skills. This issue is reinforced through AITSL *Standard 3: Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning*, which requires teachers to consider the learning requirements of all their students, and to plan and implement appropriately, that is catering for the individual learning needs of the student-athlete. Additionally, ATSL substandard 3.4 concerns the use of a varied range of resources, specifically the incorporation of Information Computer Technology (ICT) that would be useful for the athlete with interrupted attendance.

Time Management and Goal Setting: 'They can't manage their Time'

Time management issues involving school and sport requirements were raised by five teachers who indicated that, as student-athletes' personal time commitments varied greatly it was essential to adopt an individual approach to their time management.

*You have to take into consideration their academic and sporting commitments. So there has to be individual plans not run of the mill blanket policy about the kids. That's how we do it at my school. T3**

*They are all individuals and we treat them all as individuals when we have our initial discussions with them when they enter Year 11. T5**

One suggestion was for teachers to have a copy of the individual annual periodised training and competition program, which coaches prepared for each athlete. This would enable teachers to plan in advance the submission dates for assignments and exams so that assessments were due outside the dates for major competition.

*The periodisation plan or a skeleton of the student-athlete's commitments would be of major assistance. T9**

While all teachers reported that their schools allocated study times for student-athletes, most indicated there was a need to help them structure these effectively to maximise available time to complete schoolwork. Those teachers who trained their students in time management skills empowered them to manage their own schedules better.

*The personal needs of my footy players like scheduling them, is an important part of my job. T5**

*The thing about time management is they can't manage it well and often they are too young to manage their time appropriately unless we time manage them. My elite athletes, once they get good at personal management they do it a lot easier. T1**

Closely linked to developing personal time management skills, teachers reported that there was need for athletes to set realistic goals for their future lives (short term and long-term goals) including thoughts about future careers and lifestyle options.

*They are only good at looking at the 'here and now' as opposed to thinking about the longer term plans of their life after sport. Most of them are good at winning the race but when it comes to setting realistic goals they have to be more specific and timely. T10**

*Their priorities go with what's happening at the moment. T5**

These comments about time management and goal setting indicate the important role that teachers play in helping student-athletes with time management and goal setting. A realistic approach would be for teachers to work with student-athletes to help them identify specific short and long-term goals, as well as assisting in developing athletes' time management skills to meet these goals. This issue again is reinforced by AITSL *Standard 4 – Create and maintain safe learning environments*, with respect to supporting student-athletes' participation in the learning program through assistance to develop specific planning and management actions.

Pastoral Care: 'You need a Key Person in the School that Athletes feel Comfortable with'

Several teachers mentioned that their school had a dedicated staff member as the 'go-to person' for student-athletes to contact regarding any welfare or pastoral care issues. This staff member would monitor student-athletes' progress and well-being, and then be in a position to liaise with other teachers, parents and coaches about any pertinent issues.

*Each athlete in my school is allocated a teacher mentor who chats with them and is another source of caring and understanding in my school. T8**

*This mentor would outline at the beginning of the year, key social, traineeships and other things and they would work with the plan weekly or even daily so that the athlete is being looked after in the school. If problems arise for any of these kids in our school such as they fall behind or they need extra time with teachers, this mentor organises so that the student athlete gets the time they need. T2**

In addition to dedicated staff mentors, some schools also provided a case manager or an older athlete in the school to mentor student-athletes. Sometimes additional support personnel were sourced from external sporting bodies such as a national or state sporting body or a state or national institute or academy of sport, as these provided excellent role models and had positive influences on these students.

*The local community mentors provide the best influence for my high performance rugby league footy players as opportunities are provided by them that can help forge their footy careers forward into the NRL from the age of 18 and onwards. T8**

Although teachers in this study indicated that their schools provided dedicated mentoring and pastoral care support, this was not always the case. Reports from a number of female student-athletes in government schools about being bullied at school indicated that

not all schools provided dedicated support for student-athletes when they experienced such problems at school (O'Neill et al. 2014). For this research AITSL *Standard 4 – Create and maintain safe learning environments* is most significant. This standard has the most impact on the personal wellbeing of the student especially regarding issues of inclusion and a safe environment that must be addressed by all schools.

Respect and Empathy: ‘Teachers need to walk in the Athletes’ Shoes’

All teachers in this study expressed an interest in and an understanding of the training and competition requirements for student-athletes. However, this empathy for the specific issues faced by student-athletes was not common for across all teachers. Several senior teachers (T2, T4, T5 and T10) in this study reported that some novice teachers or those teachers with little to no knowledge of the requirements of high performance sport may misinterpret fatigue for laziness. A common observation by teachers was that student-athletes frequently fell asleep in the classroom, being too tired to play an active role in class activities.

*Exhaustion is a huge problem for the young high performance sport kid! The problem for me in senior PE is that I really only get to see them when they are so exhausted. The practical lessons they often can't fully participate in and then in my theory lessons I constantly see them asleep on the desk. T1**

Those teachers in management positions spoke about the need to ‘raise the awareness’ of junior staff and non-sporting teachers about the workloads and commitments required of student-athletes. This echoes the findings of Lamb and Lane (2013, p. 163) who found that some teachers were unaware of the demands that training could have on schoolwork. In practice, most teachers do not have a background in high performance sport so it is unrealistic to expect them to understand the demands placed on student-athletes.

*Teachers need to walk in the athlete's shoes, which allows understanding, and for them to start thinking ‘wow this kid does have a lot of stuff on their plate’ other than just sitting in my classroom. For a teacher to be respected by students the teacher **must** respect the students. It's reciprocation. I tell my younger teachers they need to take time to talk and understand the students that they teach. T10**

One teacher succinctly described the importance of empathy and respect by teachers in the management of student-athletes:

*Teachers need to extend, encourage and nurture these kids. We want our students to see that we accept their feelings and are willing to help them. T2**

With this raised awareness of the athletes’ sporting commitments, reciprocal respect can be engendered between teachers and students within the school culture. This issue relates to both AITSL *Standard 6 – Engage in professional learning and Standard 7 – Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and community*. Most pertinent, AITSL Standard 6 requires teachers to participate in learning to update knowledge and practice and then implement to address identified student learning needs. AITSL Standard 7 specifically involves establishing and maintaining respectful collaborative relationships with parents/carers regarding their children’s learning and wellbeing.

The preceding section identifies five key areas of concern raised by teachers. However, in order to gain a comprehensive overview of the issues, the following section outlines briefly the main concerns of parents and students, thus enabling a comparison of perspectives.

Different Perspectives of the Issues for Student-Athletes, Parents and Teachers

There are four key environments where student-athletes experience difficulties in balancing the demands of school and sport school, sport, home and their social lives. A comparison of the main issues identified by teachers, student-athletes and parents of student-athletes revealed many similarities but also some key differences (Table 2).

Main issues	Teachers (n=10)	Athletes** (n=19)	Parents* (n=10)
School			
Time management	8	19	1
Goal setting	6		
Connectedness to school	10	19	10
Missed class time	10	19	10
Need for case/mentor	4	1	2
Sport			
Workloads	8	19	
Fatigue	4	6	5
Nutrition	1	19	4
Sleep	1	1	1
Home			
Sibling rivalry			9
Financial expenses	1	4	2
Missed family outings		4	2
Time commitments	2	3	2
Social life			
Reduced contact with friends for social activity	1	19 5	
Exposure to drugs and alcohol			
Bullying		12 #	

Table 2. Comparison of issues identified by teachers, athletes and parents

** O'Neill et al. 2013

* O'Neill et al. 2015

all females

Teachers reported that the main issues they observed related to balancing timetables, student tiredness, time management, disrupted connectivity to school life, and the need for students to set both short and long term goals. Time management, missed classes and connectedness to school were common issues identified by student-athletes and most parents; but goal setting was not mentioned by these groups. In contrast to coaching practice, teachers and parents had no systematic approach to monitoring fatigue and stress in student-athletes. For some teachers, there was limited awareness of the physical and psychological demands of training and competition; and there were few comments concerning any nutritional and sleep requirements or social problems these students faced. Teachers were also less aware of issues related to the home environment. Whether this was due to teachers focusing on the school environment and teaching, or being unaware of issues in the student's home life is not clear. Sibling rivalry, financial strains on the family, absence from family activities and a reduced social life were other important issues identified by parents and athletes (O'Neill et al. 2015).

All groups raised the issue of connectedness with peers and school. In contrast, no teachers or parents identified victimisation, bullying or alcohol and drug use as problems for student-athletes. Interestingly, student-athletes in the larger study (O'Neill, 2012) reported the presence of drugs at their schools (both government and non-government schools), with all 12 female athletes having experienced victimisation or bullying from jealous classmates

and in one case, from a teacher (O'Neill et al. 2014). In these situations, a case manager or mentor could have liaised with the student, teachers and peers concerned to facilitate a solution.

An examination of the collective views of teachers, student-athletes and parents offers some solutions to the identified problems. Essentially, irrespective of the type of school, sports program or specialist pathway that a student-athlete undertakes, those schools with an athlete-friendly approach and supportive programs (Figure 1) cater well for the needs of these students. The challenge for some mainstream schools may be a lack of resources in terms of facilities, staff and finances. However, not all the requirements to be athlete-friendly are expensive or time consuming, but are focused more on improving communication and understanding between all the parties concerned by providing an individualised approach to support for each student-athlete.

These findings highlight the need for specific, inclusive and equitable learning opportunities for high performance athletes at school. In particular, as noted in Theme 2, these students require a flexible approach to the delivery of the curriculum. As stated by one teacher (T3) to '...cut them a bit of slack...' and by another (T10) to individualise the delivery of the learning needs of these students. This is in keeping with the professional standards promoted by APST (2014).

Conclusion

This study examined teachers' perceptions of problems faced by high performance student-athletes in juggling the demands of their multifaceted lives. In particular, this research was designed to provide a broader insight into this problem by expanding on the existing published data, to include teachers as 'significant others' in the lives of these young people. The ten teacher participants in this study originated from a variety of school programs that catered for student-athletes; however, many more Australian mainstream schools have student-athletes enrolled but fall outside these dedicated sports schools and sports programs. This should not deter these mainstream schools from being able to support these talented individuals. By adopting some of the strategies used by specialist sports schools and programs, mainstream schools will be able to actively support their student-athletes, as outlined in the following recommendations, which align to the AITSL Standards (AITSL, 2011)

Recommendations

In the context of high performance sport requirements these young athletes should be provided with the circumstances to facilitate the full development of their specific talent, including their educational experiences. The following recommendations are all underpinned by the AITSL, although continued engagement in targeted professional learning (*Standard 6*) will be required, as high-performance student athletes enrol in schools. Specifically, AITSL substandards *3.4 Select and use resources* (specifically the use of ICT for learning); *4.1 Support student participation* (connectedness to school); and *7.3 Engage with the parents/carers* (regular meetings with significant adults) (AITSL, 2011, p. 1-25) emerged as key factors in developing programs for these young people.

Thus, based on the data and an acknowledgement of the AITSL Standards the athlete-friendly school is characterised by:

- The provision of a dedicated staff person or case manager, tasked with supporting the student-athlete through providing pastoral care and assistance;
- The implementation of an individualised approach for goal setting, time management training, and scheduling schoolwork in relation to training and competition commitments;
- The organisation of additional support from other teachers and mentors, even outside the school environment, to raise awareness about the physical and emotional pressures that the student-athlete's experience;
- Regular meetings (including teachers, parents and coaches) scheduled to monitor the signs and symptoms of a student's wellbeing and detect any potential problems;
- The extension of existing electronic monitoring tools used by coaches to include variables for teachers to monitor athletes in school, and parents to monitor them at home, would be a simple and inexpensive ways to engage teachers and parents in assessing the student-athlete's overall physical and psychological state;
- The use of technological educational tools to keep student-athletes in contact and up-to-date with schoolwork and classmates during any absences; and
- Strategies to be developed to minimise the impact of problems linked to marginalisation of student-athletes from their classmates, thus reducing bullying and fostering a culture of respect.

In summary, the issues raised in this paper are becoming even more apparent with the increasing number of Australian school-age athletes in high performance sport. Future research should consider expanding the sample sizes for school types, sports examined, and increasing the number of participant teachers, student-athletes, and parents from all Australian states and territories. Additionally, information from coaches' observations needs to be included in future investigations. Despite these limitations, the outcomes from this research offer schools and teachers, a number of proven strategies, all of which align with APST requirements, when considering how to support student-athletes at their school.

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Figure captions

Figure 1 Ancillary support programs offered to student-athletes in Australian Sport Schools

Source: (ASC 2016b)