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Athletes' Perceptions of Their High School Sport Ecology and Life Skills Development

Kylee Jo Ault
University of Tennessee, kault@vols.utk.edu

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<div align="right">Jedediah Blanton, Major Professor</div>

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Scott Pierce, Rebecca Zakrajsek

<div align="right">

Accepted for the Council:

<u>Dixie L. Thompson</u>

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

</div>

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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DEDICATION

"WE BELIEVE" - This is the good luck text message I received from my brother before trying out for The Ohio State University Cheerleading Team in May of 2015. These two words are the truest representation of having Tyler and Trevor as older siblings.

The influence that the two of you have had on me cannot fully be put into words. You both have so greatly shaped how I see the world, and perhaps more importantly, how I see myself. In every area of my life you have simultaneously paved a path for me and encouraged me to step out on my own. You have always helped me see my own potential and gave me the courage to be bold enough to live it out. It is one of my greatest joys to be your little sister. Thank you for challenging me, believing in me, and loving me in the way that only the best older brothers can. This is for you.

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ABSTRACT

Sport psychology researchers have examined the degree to which youth sport participation leads to positive developmental outcomes. Contemporary findings suggest that these outcomes are more likely to occur when adults intentionally design environments that foster life skills development. However, many of these studies have only examined one adult relationship (e.g. Camiré, Trudel, & Bernard, 2013; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; Turnnidge, Côté, & Hancock, 2014) without acknowledging the larger context surrounding interscholastic sport. The purpose of this study was to examine high school student-athletes' perceptions of how stakeholders in their high school sport-ecosystem influence their life skills development and contribute to their well-being. To consider this system and the power of those who influence interscholastic sport, Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Model (1977; 1996) and Prilleltensky's (2003; 2011) concept of psychopolitcal validity were used as a dual theoretical framework. Seven focus groups and eight individual follow-up interviews were conducted with student-athletes ($N = 46$) who were members of student advisory councils for three state associations. Participants were asked how others (e.g. peers, coaches, parents, athletic directors, and state associations) shape the psychological factors and political dynamics that promote or hinder their well-being (Prilleltensky, 2003; 2011). Themes suggest that student-athletes' development could be placed into three depths of life skills development: Resilient Development, Surface Development, and Optimal Development. All depths of development were comprised of two reciprocal subthemes: the relationships of the student-athletes with others, and the developmental experiences. The relationships that the student-athletes participated in were revealed to be the *mechanisms* with which the student-athletes learned life skills. Specifically, in Optimal Development, representing the deepest internalization of life skills, the student-athletes had Great Relationships that supported their initiatives to influence their sport experience, and meaningful practice of shaping their sport community through Anchored Learning. However, outside of Anchored Learning experiences, these skills learned through sport were not explicitly targeted toward increased civic engagement, which falls short of total well-being (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2005). When stakeholders at any level of high school sport guided the student-athletes in civic engagement, they were fostering deep internalization of life skills and preparation for life beyond sport.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

'Giving voice' is a phrase that has begun to appear in everyday language when speaking about individuals or groups of people that are often oppressed, misrepresented, or simply unheard. Society is beginning to recognize that it is not only valuable, but necessary, to get the input of those whose experiences are impacted by the larger system. On a large scale, this has been demonstrated in the fight for equality for many minority racial groups, the LGTBQ community, and women in the workplace. Sport has been no exception with athletes beginning to speak out about their personal experiences as minorities on teams, with abusive team cultures, or feeling used for others' profit at the amateur level.

A group that can often be forgotten is young people. Specifically, in the world of American high school sport, adult stakeholders set the rules, formalize the structure, and create the culture that shapes the youth athletes' experience. These rules and regulations are not explicitly meant to be oppressive or restrictive of the athletes' input on their own experience, but as athletes are left without input on the implementation of rules, these can thusly impose order and require obedience against athletes' own desires. Whether the intention is positive or not, there is a chance that these restrictions are oppressing more of the athletes' experiences than what is intended. Even positive aspects of sport participation that are thought to be present, like the development of life skills and promotion of well-being, may be hindered by the actions and policies of the adult stakeholders.

Development in Sport

A commonly held belief is that 'sport builds character.' When talking about youth sport, however, there has been criticism as to whether this is actually true (Coakley, 2011). Does sport

actually build character or are there other factors or 'actors' creating the influence? As 'character' was studied under the realm of positive youth development and life skills (Gould & Carson, 2008), additional researchers came to understand and define that sport participation in and of itself did not develop these skills; instead, the actors (e.g. coaches, parents, athletic directors) on the participants' experience in sport certainly did have the power to do so by using both implicit and explicit approaches (Camiré, Trudel, & Bernard, 2013; Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; Turnnidge, Côté, & Hancock, 2014).

In studying life skill development factors, researchers have typically focused on only one area of the athlete's sport ecology at a time, such as coaches, parents, or peers (Gould & Carson, 2008). In reality however, these relationships do not exist in a vacuum, but rather are intricately intertwined with the others. Based on these systems of interaction, Bronfenbrenner (1977) established the Bio-Ecological Model of human development which accounts for the individual themselves (microsystems) to the culture surrounding the individual (macrosystem). Holt and colleagues (2017) acknowledge these overarching cultural influences by including distal ecological systems as the larger context with which their model of positive youth development is framed. Prilleltensky (2011) would argue from a structural framework that those individuals who occupy the outer-most systems would therefore have power and influence over the individual even without direct contact. Life skill development as it takes place within the ecology of youth sport has been studied only at some of the various levels. But, it has yet to be examined as a whole system influencing the learner, and specifically, how the individuals at the center of the development process perceive their entire ecological system.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine high school student-athletes' perceptions of the ecology of their high school sport experience and their life skill development and transfer through sport. By listening to the voice of the student-athletes, who occupy the center of their ecological sport system, this project aimed to examine their views of how others shape their sport experience, and contribute to or hinder their life skills development and transfer of life skills through sport. The researcher aimed to add to the literature on life skill development and transfer in sport by using a lens that acknowledges the *entire* system of high school sport and its role in developing the life skills of student-athletes as they participate in the system. In doing so, this study answered the following research questions: 1) How do student-athletes perceive their development through sport, and 2) How do student-athletes perceive others as helping or hindering their development through sport?

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Positive Youth Development

For nearly 30 years, scholars have been exploring how children can be positively influenced through their participation in varying extracurricular activities like sport. This area of inquiry and outreach is commonly referred to as Positive Youth Development (PYD) and focuses on building strengths in young people in a positive, asset-gaining manner, as opposed to fixing or resolving deficits (Larson, 2000). This area of inquiry and outreach began in developmental psychology, and was quickly recognized for its value in the sport setting, though it was not originally referred to as "positive youth development". To demonstrate this, King and colleagues (2005), examined the terminology used to identify similar concepts to positive youth development in the literature from 1991 to 2003. They found that the most common expressions articulating ideas similar to PYD were competence, coping, health, resilience, and well-being (King et al., 2005). This includes Larson (2000), an early PYD scholar, explaining development as "a process of growth and increasing competence" (p. 170). This increase in competence encompasses what has been referred to in the literature as life skills (Gould & Carson, 2008).

When studying the development of initiative in youth, Larson (2000) concluded that 'structured voluntary activities' can provide a productive environment for youth development. The criteria used for these types of activities is twofold: First, the activity must be organized outside of the mandatory school day hours, thus voluntary and second, it must also involve some structure, including rules, constraints, and goals (Larson, 2000). Activities that fit both of these criteria could be various hobbies, clubs, music, art, and sport.

Sport is often believed to be profoundly positive as an activating agent of growth and development for those who participate in it (Coakley, 2011; Danish, Taylor, & Fazio, 2003). This belief has sparked investigation of the development of leadership and other important life skills in young people through sport for some time (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993; Danish, Forneris, & Wallace, 2005; Coakley, 2011). Gould and Carson (2008) have provided the most often cited definition of life skills as the "internal personal assets, characteristics, and skills such as goal settings, emotional control, self-esteem, and hard work ethic that can be facilitated or developed in sport and transferred for use in non-sport settings" (p. 60). Prior to this definition, however, a long line of literature exists exploring the potential of sport and mechanisms within to develop life skill outcomes. Below, a chronology of some key literature has been summarized.

In 1993, Danish, Petitpas, and Hale created the Life Development Intervention framework around the idea of promoting change through empowerment. A goal of the interventions is to intentionally create change for the participants' future by teaching sport-based life skills in the present (Danish et al., 1993). Thus, this psychoeducational model operates from a lens that development occurs across the life span. The framework also considers the environment of the individual in their overall development. This environment may elicit critical events to occur where the young person would require life skills to navigate it effectively. The central tenant of the Life Development Intervention is the use of goal setting skills to empower the young person to intentionally shape their own environment (Danish et al., 1993).

In 1995, Hellison proposed the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model advocating for physical education and sport-based interventions for teaching life skills. This model of development has five levels. Self-control, the most basic level, targets respect for oneself and others. Level two, self-responsibility, is the facilitation of the young person's

involvement in being active. Self-direction is level three, which encourages taking ownership of one's own well-being. Level four revolves around leadership and sensitivity to others. The final level is the application and transfer of the lessons that were learned in earlier levels outside of the physical activity setting.

Benson and colleagues (1998) created a framework for adolescent development that includes both family and community engagement. The developmental assets framework works to promote specific developmental targets, as opposed to prevent certain downfalls, in an effort to create a more positive language to empower those with "inherent developmental power" (Benson et al., 1998, p. 8). The positive developmental perspective allowed Benson and colleagues to focus on strengths to develop in the environment and internally in young people.

The 5 C model was created by Lerner, Fisher, and Weinberg (2000) using applied developmental science, which seeks to link research on positive development to community policies and programs. The model categorizes ideal outcomes for development through these programs into five components of competence, connection, character, confidence, and caring. Lerner et al. (2000) define competence as an individual attribute of intellectual ability, social skills, and behavioral skills. Connection demonstrates positive relationships with others and institutions. Character is moral centeredness and overall integrity. Confidence refers to the individual's sense of self-regard, self-efficacy, and courage. Lastly, caring describes actions of empathy, a sense of social justice, and humane values (Lerner et al., 2000). These five outcomes are thought to be reached through the impact of policy on program resources for young families and young people.

The model suggests that when civil society is comprised of public policies that create an opportunity for families to provide a nurturing climate, children get the resources they need to

develop. These policies should be based around boundaries and expectations, physiological and safety needs, a loving and caring climate, inculcation of self-esteem, encouragement of support and growth, a constructive use of time, positive values, and positive links to the community (see Figure 1 of Lerner et al., 2000, for full model). The next step in the model proposes that when policies have these standards in mind, then programs for young people can provide resources that give youth a healthy start, a safe environment, education for marketable skills, an opportunity to give back, and freedom from prejudice and discrimination. It is then that the programs with those qualities create the outcomes of caring, competence, character, connection, and confidence (Lerner et al., 2000).

An important piece of Lerner and colleagues' (2000) 5 C model is the use of the outcomes for children to enhance civil society further. These five categories of ideal outcomes certainly share some overlap with Benson and colleagues' (1998) ideas. The focus on community as an influence of development is present in both models as well as the presence of socialization playing a role in developing these aspects of well-being for young people.

Larson, Hansen, and Moneta (2006) created the Youth Experiences Survey to identify developmental experiences of young people. The survey focuses on the idea that the young individual is at the center of their own development and specifically examine areas of socioemotional development. Socioemotional development includes both personal and interpersonal skills, such as emotional regulation and teamwork (Larson et al., 2006). The Youth Experiences Survey aimed to study negative developmental experiences as well. All of the research on components and categories of life skills demonstrates that there are many ways to examine and label them. Within the sport context, there may be certain life skills that are more applicable or likely to be taught (Gould et al., 2007).

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Study of Life Skill Development in Sport

In an initial movement to fill a gap in the literature on life skill development through sport, Gould and colleagues (2007) interviewed and gave a survey to ten high school football coaches about their coaching philosophy, style, and objectives with questions targeting specific strategies used, such as life-skill accomplishments of former players and advice they could share with other coaches. The coaches selected had all been finalists for the NFL "Coach of the Year Program", meaning they had been nominated by an NFL athlete who felt that the coach had a significant impact on their life development (Gould et al., 2007). The researchers found two different dimensions that were articulated well by the coaches: effective coaching strategies and player development strategies. Within the player development strategies dimension, the coaches provided specific techniques and examples to develop life and performance skills. An important revelation about why these coaches were identified as shaping the life development of these elite athletes was that their methods for developing life skills in their athletes were found to be well thought-out and intentional (Gould et al., 2007).

At this point in the literature, Gould and Carson (2008) captured the state of the field, critiqued the gaps in the research, and called to action those who are studying life skill development in sport. Using PYD concepts identified in the literatures on youth sport and child and adolescent development, they created a working definition of life skills: "those internal personal assets, characteristics and skills such as goal setting, emotional control, self-esteem, and hard work ethic that can be facilitated or developed in sport and are transferred for use in non-sport settings" (Gould & Carson, 2008, p. 60). After developing the definition, Gould and Carson separated the field at that point in time into four critical categories of exploration: the life skill needs of youth athletes, whether or not sport participation develops life skills, how the life

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skills are developed through sport, and if sport programs created for life skill development actually work (Gould & Carson, 2008).

For the life skill needs of youth athletes, Gould and Carson (2008) discussed Benson et al.'s (1998) model of developmental assets, Lerner et al.'s (2000) 5 C model, and Hansen and Larson's (2003) Youth Experiences Survey as foundational support that life skills can be developed in young people. Although these models and survey are not specifically designed with sport in mind, Gould and Carson (2008) believed that they would also apply to youth athletes. The variety of life skills acknowledged in the literature leads to questioning which life skills are the most important and applicable for youth sport participants. Gould and colleagues (2006; 2007) began attempting to identify the greatest life skill needs by gathering input from coaches, athletic directors, parents, athletes, and more. These stakeholders in youth sport recognized communication skills, decision making skills, time management skills and many more as largely beneficial to high school student athletes (Gould et al., 2007).

Research on whether sport participation actually develops life skills has mixed results. Weiss and Smith (2002) demonstrated that when compared to non-athlete youth, sport participants are not necessarily at a higher level of moral reasoning, which suggests that mere sport participation does not enhance moral development and may be unlikely to instill other life skills in youth sport participants. Other research has found that sport can positively develop young people if life skills are specifically addressed to them (Gibbons, Ebbeck, & Weiss, 1995). This explicit work to enhance life skills through sport is a key factor in providing the right conditions to use sport as a tool for positive youth development (Gould & Carson, 2008).

Taking a position that life skills ought to be taught to young people, it becomes important to examine *how* they are being taught. Interviews with coaches known to be successful in

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teaching life skills shed light on the importance of including a priority to develop life skills in a coaching philosophy, forming strong relationships with participants, and recognition that other outside factors influence life skills as well (Gould, Chung, & Smith., 2006; Gould et al., 2007; Flett, Gould, Griffes, & Lauer, 2013). These coaches also viewed life skill development as one of their coaching duties that weaved into their normal coaching behavior (Gould et al., 2007). Although others have examined positive youth development in sport (Hellison, 2000; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin., 2005), Gould and Carson (2008) acknowledged that more work needs to be done to explore other factors that influence the development process, such as individual, social, and contextual factors.

Intervention studies showed some positive results for programs designed to use sport as a tool for teaching life skills. Examinations of The First Tee golf program and the Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation (SUPER) life skills program showed that the participants demonstrated a higher level of knowledge about the life skills being taught than control groups of youth that had not participated in the programs (Weiss, 2006; Brunelle, Danish, & Forneris, 2007). Gould and Carson (2008) also suggested that better measures for life skill development were needed as well as examining the efficacy of transferring life skills beyond the sport programs into daily life.

In order to better understand and study life skill development through sport and provide a starting foundation for research at that time, Gould and Carson (2008) created a model for understanding how life skills are coached through sport. The model includes internal and external assets that make up the sport participant before they engage in the sport experience. These assets feed into the sport experience itself and the teaching of life skills. This portion of the model is largely focused on the coach's behavior and ability (Gould & Carson, 2008). The

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center of the model targets explanations for how the development occurs and the usefulness of the life skills. Gould and Carson (2008) suggested that social and environmental influences play a large role in shaping the identity and development of the young athlete, and the life skills being learned must add value in sport and other areas of life for them to be used. The last two components of the model are the positive and negative outcomes of the life skill development and the transferability of the skills to non-sport settings. In particular, they are intentional about acknowledging that not only is learning life skills beneficial, but the failure to develop or transfer some skills may even have negative consequences (Gould & Carson, 2008). In summary, life skill development is not a simple process and is influenced by many different aspects of the world of young people, which requires many different avenues of research to create a well-rounded understanding of how to best impact the youth sport system (Gould & Carson, 2008).

In 2011, Camiré, Forneris, Trudel, and Bernard created a set of five strategies for coaches to use in hopes of creating an environment of positive youth development. These tactics are based in previous research conducted with selected coaches who have recognized for their work with adolescent youth and summarize the larger themes that were presented by the coaches (Camiré, Trudel, & Bernard, 2013; Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2012). Camiré and colleagues (2011) found from interviews with selected coaches that developing a clear coaching philosophy, creating meaningful relationships with the athletes, intentionally plan for the teaching of life skills, making the athletes practice the life skills, and teaching the athletes how the life skills transfer out of sport all were useful techniques for coaches to use to encourage positive youth development.

Frameworks for creating life skill development interventions have included components of transfer of the skills (Hodge, Danish, & Martin, 2013; Lee & Martinek 2013). Hodge and

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colleagues (2013) revised the Life Development Intervention model to better incorporate life skill transfer using the Basic Needs Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Hodge and colleagues incorporated the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness supportive environments to create a motivational climate that allows for internalization of life skill development. Generalization of the life skills learned is included as a simultaneous piece of life skill outcomes, which create optimal psychological well-being (Hodge et al., 2013).

Coaching techniques have also been examined in underserved youth populations by Flett and colleagues (2013). The researchers interviewed and observed 12 volunteer coaches, two coaches each from six different sports, studying the coaching behaviors and strategies used to develop life skills in athletes. Half of the coaches were considered more effective coaches, meaning they had been recommended by the athletic directors of this community sport program because they were great at teaching and role modeling skills such as responsibility, integrity, compassion, and perseverance, while the other half was considered less effective, also by recognition from the athletic directors (Flett et al., 2013). The more effective coaches were found to build positive environments and used both explicit and implicit developmental strategies. The less effective coaches used negative coaching strategies and often times did not see the value in role modeling positive behaviors. These coaches also did not vocalize the use of transferring life skills out of sport. Similar to the findings of Camiré, Trudel, and Forneris (2014), the more effective coaches were more open to continue their own learning and development as coaches (Flett et al., 2013).

In a more recent study, Camiré et al. (2014) asked 16 model high school coaches in Canada to describe how they each have learned to aid their athletes in positive youth development. These 16 coaches were selected after receiving coaching awards for

characteristics such as showing an interest in learning about coaching, respected by peers in their

sport community, demonstrates leadership, and more. In order to learn how to facilitate positive

youth development with their athletes, the model coaches were open to continuing to learn about

using sport as a tool through formal, non-formal, and informal methods (Camiré et al., 2014).

Formal methods include coaching education courses or high education degrees, non-formal

learning methods include conferences and seminars, and informal methods include personal life

experiences such as reading coaching books or conversing with fellow coaches. While the

coaches had an average of 13 years coaching experience already, most expressed continued

interest in continuing to learn about positive youth development through sport in the future.

Camiré et al. (2014) stated that this characteristic was the general theme among the group of

model coaches.

Furthermore, scholars have noted that though life skills are often discussed, and even

measured in some studies, the mechanics of how transfer occurs have not been closely examined.

Recently, Pierce, Gould, and Camiré (2017) set out to define life skill transfer and proposed a

model for how it occurs. The definition they proposed has five key components: life skill

transfer as an ongoing process, the learner is at the center of the process, life skills encompasses

multiple personal assets, development can occur in various learning contexts, and transfer is

possible in many life domains (Pierce, Gould, & Camiré, 2017). Sport falls within this definition

as a possible learning context for life skills.

The Pierce model begins with the individual learner's internal and external assets and

previous experiences. These factors are taken into the learning context, which in this case is

sport. The inherent demands of sport, program design, and coaching characteristics and

strategies all influence each other and the sport learning context (Pierce et al., 2017). From here,

life skill learning is internalized through the creation of knowledge, psychosocial skills, dispositions, and identity formation. Only after the skills are internalized can they be transferred to other areas. Pierce and colleagues (2017) suggest that the context of the environment and psychological processes impact the young person's ability to have positive transfer outcomes. These psychological processes include, but are not limited to, satisfaction of basic needs, confidence, perception of support, awareness of transfer possibilities.

The overarching factor for life skill development and transfer in the model proposed by Pierce and colleagues (2017) is the socio-cultural environment. The authors acknowledge that although the model focuses on the microsystem level, the transfer process occurs in an entire larger ecology and many larger factors play a role in the process (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Sport as a context for teaching life skills to young people and helping them transfer the skills to other areas of life "does not happen in a vacuum" (Pierce et al., 2017, p. 197).

Recently, Bean, Kramers, Forneris, and Camiré (2018) have expanded upon the transfer component of previous models, proposing that the teaching of life skills and transference does not fall into an implicit/explicit dichotomy, but exists instead on a continuum. This continuum includes six different levels. At the far end of the implicit side of the continuum is the structuring of the sport context, which includes the setting of rules and inherent demands of the sport. Moving towards the median of the continuum is the facilitation of positive climate change with modeling positive behaviors and taking advantage of natural teaching moments. Crossing to the explicit side of the continuum, discussing life skills is the next level. Beyond simple discussion is the practicing of life skills. The two levels on the farthest explicit end involve transfer. The first being discussing transfer, its importance, and potential opportunities. The highest level of explicit teaching on the continuum is practicing life skill transfer by providing

opportunities beyond sport and building relationships with others involved in the youth athletes' lives (Bean et al., 2018).

Bean and colleagues' (2018) continuum focuses on the microsystem of development and transfer as well. This falls in line with contemporary sport literature. Although it is acknowledged that many factors play a role, the published research has remained limited in the factors observed in life skills development and transfer. For example, the coach has often been a focus of the studies examining youth development through sport with the aim of defining and promoting more effective coaching techniques (Gould et al., 2007; Camiré et al., 2011; Camiré et al., 2014; Flett et al., 2013). In order to get a full picture of the life skill development in youth sport, research should go beyond the direct impact of coaches and continue to be expanded (Gould & Carson, 2008).

Examining the Entire Ecology

When using Larson's (2000) idea that development occurs in a context, it begs the question of what is included and worth studying in the entirety of a context. In community psychology literature, a concept called *psychopolitical validity* has been examined. Psychopolitical indicates the combination of influences in both the psychological and political realm of a context, noting that the individual is not immune to the decisions and political processes of those in power over their context. Often, this psychopolitical validity examines factors in realms that both promote well-being or breed issues of power, oppression, or liberation (Prilleltensky, 2011).

A common belief about sport is that it promotes well-being. Although there is no entirely agreed upon definition for well-being in the literature, the Center for Disease Control notes that well-being includes positive emotions, satisfaction with life, and positive functioning (Well-

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Being Concepts, 2016). A primary component of sport that is thought to create well-being is the promotion of health and physical fitness (Smoll & Smith, 2002). The psychopolitical validity concept would point out that this promotion of physical well-being is not devoid of psychological and political influence (Prilleltensky, 2003).

In the struggle to promote well-being, Prilleltensky (2003) would argue that there are larger forces at hand that impact the political and social norms of an environment. In youth sport, these larger factors would be the stakeholders of the young peoples' sport experience: coaches, parents, athletic organizations, and state associations. In enforcing political and social norms over the youth participants through rules and mandated structure, there is the possibility that the youth are having oppressive experiences that could hinder their own well-being, and thus the development of life skills (Prilleltensky, 2011). This enforcement of rules and structure aligns with Lerner and colleagues' (2000) 5C model in which the policies of the community informed opportunities that impacted the development of the young people. Within the model, meeting safety needs, providing a caring climate, and encouraging growth and support are a few standards of community policies that allow resources to be better provided to families and youth. Similar standards may be able to be applied when examining the Psychopolitcal validity of youth sport policies. In order to understand these influences, examining the sport experience of youth participants through an entire ecological lens is needed.

Lee and Martinek (2013) began to expand the lens by adjusting the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility model using the Bio-Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1995) to include the interactions of the participant and the context. This adjustment includes out-of-program outcomes that represent the transfer of life skills beyond the intervention (Lee & Martinek, 2013). Each of these models has been created or revised with the understanding that

part of the development of life skills includes applying these skills/assets to areas of their lives beyond sport.

The Bio-Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) studies human development by expanding beyond the direct observation of human behavior to the entirety of the ecological environment, the relationship between the person and the environment, and the larger context influencing both. The ecological environment is made of multiple structural levels. These levels include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Each of these levels plays a role in impacting the developmental environment of the young person and are influenced by the other levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

The microsystem level includes anything that the individual experiences in a role, activity or interpersonal relationship within a given setting. This microsystem then comprises the elements within the physical setting, but also the individual's perceptions about them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The interpersonal relationships are focused around face-to-face interactions in a given situation as well as the role of the individual and the other. This level in the sport setting would include coaches and peers.

The mesosystem level incorporates the interactions of two or more settings. It is created as a structure of microsystems formed around the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Sometimes, microsystems can overlap with other people crossing into multiple microsystems of the individual through shared activities, or even knowledge about other settings being shared. This mesosystem in sport could include the interaction of the athletic department and coaches or the coaches and the parents. Since the athlete interacts with each of these systems, and these systems interact with each other, there is an interplay that has the potential to impact development (Lee & Martinek, 2013; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The exosystem level encompasses at least one setting that may or may not actively include the individual, but the setting does influence the microsystems that the individual participates in. This level in high school sport would include the state associations enacting regulations on the youth sport experience. Although athletes may not interact directly or explicitly with the individuals in this system, the athletes are at least acutely aware of their rules and guiding structure. Therefore, the state associations certainly influence the interactions that occur on the smaller levels. The macrosystem includes sub-cultures of the lower systems, culture as a whole, or beliefs that encompass the entirety of the rest of the systems influencing the individual's development. These beliefs could include the inherent nature of sport being 'good' or the favor that athletics receives in society. All of the levels are influenced by the outermost macrosystem cultures (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Even larger still is the change of the macrosystem over time, which is referred to as the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

It is here that the examination of the psychopolitical intersection becomes necessary to fully understand the perceptions of youth athletes and how they may be guided toward life skills development. By examining how youth perceive the degree of actuality of life skills being discussed, taught, and the transfer of these skills being implicitly or explicitly supported by the varying levels of influence over their high school sport experience, we are able to capture how the context guides, influences, or oppresses their development while giving the athletes' a voice in their experience. This ecologically framed inquiry over athlete well-being, development, and their psychopolitical validity will add an important voice and perspective to the literature on positive youth development and life skills in sport.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine high school student-athletes' perceptions of the ecology of their high school sport experience, their life skill development, and the transfer of those skills into other contexts. Specifically, the study aimed to examine student-athletes' experiences of their ecology at all levels in order to better understand the whole system of power enacting on the life skill development and well-being of youth athletes. To best describe and understand these experiences, a basic interpretive approach to qualitative inquiry was used (Merriam, 2002). This approach operates out of a constructivist ontology and epistemology, which proposes that reality is individually constructed and can be interpreted in many different ways (Patton, 2002).

Ontology, according to Guba and Lincoln (1994), is how the nature of reality is understood. Epistemology is how knowledge has come to be known (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In terms of knowledge creation, this constructivist positionality of the research paradigm, and the positionality of the primary investigator (Appendix E), recognizes that meanings are made as the participants, as well as the researchers, interact with the world that they are aiming to interpret (Crotty, 1998). This interaction of multiple participants allows for the inclusion of multiple individual experiences and perspectives. Thus, the knowledge created is one interpretation of the individual perspectives of the participants' world (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Therefore, the researcher works with the participants to interpret their world by using the data in the study through the basic interpretive inquiry methodology.

This constructivist positionality of the researcher and basic interpretive inquiry methodology leads to the acknowledgement of the researcher's influence in the study. Through

the primary investigator's role in selecting the research question, contribution to the interview conversations, ability to choose follow-up questions within the interviews, as well as final interpretation of the data and producing the report, the researcher's impact on the study cannot be ignored. This central tenant of basic interpretive qualitative research allows the active role of the researcher to be the primary tool for the investigation (Merriam, 2002).

Thematic analysis procedures were followed in order to analyze the data using an inductive approach that is systematic with the researcher as the tool (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, the semantic approach of thematic analysis was utilized to provide a rich description of what the participants said and the interpretation of what was said, without applying any specific theoretical framework as a structure for the analysis. This approach aligns with the purpose of the study in that the analysis aimed to shed light on the perceptions of the student-athletes as they see their own world before providing critical assessment of that world which they, and the researcher, are interpreting. The interactive data collection methods, via semi-structured focus group and follow-up interviews, paired with a recognition of the researcher's active roles in the study, as well as the goals of providing rich description of how the participants interpret their experiences makes basic interpretive qualitative inquiry an appropriate methodology.

Participants

Since the study aimed to explore the lived experiences of high school student-athletes, the participants *(N = 46)* recruited were current high school student-athletes who are members of the advisory council for their high school state association. Three states were represented in this sample, with 14 from State A, 16 from State B, and 16 from State C. The inclusion of student-athletes from multiple states allowed for a variety of perspectives of the high school sport

experience with different high school state associations and their operations being included in the study. The student-athlete participants' membership in the advisory council for their state association allowed for a greater understanding of the state association's role within the high school sport system.

Student Advisory Councils. The advisory councils that the participants are members of work alongside the administrators of the high school state associations in different capacities. The responsibilities of the councils include a range of activities, such as promoting good sportsmanship through social media campaigns, overviewing policies and policy changes, marketing school spirit promotions, and attending and facilitating leadership trainings. Not every high school state association has one of these unique advisory councils. Although each state association has different protocols for selecting the student-athletes to serve on the councils, it is usually a competitive process where spots are offered to those students who demonstrate leadership ability. In recruiting participants from these groups of student-athlete leaders, the researchers believe that utilizing the athletes' awareness of the state associations' actions and the impact on their sport experience allowed for a more complete picture of their entire high school sport ecology and life skill development (see Figure 1).

The advisory councils and committees are usually made up of both male and female student-athletes that are sophomores, juniors, or seniors in high school. The student-athletes participate in a diverse selection of sports on their high school teams from all across their home state. Since most of the participants were minors, the recruitment of the participants was done through the state administrator that acts as a gatekeeper to the councils.

Macrosystem
(sport culture, sub-cultures of lower
levels, beliefs about sport)

Exosystem
(state associations)

Mesosystem
(interactions between coaches,
peers, parents)

Microsystem
(coaches, peers, parents)
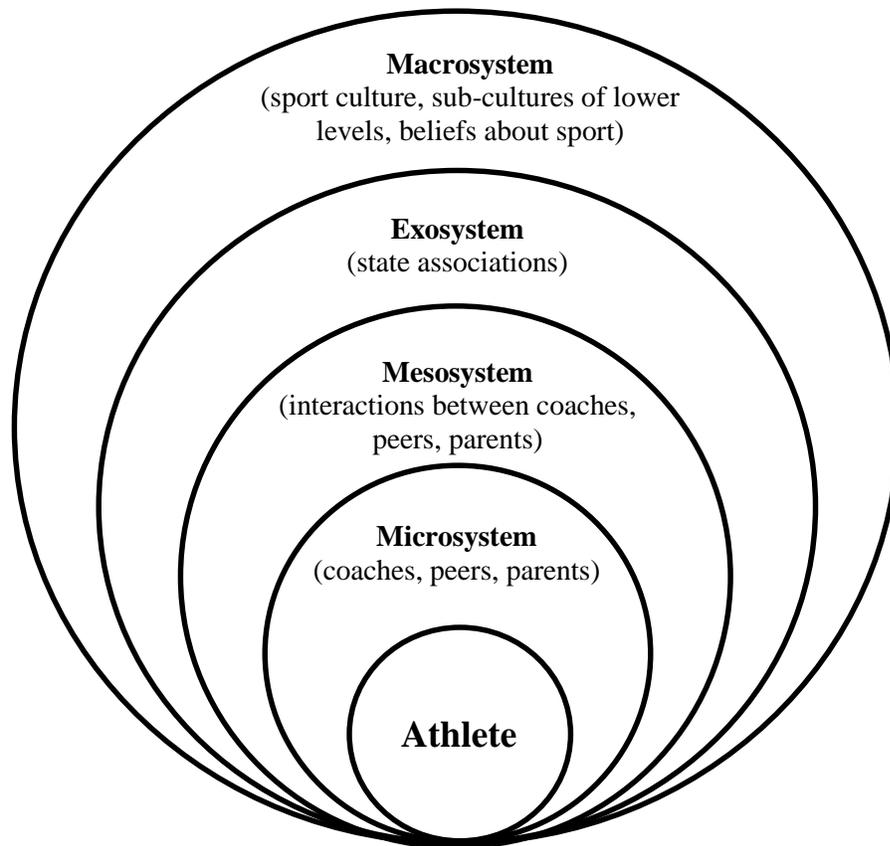
Athlete

Figure 1. High school sport ecological system based on the Bio-Ecological Model (1979).

Administrator Recruitment. To gain access to the high school student-athletes, the high school state association administrator had to agree to allowing the researcher to attend an advisory council meeting and conduct the focus group interviews. This process included making multiple contacts with the administrator to gain buy in to participation in the study. After searching high school state association websites and creating a list of states that held Student Advisory Councils/Committees, emails were sent to six different state association administrators who oversaw the councils. Previous connections with two of the state administrators aided in creating buy in to the study and site permission was gained. One of the other state administrators responded to the initial interest email asking to be contacted at a later date, however when reached out to again by email and telephone did not respond. There was no response from any others via email or telephone. After data collection at the first state site was completed, snowball sampling was utilized as the administrator suggested two other state administrators to contact about participation in the study (Patton, 2002). One of the suggested state administrators responded to email, engaged in a phone discussion of the study, and granted site permission. The other did not respond. Altogether, three states were then represented in the study after the agreement of the advisory council administrators was gained and travel arrangements were made.

<div align="center">

Procedures

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After gaining the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and site permission from the state association administrators, the Primary Investigator sent out the consent and assent forms explaining the study to the advisory council administrators. The administrator at each state association then distributed forms to the potential participants within the advisory council. This included all three different consent and assent forms: an assent form for students under 18

years of age (Appendix A), a parent/guardian consent form for students under 18 years of age (Appendix B), and a participant consent form for students 18 years of age or older (Appendix C). Each form explains the study, the role of the participant, risks associated, and contact information of the researchers before providing an opportunity for the parent/guardian and participant to give consent or assent for participation.

Before conducting the interviews or meeting with participants, the researcher recorded any expectations or biases about the project or student-athlete experiences in a research journal. This initial positionality statement (Appendix E) was used as a reflexive tool for the primary investigator to bring awareness to her position as a researcher in an effort to better equip her to acknowledge and manage biases in the data collection and analysis process (Merriam, 2002). Memoing occurred throughout the research process to promote further researcher reflexivity and potentially create more of an openness to the data that has been presented.

This study utilized seven 28-58-minute (with an average of 46.5 minutes) semi-structured focus group interviews and eight 29-52-minute (with an average of 41.25 minutes) individual follow-up interviews to collect information on the lived experiences of the participants (15 total interview transcripts). The focus group method has been noted as a helpful tool in discovering perspective for adolescent participants (Peterson-Sweeney, 2005; Greene & Hogan, 2005). The student-athletes who agreed to participate were organized into focus groups at the home state meeting of the student advisory council. Since there are more than eight student-athletes participating from the advisory councils at all three state locations, smaller groups of four to eight participants were organized while best attempting to keep diverse populations for each group (gender, sport, class, etc.). The composition of the states and participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. State and participant composition.

State	Number of Focus Groups	Length of Interviews (in minutes)	Gender	Class Rank
A	2	57.5	7 Male 7 Female	5 Senior 5 Juniors 4 Sophomores
		58		
B	2	27.5	8 Male 8 Female	8 Seniors 8 Juniors
		34.5		
C	3	49	4 Male 12 Female	11 Seniors 5 Juniors
		38.75		
		39.75		

*Sports represented are not listed to avoid participant identification

With the help of the administrators at each state, the groups were separated to maintain differing age, gender, and sport representation in each focus group. The forms were gathered by the administrators and given to the researcher at the meeting for the council in order for the student-athlete to participate. Consent was also attained at the beginning of each focus group interview with verbal or nonverbal (head nods, thumbs up, etc.) cues after the researcher explained the interview process and what the participants should expect. The researcher then would start the recording.

Focus Group Interviews. The interview guide for the focus groups was semi-structured with open-ended questions asking about the athletes' interactions and experiences with each level of the high school sport system (Roulston, 2010). This study utilized 14 scripted questions. The questions served as prompts for the participants in the topics to be covered unless others come up naturally. The Primary Investigator asked any follow-up questions thought to be necessary to get further information on the experiences based on the responses of the participants. Participants were encouraged to ask for clarification if they did not understand the phrasing of a question. For easier identification of speakers in transcribing, each focus group was reminded to refer to any other participants by name when responding if possible. The researcher also took some notes during the interviews to aid in the identification of participants during the transcription process as well as provide researcher perspectives for the analysis process. The participants' names were de-identified during the transcription process through the use of pseudonyms. In each state, the participants had the opportunity to suggest pseudonyms to the researcher. This was mentioned before the interviews and provided an opportunity for the researcher to build rapport with the student-athletes. If the participants did not choose their own pseudonyms they were selected by the researcher during the transcription process. The focus

groups were held in a confidential location within the facility or office of the advisory council

meeting at the state associations (a conference room or administrator's office); permission was

granted by a state association administrator to conduct the focus groups on site.

Since the focus groups were conducted during the student advisory council meetings at

the state association, the allotted time for each focus group was dependent on the schedule of the

meetings for the day, which contributes to the range of lengths of the interviews. Due to this

time constriction in some focus groups, it was not possible to get to every question on the

interview guide for each focus group. In an attempt to gather some perspectives of the student-

athletes on each question in each state, an effort was made to ask the remaining questions during

the individual follow-up interviews with the participants from each state.

Individual Follow-Up Interviews. Certain participants were identified after the focus

group process as being potentially beneficial for further investigation in the study through

participation in an individual follow-up interview. After individuals were selected, the primary

investigator referred to the consent and assent forms to see if the participant and parent had

agreed to participate in a follow-up interview. If so, the participant was contacted about the

possibility of setting up an individual interview that would occur over the phone. If the parent

had provided an email by which to be contacted with that was different than that of the student-

athlete, the parent was copied on the email. In total, 18 participants, including participants from

each state, were recruited through email. Eight students replied and followed through with

setting up and participating in the interview (Two from the State A, three from State B, and three

from State C). Three others replied that they were willing, but did not follow through with

scheduling and participating in the interviews. After an interview time was agreed upon by the

researcher and participant, the researcher reserved a quiet and confidential space to call the

participant for the interview. The interview was recorded over the phone after the researcher

explained the study once again, what the participant could expect for the individual interview,

and gained verbal consent. A semi-structured interview procedure was used once again, with the

questions being created from initial interview questions that had not been asked in the focus

group due to time constraints as well as questions based on the participants comments in the

initial focus group (Roulston, 2010). At the conclusion of the interview, the participants were

able to ask any questions they had about the study and process moving forward.

Analysis

After the interviews, the audio recording of the focus groups and individual interviews

were transferred to the researcher's computer and protected as a secure file. All of the interviews

were transcribed verbatim using pseudonyms, chosen by the participants if they chose to do so or

otherwise by the researcher, to maintain confidentiality of the participants. Three transcribers

were hired to assist in the project. All three transcribers signed confidentiality agreements

acknowledging that he or she must not discuss any names or content from the audio recording he

or she transcribes. Once all of the audio files were transcribed, the transcripts were saved as

secure files on the researcher's computer.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using Thematic Analysis procedures as set by

Braun and Clarke (2006). Two researchers conducted the initial coding and analysis, while a

third researcher contributed as a critical friend. This critical friend role used the third researcher

as an external voice to assess and challenge the initial data analysis by the first two researchers

by asking questions and checking biases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For this study, the third

researcher who fulfilled the role of critical friend is an expert in life skills development through

youth sport. Using this researcher as a critical friend added to the trustworthiness of the data by

ensuring that the initial analysis was accurate and thorough. All six phases of the analysis were conducted to arrive at a final thematic structure to represent the data.

Phase One

Phase One of the thematic analysis process is the researchers familiarizing themselves with the data. This occurred while the data transcripts were checked by the primary investigator for accuracy and de-identified. Reading the transcripts as well as listening to the recordings of the data allowed for the primary investigator to become more familiar with the data beyond the experience and knowledge created from conducting the interviews. Phase One is an informal thought gathering process where the researcher already begins to gather thoughts about the meanings and patterns of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once this process was complete, the researchers continued on to Phase Two of the analysis where more formal coding began.

Phase Two

Phase Two of the thematic analysis process is the generating of the initial codes within the data. For this study, semantic analysis was initially used, meaning the researchers aimed to identify what was said by the participants and interpret what they said in the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This choice of semantic thematic analysis approach aligns well with the basic interpretive qualitative research design in that the purpose is to identify and explain the perspectives of the participants without analyzing the data using a specific theoretical framework for comparison (Merriam, 2002). During this initial coding process, both researchers looked to code as many potential patterns as possible using *In vivo* coding. *In vivo* coding allowed for the participants words to become the code tags as opposed to researcher selected names for the codes (Corbin, 2004; Saldaña, 2015). This aligns with the constructivist paradigm in that the participants further influenced the analysis process through providing their own words for the

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codes. Some segments of data were coded multiple times if the data fit within multiple potential theme patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After all focus group and individual follow-up interviews were initially coded, the researchers met to discuss the initial coding process and ensure that both researchers were arriving at similar coding decisions before moving on to Phase Three.

Phase Three

Phase Three of the thematic analysis encompasses searching for themes within the data. This was conducted using pattern coding by both researchers as a second cycle coding mechanism. For each individual *in vivo* code, a pattern code was used to begin to organize the data into larger themes. Pattern coding allowed for the researcher to decide a common label to use for important codes that started to tie different themes together (Saldaña, 2015). Once the pattern coding was completed, both sets of coding from the researchers were combined into a singular spreadsheet and sorted by code columns to arrange the codes in groups of similarity. After a discussion between both researchers about the pattern coding and data set, an initial theme breakdown was written in a separate document explaining themes, subthemes, and categories as well as their relationship to each other. Potential patterns that did not have enough data to be supported were collapsed into other categories or subthemes and similar groupings that were parallel were grouped together (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The primary investigator reviewed the codes fit within each theme and the overall theme list's representation of the data set. Phase Four was then conducted within the initial theme document.

Phase Four

Phase Four of the Thematic Analysis Process includes the reviewing and refinement of themes. As the primary investigator created the initial theme document, a concept map was

created using main themes, subthemes, and categories of the data. The pattern code names were often used for the theme names, and any larger groupings were named using discussions from both researchers and aimed to provide descriptions of the data. The definitions of the themes were also included within the document and include the subthemes and categories that fall under the larger category. After the initial themes and concept map were created, the third researcher was brought in to fulfill the role of a critical friend (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The third researcher had reviewed the data and theme documents before the meeting to help provide thoughtful revisions and questions to the first two researchers about the analysis. This researcher's expertise is in life skills development and transfer in youth sport provided a greatly beneficial perspective to the data. After the third reviewer provided further perspective on the analysis, revisions were made to both documents to the overall arrangement of themes and concept map and the formal naming and defining of themes took place in Phase Five.

Phase Five

Phase Five in the Thematic Analysis Process includes the defining and naming of the themes. This was accomplished through the additions of a two-page description of themes, their essence, and organization in a summary form. Once this summary description of the themes and data organization was completed by the primary investigator, it was sent for review to the other investigator who completed the full analysis as well as the critical friend. Any comments and suggestions given by the other investigator and critical friend were taken in to consideration as adjustments were made. Phase Six of the Thematic Analysis process is producing the report of the data using this summary, which follows in the results chapter.

Latent Analysis Process

During the process of Phase Six, producing the report, the researchers felt as though the latent approach to thematic analysis would be beneficial in providing a more articulate picture of the data and worked to organize the selected themes, subthemes, and categories in a way that demonstrated the deeper meaning of the participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This extra layer of analysis was necessary in fully representing the data set and providing useful knowledge of the interconnectedness of the themes, subthemes, and categories. This process was done through discussion of the first two researchers initially, and then with the inclusion of the critical friend to provide insight in the process. The production of the report was then adjusted to fit this additional layer of analysis with the creation of a new concept map and articulation of the data.

Using the Thematic Analysis Process, in both the semantic and latent approach, aligned with the constructivist ontology and epistemology of the study. The researchers were able to recognize their influence in the process as they made decisions about the data while also interacting with the participants' words and perspectives. This interpretation of the participants' sport system is recognized as being impacted by the participants' lens of the world as well as the researchers'. The inductive approach of the analysis process, including the *in vivo* coding, allowed for the interpretation to stem from the participants themselves, with the aid of the researchers' efforts. All phases of the analysis, including the report, which follows in the next chapter, demonstrates the interaction of the participants and researchers in constructing this interpretation of the participants' realities in high school sport.

In order to ensure trustworthiness of the data, the researcher implemented several means to maintain trustworthiness and rigor in the thematic analysis process. As suggested by Nowell

and colleagues (2017), the researcher had prolonged engagement with the data by reading and

checking the transcripts of all interviews while listening to the audio recordings, storing raw data

in a well-organized manor, and keeping records of all transcripts and field notes in phase one. In

phase two, the *in vivo* coding framework (Saldaña, 2015) was used while creating a clear trail of

the coding process as well as peer debriefing between the researcher team. Trustworthiness was

ensured in phase three and four by diagramming to make sense of theme connections and having

themes and subthemes vetted by research team members (Nowell et al., 2017). Phase five and

six included peer debriefing, description of the context of the data, and reporting on reasons for

theoretical and methodological choices.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine current student-athletes' perceptions of their entire high school sport ecology and life skills development and transfer through sport. The perspectives of the participants ($N = 46$) provided insight into their personal developmental experiences and the roles that relationships with others in their sport system play in that development. During the seven focus groups and eight individual follow-up interviews, the participants shared stories of their high school sport experiences and their thoughts on the people in their sport world, which were all coded during the semantic thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the organization process of the individual codes, latent analysis was used to identify four core themes in the data*: Life Skills, Resilient Development, Surface Development*, and *Optimal Development.* The latent process allowed the researchers to go beyond interpreting what the participants said and use knowledge of theory to organize the data in a way that demonstrates a deeper meaning of the semantic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, the further analysis provided the structure of the data in the form of a concept map, in an effort to acknowledge the interaction of some of the subthemes. This arrangement of the data is shown in Figure 2.

The first theme, *Life Skills*, represents what the student-athletes were developing. Six of the subthemes represent the most prevalent skills mentioned by the student-athletes as outcomes of their development. The other three themes in the data, *Resilient Development, Surface Development*, and *Optimal Development*, represent the levels of development and mechanisms with which the development occurs. As a result of the latent analysis process, these three themes reflect the investigative framework for the study, Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Model

(1977), and each theme includes two co-acting subthemes: one representing the nature of the

developmental experience and another representing the nature of the relationships influencing

the experiences. It is the arrangement of these two subthemes per theme in the reciprocal,

iterative connection that reflects the inseparable nature of the experiences and the system of the

learner that mirror Bronfenbrenner's notion of ecological systems and development. These

reciprocal subthemes of *Resilient Development* include *Learning Through Necessity* and *Limiting

Relationships*. In *Surface Development*, the reciprocal subthemes are *Growth Without Depth* and

Good Relationships. The reciprocal subthemes in *Optimal Development* include *Anchored
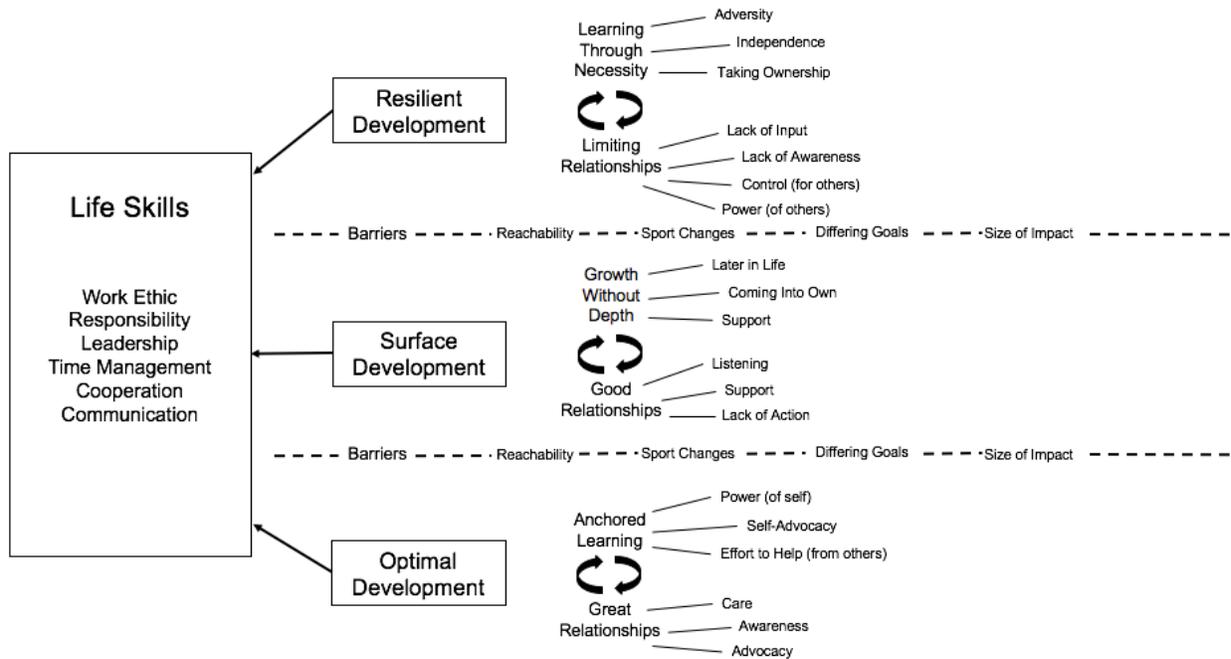
Learning* and *Great Relationships.*
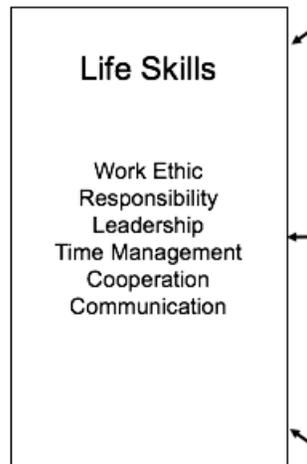

Figure 2. Results Concept Map.

Life Skills

The first theme revealed in the data is *Life Skills.* This theme has seven subthemes, encompassing the different *Life Skills* that were discussed by the participants when they were asked about their development through sport. The first six subthemes include *Work Ethic, Responsibility, Leadership, Time Management, Cooperation,* and *Communication* and represents the different life skills learned through sport participation. The seventh subtheme is *Barriers,* which shows up in multiple places within the concept map and represents the obstacles to life skills development. The *Life Skills* theme represents the outcomes of the development that the student-athletes discussed. When development was referenced within the data, these *Life Skills* are at the core of what the participants referred to in regard to their growth. Billy shared that although his main priority with sport is having fun, development of *Life Skills* is a part of the sport experience. He said,

> "…I look for friends, I look for memories and stuff, and that's kind of the primary focus, whenever I signed up for all of it. I kind of just want to enjoy it. I want to have a good time. I want to meet new people, but it's obviously not always like that. Because I mean being in a sport, you have to…; there are challenges along the way. You have to push yourself. You are going to be put in circumstances you don't necessarily expect to be put in. And it kind of just teaches you along the way, like um, how to develop a work ethic that will be useful in life or how to maybe, um, deal with some people that might be difficult to deal with at times and there really is a lot that comes with that. And it's not what you are initially expecting, but it's definitely stuff you learn along the way."

As the participants shared their sport experiences, they also opened up about the all of the skills they learned 'along the way', which created the *Life Skills* theme (*Figure 2.1*).

Work Ethic

The first subtheme of *Life Skills* is *Work Ethic. Work Ethic* was mentioned by the

participants as a transferable life skill that they used towards self-improvement in both

academics and athletics. Seeing their success after their effort led them to strive for more in

many areas of life. Austin mentions *Work Ethic* in conjunction with making him better in the

classroom and life by stating, "A lot of coaches talk about how you can use the skill you learn in

academics. And how important academics are for your after, life…work ethic can make you a

better student and then a better person after that." Work ethic was often mentioned by other

participants as leading to improvement in areas beyond sport and later in life as well.

Figure 2.1. Results Concept Map - Life Skills.

Responsibility

The second subtheme of *Life Skills* is *Responsibility*. This subtheme represents the participants' needs for being prepared and managing priorities to maintain success as student-athletes. Julie shared that being responsible in all areas of life is what being a student-athlete means to her. She said,

"For me being a student-athlete means taking on the responsibilities like in the classroom and out of the classroom as well and also being a leader in both of those situations. And also just putting obviously like school first before your sports, because that's more important to me I feel is school and getting your work done than just practices and going to games."

Getting work done and meeting expectations for sport participation often were discussed in relation to demonstrating *Responsibility* as a student-athlete.

Leadership

The third subtheme of *Life Skills* is *Leadership.* Perhaps due to the nature of the participants' positions on the advisory councils and their high caliber as student-athletes, the skill of *Leadership* was developed by occupying positions of authority or regard amongst their peers. Whether this position was given by others or through the selection process of the state association, multiple participants discussed their *Leadership* roles and development. Garrett said, "Like if your coach makes you captain or you're like an upper classman on your team, you're put in a position by others, but you really do learn skills on your own like how to be a leader." The *Leadership* skills often came with fulfilling certain expectations of what it means to be a captain or a member of the council and were influenced by others encouraging or restricting the practicing of *Leadership*.

Time Management

The fourth subtheme of *Life Skills* is *Time Management.* This subtheme was one of the most often mentioned *Life Skills* by the participants. Not only did they discuss juggling the demands of participating in sport, like practice schedules, games, and workouts, but the other areas of life adding to their list of responsibilities as well. This especially included school and homework requirements, and other clubs or activities outside of school. Billy, a senior, explains how using time management was vital to making it through his long days:

"It is a lot of time management. So like I know I'm usually busy from 8AM until 10:30 PM every single night and you really learn some valuable skills about time management because you have to juggle, like she said you have homework, and um practice, school, all that stuff, extracurriculars. So, it's about a lot of leadership and stuff, but time management is big."

Specifically, for this group of student-athletes, their participation in the advisory councils for their state associations was an added time demand on their weekend schedules. The participants expressed that learning *Time Management* was vital in their success as a student-athlete.

Cooperation

The fifth subtheme of *Life Skills* is *Cooperation. Cooperation* was discussed by the participants as a useful life skill in multiple arenas of their lives due to the consistent need for accomplishing tasks with other people. Specifically, the transferability of working with a team to working with others in a classroom setting or work-related setting was commonly mentioned. For example, Pamela said *Cooperation* for her meant:

"…learning how to deal with different people, um, and still trying to get along with them. Like, on the court or something like I get to know, ya know, get a common goal, and

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understand what we want to achieve and then kind of set aside our differences. Um,

which really helps in the classroom because when you are elaborating on projects and

stuff it's just easier because I've like done it all my life."

Learning *Cooperation* through sport allowed the student-athletes to problem solve in a way that

takes consideration of other people, which many participants already began to use in their current

lives outside of sport.

Communication

The sixth subtheme of *Life Skills* is *Communication.* Not only was it important for the

participants to communicate well with coaches and teammates for their sport performance, but

also being able to communicate with others in and out of their sport system about their schedule

and needs allowed them to be more successful in navigating life as a student-athlete. Macy said

that she learned *Communication* through sport, but also that without it she would struggle:

"I think being a student-athlete it shows you how to manage time and communicate with

people because if you don't communicate with your busy schedule to your parents and

your coaches or to anybody or to even your friends and your boyfriend or girlfriend like

your worlds going to be a mess."

Communication was mentioned as a tool for building and maintaining many of the relationships

within their sport world at every level of their system. This life skill was discussed in ways that

extended beyond the current sport experience into their life outside of sport now and later on.

Each of these *Life Skills* were a result of different types of development demonstrated by

the participants in their sport world. Development, however, is a complicated process that is

informed by not only the direct experiences of the student-athletes, but the relationships with

others that shape those experiences as well. Although the participants had a wide range of

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personal stories, each student-athlete's experience elicited some level of development of *Life Skills* in different ways and to different degrees.

Barriers

A final subtheme of the *Life Skills* theme is *Barriers*. This represents the obstacles that the participants discussed as impeding in their relationships and thus development. This subtheme includes four categories: *Reachability*, *Sport Changes*, *Differing Goals*, and *Size of Impact*. Although this subtheme is a piece of the *Life Skills* theme due to its connection to the development of the skills themselves, it is more appropriate to address this subtheme in accordance with where it fits within the conceptual mapping of the data. Thus, it will be described in the spaces distinguishing the difference between *Resilient Development* and *Surface Development* and again between *Surface Development* and *Optimal Development*.

The latent approach to thematic analysis led to discovering the cyclical connection between the experiences and the relationships that produced different types of development for the participants. Matching the theoretical framework of the investigation, Bronfenbrenner's (1977; 1993) Bio-Ecological Model, the development of the *Life Skills* through different experiences shared by the participants could not be separated from the people that interact within the sport context. Aligning with this interaction of the sport context and development, themes were revealed to be comprised of two co-acting entities: the developmental experience and types of relationships with others. These two elements of the themes were clearly separate subthemes in their own right, but interacted with the other reciprocally to create the theme. Specifically, the developmental experiences that aided in the learning of *Life Skills* were created, enhanced, or inhibited by the student-athlete's relationships in their sport system. Similarly, the relationships that the student-athletes participated in were enhanced or limited by the other peoples' assistance

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in the developmental experiences. Thus, three more themes comprised of these reciprocal connections, representing different types of development, were discovered in the data: *Resilient Development*, *Surface Development*, and *Optimal Development*.

Resilient Development

The second theme discovered in the data was *Resilient Development*. This theme is comprised of two co-acting subthemes that represent the interconnectedness of developmental experiences and relationships with others: *Learning Through Necessity* and *Limiting Relationships*. In the *Resilient Development* theme, participants' development occurred through experiences that required the student-athlete to utilize *Life Skills* whether they were prepared to or not, usually influenced by some negative relationship with others in their sport system. *Life Skills* were developed in this theme in spite of obstacles placed in the way of the participants due to the student-athletes navigating the negative situations with little to no guidance. Overcoming these challenges meant that the participants often learned *Life Skills* out of necessity, as their relationships with others were unhelpful or even limiting development in their own right. Becky discussed a time when her coach was unhelpful to her in navigating personal struggles. She said, "When I told my coach I was going through a tough time, she told me that it was selfish to focus on my own problems {Gasps from group} and that there was a team that needed me." Not only did Becky have to overcome her original personal tough times, but she had to learn to navigate the added challenge of the unsupportive coach. These challenges also influenced the quality of relationships with others that the participants have in sport. At another point, Becky expressed unfavorable perspectives of her coach by saying,

"She is the worst. The literal worst. But like, then like you talk to your teammates and like we all get our support for our mental and physical well-being from our teammates. We get none of it from our coach…"

This interaction between the two subthemes created a reciprocal relationship that produces *Resilient Development*. This type of development is pictured in Figure 2.2.

Learning Through Necessity

The subtheme within *Resilient Development* representing the developmental experiences is *Learning Through Necessity*. This subtheme denotes the developmental experiences shared by the participants that required the student-athlete to develop *Life Skills* to overcome obstacles. Although the participants did attribute some of their *Life Skills* development to these experiences, they typically did not have much guidance in navigating their development or their development was rooted in potentially difficult experiences. Becky explained that she had this type of developmental experience by having to navigate difficult coaches without much guidance,

"I would say that they (parents) have helped me for like after sport life just because they let me deal with stuff on my own, and they won't deal with stuff for me. And like they'll let me vent and stuff, but when it comes down to it they expect me to handle things on my own and that's like probably prepared me most. Like with dealing with a bad coach like they refused… But like they won't do that because they expect me to do things on my own. They expect me to be a responsible almost adult person, and like to handle my own stuff."
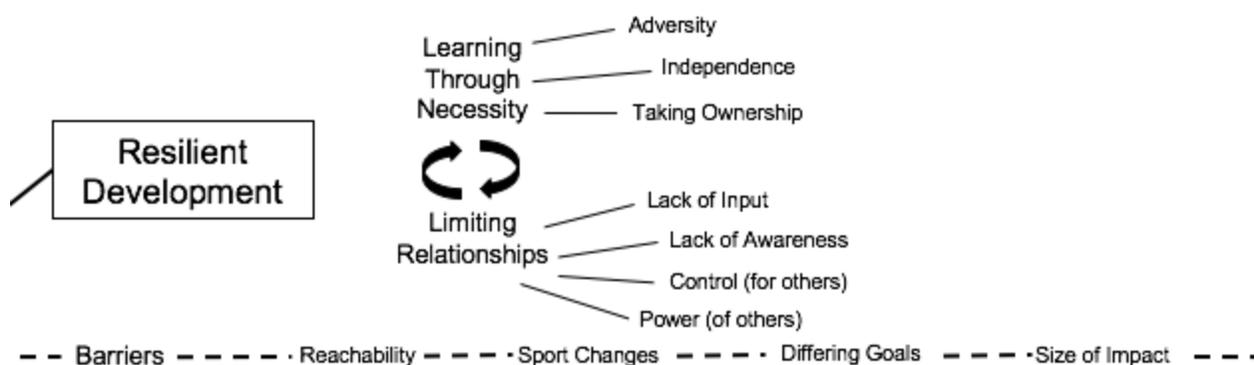
Figure 2.2. Results Concept Map – Resilient Development.

The benefit of these experiences, and the lack of desirability of them, was discussed by Jessica as well,

> "I feel like having a bad experience helps you grow as a better person too. Like I have yet to have that bad of an experience, thank you, but I feel like it would help me grow if I did, but I also don't want it, because I don't know if I'm tough enough to handle it. Like if a coach was that mean to me, my mom would be in there 'momma bearing' it for sure. I don't think I could be as tough as you Becky, like I give you props for that, all the way."

Many of the participants acknowledged that *Learning Through Necessity* did help them develop *Life Skills,* but they would not purposefully have the negative developmental experiences by choice. This *Learning Through Necessity* subtheme is characterized by three different categories in the data: *Adversity*, *Independence*, and *Taking Ownership*.

Adversity. The first category in the *Learning Through Necessity* subtheme of *Resilient Development* is *Adversity*. When discussing their sport experience, participants commonly gave examples of *Adversity* that they had to overcome. This category encompasses the trials and challenges that the student-athletes faced within their sport experience. The *Adversity* stemmed

from many different avenues, however it was usually created or exacerbated by another person in their sport system. These challenges that the student-athletes credited with sparking the development of *Life Skills* were not taken on by choice. One participant, Ross, mentioned this adversity coming from his peers,

"…like as a freshman when you have seniors beating down on you, you also can learn how to like handle them so you also gain life skills from that...I feel like you get different life skills no matter what like happens. So even if people are beating down on you, like you still get like life skills out of that because you like figure out how to handle people like that..."

Using these moments of *Adversity* to their advantage allowed for the participants to value their growth and development, but no participants mentioned gaining different *Life Skills* from the negative experiences than the positive experiences in sport. The development from the *Adversity* was not to the depth of those with positive experiences.

Independence. The second category of the *Learning Through Necessity* subtheme of *Resilient Development* is *Independence.* This category refers to the student-athletes learning *Life Skills* with little or no help from other people. While the student-athletes valued the space to learn on their own in some cases, often the *Independence* required the participants to develop in ways that they may not have been ready to do or wanted. Billy, a senior, shared his story of struggling through his parents' divorce and being given control over his sport and extracurricular experiences from a young age. He explained, "I kind of feel like I missed out on childhood a little bit. Just because I had, I had to be independent kind of from the start…But, I definitely feel like I am more prepared for adulthood now." Billy, like the others, valued some *Independence* to allow him to learn *Life Skills* in his own way, but recognized that this freedom may have forced

him to develop this maturity or resiliency in response to unforeseen adversity, rather than through the guidance of a caring adult.

   Taking Ownership. The third category of the *Learning Through Necessity* subtheme of *Resilient Development* is *Taking Ownership.* This category encompasses the student-athletes accepting their own role in shaping their sport experiences and development. Although some negative situations could not be changed, the participants recognized their ability to take control of parts of the outcome. Jessie, who experienced a lot of adversity with her coach, says she took control of how she recovered from the situation stating, "I'm definitely more strong, more confident. I feel like I am playing better now. Um, I feel like I am swinging harder…I definitely feel like a whole new person just after that. Just because it was so, it was so, so, so damaging. So, I kind of had to rebuild myself back up." Her *Taking Ownership* of rebuilding herself after the adversity contributed to her development, much like the other participants who shared experiences that contributed to *Learning Through Necessity*.

Limiting Relationships

   The subtheme within *Resilient Development* that represents the nature of the relationships is *Limiting Relationships*. This subtheme denotes the relationships of the student-athletes that actively hindered the development of *Life Skills* for the student-athletes, and typically played large roles in negative sport experiences. The participants discussed physical, emotional, and social aspects of their well-being that the *Limiting Relationships* would create obstacles for because the focus on development included the entire well-being of the participants. Often this hindering of their development overlapped more than one of these aspects of well-being. For example, Jessica shared her experience with a track coach that was a *Limiting Relationship* in her life:

"When I broke my foot my freshman year, and I was coming in as a freshman with a decent height for pole vault to start, she (coach) was like mad that I missed a good part of the season and she was making me work out with a boot on my foot. So, I was doing anything and everything that I could do to stay off my left foot and like I was probably doing stuff I shouldn't have been doing because I wanted to do it and I wanted to make her happy as a freshman so that way I would get the varsity spot and show I was dedicated no matter what. And like I purposely made doctor's appointments on like Saturday evenings so I wouldn't miss any practice and I'd like go along with her schedule and like my schedule revolved around her. Which was kind of hard but I had to make it work, and like I guess it paid off in the long run."

Her coach impacted Jessica's physical well-being by having her practice through the injury, to which Jessica even thinks she did things that were potentially harmful for her healing. This coach also was hindering Jessica's emotional well-being by creating an environment in which Jessica felt she had to go against protecting her physical health in order to get the spot she wanted on the team by playing by the coach's rules. Jessica's social well-being was impacted through her having to use Saturdays for doctor's appointments or the competitive environment to make the varsity team. Stories like Jessica's indicated negative relationships that would create or amplify *Learning Through Necessity* experiences and thus *Resilient Development*. This subtheme of *Limiting Relationships* was characterized by four categories: *Lack of Input*, *Lack of Awareness*, *Control (of others)*, and *Power (of others)*.

Lack of Input. The first category of the *Limiting Relationships* subtheme is *Lack of Input*. This category is representative of the participants' perceptions that their voice was not heard within any given relationship. In fact, the participants expressed that this *Lack of Input* of

their voice in *Limit Relationships* countered what they knew about high school sport: they were the ones participating in it, not the other people in the relationships. Instances of others making decisions or setting rules without getting the input of the student-athletes created some tension. Brett described his school board making decisions about sport opportunities for his town without getting the student-athletes input and its impact on his *Relationships*:

> "Our school co-ops with another school because we're both like really small towns. So, we didn't have enough kids for two teams or whatever, and this other school didn't have a lot of money so like they co-opped so we could share money or whatever. And we signed the co-op for like 2 years and then it was time to renew it, we renewed it, we did it for another year. And just as our softball girls won the state championship they decided to cancel the co-op. And it's all one sided, it's their school because they wanted full control. Like all the money, they wanted. They do all the practices. They didn't even care about what the students want. Like the softball girls were crying during the state championship, which they like they should've been focused on them. So they didn't ask us for our opinion. I don't understand why, like we've made a bunch of good friends being with two schools, and I don't understand why they don't ask us for our input. It's just all the school board who makes all the decisions I think. We should definitely have a say in it; like we're the ones playing the sports."

Being left out of the decision-making process left Brett confused and contributed to a *Limiting Relationship* with the others in his school whose voices were heard, such as those on the school board or perhaps his Athletic Director. In this case, the decision to end the co-op without the input of the student-athletes changed their opportunities to participate entirely. Having a *Lack of Input* in the relationships was generally not viewed favorably by the participants.

Lack of Awareness. The second category of the *Limiting Relationships* subtheme is *Lack of Awareness*. This category demonstrates the participants' perceptions that certain people in their sport world do not fully understand who they are and what it means to be a student-athlete today. The demands of being a student-athlete was commonly mentioned as part of their lives that those in *Limiting Relationships* were unaware of. Giuseppe said, "It's just sometimes like they don't understand that being a student-athlete we have other obligations. Like the other day I had four hours of homework for one class." Technology was also mentioned as having changed the participants' world in a way that others did not fully understand. Greg even said,

> "Like maybe somebody is getting bullied online and they just, they don't really
> understand because when they grew up and they played sports they never had that
> situation before but now like kids may be affected by that."

This *Lack of Awareness* contributed to other people either unintentionally creating obstacles for the student-athletes or failing to address already present obstacles in the student-athletes' sport worlds. Failing to address present struggles with the student-athletes meant missing opportunities to aid in their development of *Life Skills* and fostered *Limiting Relationships* with the student-athletes.

Control (for others). The third category of the *Limiting Relationships* subtheme is *Control (for others)*. This category includes other peoples' ability to make decisions that shaped the participants' sport experience without the input of the student-athletes meant imposing their values and beliefs on the participants. *Control* showed up in Becky's relationship with her Athletic Director and his manipulation of their funds and practice facilities. She shared this saying,

"…We have an interim Athletic Director who is the basketball coach at our school and he gives all the funds to the basketball team. He redid the basketball courts and messed up our volleyball nets so we couldn't practice for a week. And then when it came to soccer season we had an issue with the head of the one of the tournaments we were doing and he made us drop out without even asking us our opinion. Like he didn't talk to the players; He didn't talk to the coaches; Didn't talk to the parents. He just did it because he decided what was best."

Rachel also discussed the *Control* of her peers and said,

"This year I was a captain for field hockey and I was the only junior and all the seniors were captains too. So, sometimes they wouldn't let me have a say because like I'm younger and that's when the seniority comes into play because I always told myself when I'm a senior I'm not going to do that because I feel like that's rude and it just makes the younger kids feel like not that good about themselves. So, like definitely feeling loss of control due to age is definitely common in high school sports."

Becky's Athletic Director imposed his own beliefs about what was best on her team, which changed her opportunities to participate. Rachel's peers demonstrated that the *Control* of others has the potential to shape the self-esteem of the student-athletes. Experiences like these from the participants contributed to *Limiting Relationships* in their sport experience and *Learning Through Necessity* in the form of taking away opportunities to practice their *Self-Advocacy, Leadership*, and *Communication* skills.

Power (of others). The fourth category of the *Limiting Relationships* subtheme is *Power (of others)*. Although power is present in some capacity in all relationships that the student-athletes participate in, the *Power (of others)* category in *Limiting Relationships* includes when

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the others in the relationship exercise their *Power* over the student-athletes in a manner that does not promote their well-being and development of *Life Skills* and may even eliminate the *Power* of the student-athletes. Scott discussed his experience with a coach exercising *Power* over his team and said,

> "Our old coach from a couple years ago, he asked all of his players to write down something that they think the team should do and what like they can do better, put them all in a barrel and burned them and said, 'This is my team and I'll run it how I want to.'"

Scott acknowledged that he knew this action by the coach fueled the coach's *Power* and took away the athletes' by saying, "So I think that would be something that drops some powerless on the players." In other cases, schools or Athletic Directors exercised their *Power* over student-athletes through who they allowed to participate under certain circumstances. As the participants in a focus group shared the story of a student-athlete who played basketball attempting to transfer schools, Austin mentioned the role of the student-athlete's Athletic Director by stating, "…the school he transferred from, the AD refused to sign his papers to let him play as a way to get back at him from like transferring away from the school." The participants recognized that this use of *Power* was inhibiting that particular student-athlete from further development. When asked about the potential of challenging that *Power* through challenging the rules, Austin also said,

> "…there's like smaller rules that I feel like could be challenged for like a legitimate reason, but if it's like a big rule like a transfer rule or something like that, then I feel like it couldn't be really changed."

Similar stories of the *Power* of others over the student-athletes' participation opportunities and possibilities for development were mentioned throughout the interviews. Typically, these instances were associated with *Limiting Relationships*.

Barriers

A subtheme present in the *Life Skills* theme, and located between *Resilient Development* and *Surface Development*, is *Barriers*. This subtheme represents the challenges that the participants discussed as potentially prohibiting the developmental experiences and relationships in the *Resilient Development* level from entering in to the *Surface Development* level. An example of the *Barriers* subtheme acting as the upper limit of *Resilient Development* is Zach's story of his baseball coach. He said,

> "…he (coach) has been the baseball coach for over 30 some 40 some years. He has like over 500 wins. And like that's very respectful or respectable, but he's one of the biggest traditionalists I know. And they always talk about how every sport you play is changing as time goes on. Any, like I don't think you can look at any sport and look 50 years ago and it's played the same besides like rules and stuff you know….he never changed what he wanted us to do like on certain plays from 50 years ago when… he's just a traditionalist, and that's why I always look forward, I play summer baseball…I don't have to worry about if I'm doing this how he wants it, instead of just playing the game."

Zach's worry because of his coach's lack of flexibility in adapting with the changes of sport is just one example of a potential hindrance in Zach's possible level of development. Altogether, the *Barriers* subtheme is comprised of four categories: *Reachability, Sport Changes, Differing Goals,* and *Size of Impact.* Although the *Barriers* subtheme and its four categories are not exclusive to the influence it has on the *Resilient Development* theme, the presence of the *Barriers*

is notable and showed up distinctly in the difference between *Resilient Development* and *Surface Development*.

Reachability. The first category of the *Barriers* subtheme is *Reachability*. This category represents the difficulty of those in relationships with the student-athletes to have access to direct contact or influence in the participants' world. Especially for those in the outer layers of the high school sport ecology, like the state association, the participants recognized that it can be difficult for them to engage with many student-athletes. Some of this realization may be due to the elevated positions of the participants with their roles on the advisory councils, but their insight was common amongst nearly all of those in the interviews. For example, Jackson stated,

"We have so many students in the state that it's tough for you know just one type of thing to happen like the [state association] just to reach out to every kid it's tough. I totally understand we're all different, we all have different backgrounds and everything, so it's definitely tough to like as a whole to do."

This reachability was discussed by Macy when she commented that her peers may perceive a *Limiting Relationship* with the state association because they were unable to connect directly with the administrators and gain understanding of how it operates. She said,

"I think my experience is a lot different than other people… I'm in this program where I get to see again the opposite side, the inner workings of it… I feel like I get that a lot in my friends like, 'Oh, that's a stupid rule.' 'Well do you want to know why the rules in place?' And they'll be like, 'No I don't care'. 'Okay then I can't help you.' {Laughs}... So, I feel like being connected with the [state association] has given me like a leg up to realize why all these things are in place and try to help my more uneducated peers learn that, 'Hey, listen. I know this sucks, but this is why we have to do this or this is why

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you're getting red carded right now because we don't want to hurt another kid, okay? So,

you can relax'"

The *Reachability* of the state association to the student-athletes created a *Barrier* to their

relationships and experiences that influence their development. Creating personal connections

may not be possible for some relationships if they student-athletes have limited to no contact

with these other people that are shaping their sport experience. Even beyond personal

connections, the goals and missions of these people may not be reaching the student-athletes in

the ways that they are intended. For some *Limiting Relationships*, *Reachability* was the obstacle

in reaching *Surface Development*.

Sport Changes. The second category of the *Barriers* subtheme is *Sport Changes.* This

category represents the notion that those who participate in high school sport currently are

having some different experience than those who participated during a different time period.

The participants often acknowledged that the people they interact with in sport most likely had

their own previous experiences with participating in a different sport era, with different

experiences and social norms. However, the participants were quick to challenge that the

previous experiences of the others were as useful as they sound. In a charge to the adults in his

sport world to be more cognizant of these *Sport Changes*, Greg said,

"I guess they've all have been kids before. Mostly all the coaches have played sports

before, but it's a new generation, things have changed. So, be like more open minded to

different things and be more considerate of things or situations that you're going in."

This recognition of the difference in high school sport high school sport as it is experience now

compared to the cultural experience of high school sport when adults were participating was

echoed by Joe. He said,

"What would they know about the student-athlete these days? What do we do now that

makes us athletes as students are much different than what they probably went through

back in the day, whenever that day may have been."

The *Sport Changes* themselves were not necessarily the main problem to the student-athletes

however. The *Barriers* were created when the other person in the *Limiting Relationships* did not

recognize that sport had changed or was not willing to adjust to the change. This barrier kept

many relationships, both in direct contact with the participant and higher in the sport system,

from reaching *Surface Development.*

Differing Goals. The third category of the *Barriers* subtheme is *Differing Goals*. This

category encompassed the tension between people shaping the sport system and the student-

athletes when their desired purpose of sport participation was clashed. Kenzie described how

this barrier showed up in her sport experience by how her coach was evaluated by her teammates

and an Athletic Director. She said,

"So, for the past few years we have been losing a lot of games. And my freshman year we

only won one game. My sophomore year we won two games. My junior we won five

games. So that shows a lot where we weren't doing a very successful season, but the

majority of everyone thought we were all growing as a team and as individuals in our

skating abilities. And just how we want to play the game. But then people from [other

school] who are putting in the most money for a host school, I would say they thought of

our coach differently in terms of the money aspect. And especially the Athletic Director,

he just was very harsh on our coach saying that he was a bad coach and he wasn't

improving us well. But, he didn't get to see what we saw in practice or he didn't talk to

the players and hear from the parents what they hear from them after the practices and

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games. Where we got to see him in a different light and a different aspect. Where they

were thinking of money and we were thinking of just how he treats us."

Unfortunately, this example was not the only instance of the student-athletes having different

priorities than those that shaped their sport experience. When the others had *Differing Goals*

than the student-athletes for high school sport, the participants did not share deep developmental

experiences with those other people. Often times, the shared experiences were negative in nature

and the *Differing Goals* caused enough tension that the participants' development was maxed out

at *Resilient Development*.

Size of Impact. The fourth category of the *Barriers* subtheme is *Size of Impact*. This

category represents the student-athletes' perceptions of their own ability and the ability of others

to impact their relationships and sport system. *Size of Impact* was most often mentioned when

the participants discussed their relationships with those at the state association, but was also

present in other areas as well. As far as the student-athletes' potential impact, Joe mentioned that

while the participants can contribute in some way to the state association, there is more room to

increase the *Size of Impact* for the student-athletes. He said,

> "With us, obviously we can't control everything to do with the [state association] because
>
> we're not, we're not technically working for them. Obviously, we can make some small
>
> decisions, but I believe that if the student-athletes, not just the ADs, could have a say in
>
> what policies or rules the [state association] makes, I believe that it could make a massive
>
> difference or at least like a captain."

This concern for the impact went beyond just the student-athletes. Greg discussed his belief that

the *Size of Impact* of the others in his sport world would better greater if the interaction between

people was aligned with similar goals. Specifically mentioning *Differing Goals*, Greg stated,

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"If they (others in high school sport besides student-athletes) were to all like come

together and focus on like one thing at a time or achieve one thing at a time, I feel like it'd

be a lot more efficient because one person might be trying to achieve the same thing, but

be doing it a different way. It may be a less efficient way. But if they would all come

together and agree on something, and agree on a goal and agree on a way to achieve a

goal, then I feel like it'd be a lot more efficient."

By working to increase the *Size of Impact* of all people within the high school sport system, the

student-athletes perceived that the people in their system would be more likely to foster positive

sport experiences and deeper levels of development.

Surface Development

The third theme revealed within the data is *Surface Development*. This theme's two co-

acting subthemes that represent the developmental experiences and the relationships with others

are *Growth Without Depth* and *Good Relationships*. In the *Surface Development* theme, the

participants' development occurred through positive experiences in sport and some level of

encouragement from favorable relationships with other people, but the development was not

anchored in meaningful practice of the *Life Skills*. This theme encompasses the experiences

where *Life Skills* may have been treated as valuable in sport or later in the lives of the student-

athletes, but aiding in the development of those *Life Skills* was not the primary focus of the other

people within the sport system. As a secondary result of positive experiences, *Life Skills* were

developed through surface-level experiences and with some support, but little intentional

guidance of others, however the depth of the development is not optimal. Giuseppe explained

this *Surface Development* when he shared about his volleyball team and learning *Responsibility*.

He said,

"…it was just like brought up once, maybe towards the beginning of the season along

with like whenever else we said. I can't remember it now like the only reason why I'm

honestly remembering it is because we had like a little talent show thing and like I filled a

question out for my assistant coach and that was one of her questions. Definitely the

reason why I remember it, but it is like we went over our expectations at the beginning of

the season. We do that for every sport so…"

After going over the expectations for the team at the beginning of the season and the *Life Skills*

that were important to the team and coaches, the focus of the season did not remain on

developing the *Responsibility* of the student-athletes. The lack of depth is evident in Giuseppe

willingly saying that he only even remembers that it was discussed was because of a talent show

and questionnaire for his assistant coach. In many experiences like this, the participants

discussed learning *Life Skills* and understanding their importance without pinpointing any

explicit training from those with whom they have *Good Relationships*. This interaction between

the two subthemes created the reciprocal relationship that produces *Surface Development*. This

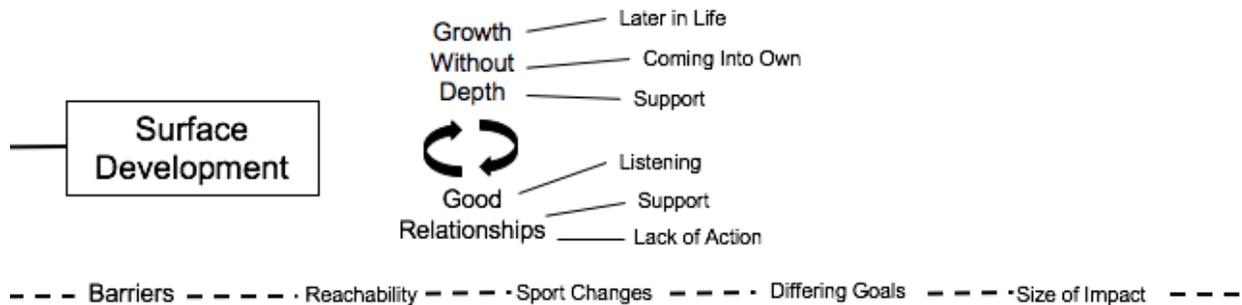type of development is pictured in Figure 2.3.

Figure 2.3. Results Concept Map – Surface Development.

Growth Without Depth

The subtheme within *Surface Development* representing the nature of the developmental experiences is *Growth Without Depth.* This subtheme denotes the developmental experiences of the participants where *Life Skills* development was supported and perhaps encouraged in a positive manner, but not necessarily rooted in any particular practice of the skills or guidance in the learning process. The participants discussed the same *Life Skills* as outcomes of the *Growth Without Depth* experiences, however the intentional facilitation of development was not the focus for the other people influencing these experiences. An example of a *Growth Without Depth* experience would be Julie's perspective on developing *Life Skills*. She said,

"My school co-ops as well for sports. And going into my freshman year I think uh that has really helped me get to know other people, I get to almost make new friendships, we were like in junior high we were like rivals and going into high school sports that was kind of rough... {laughs}but once we actually got to know each other, we started to play better of course, and now like going into senior year we, my grade, we all know each other very well and we're all really good friends. And so I don't know, I think that will help me later in life too as I like get a new job somewhere and I have to make friends with coworkers, and I don't know, that and just communicating with them."

Julie's sport participation taught her *Life Skills* such as *Cooperation* and *Communication*, but she did not attribute her development to any particular experience that was intentionally guided by others for her to develop *Life Skills*. Other participants shared similar experiences to Julie that were included in the *Growth Without Depth* subtheme of *Surface Development.* The *Growth Without Depth* subtheme is comprised of three categories: *Later in Life, Coming Into Own,* and *Support.*

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Later in Life. The first category of the *Growth Without Depth* subtheme of *Surface Development* is *Later in Life*. This category represents the idea that although the *Life Skills* were supported in the participants' current standing as student-athletes, the focus of the development was for use after sport and high school. This connection, often explicit, helped the participants identify ways that the *Life Skills* would be useful to them in their future, but typically failed to aid them in the development of the skills in the current moment. This *Later in Life* category did not provide a way for the participants to root their *Life Skills* in a deeper experience even though it may have been encouraging to the student-athletes. Michelle mentioned that her dad demonstrated this *Later in Life* category and stated, "He just tells me that everything you do, you can end up using as you get older. Say you're a captain of your team, you're going to be able to use that in life when you're a head of a group in your workplace." These types of occurrences usually were not accompanied with opportunities for the participants to be guided in practicing the *Life Skills* beyond a discussion, providing a *Growth Without Depth* developmental experience.

Coming Into Own. The second category of the *Growth Without Depth* subtheme is *Coming Into Own*. This category encompasses the belief represented in the data that the participants would develop *Life Skills* as they aged and matured on their own. The participants sometimes mentioned that they or others saw development of *Life Skills* as a normal expectation or an occurrence that just seemed to happen without intentional practice. The development of these *Life Skills* by the student-athletes may have been viewed as positive and even essential by those in the sport system, but was not taught or practiced. One senior, Giuseppe, explained that his coach, and thus himself as well, viewed development as something that occurred with age,

"I would say you get it with age, but I know on my volleyball team that was one of the like important things that she'd (coach) say um so yeah. It's as you get older. I just turned 18, like I'm no longer a kid. Like I don't know just you're going to college soon you've gotta be independent and responsible. I think most kids will figure it out."

Giuseppe saw his development of *Responsibility* as a necessity, and thought coming into his own at age 18 would bring him the skills that he needed for college, which was supported by the views of his coach. This positive view of development still provided the favored perceptions of developmental experiences without creating active participation from the student-athletes or the others in the sport system.

Support. The third category of the *Growth Without Depth* subtheme is *Support.* This category represents other people in the participants' sport system functionally aiding the student-athletes' sport experience of providing encouragement along the way. Often times, this support was facilitated through other people performing tasks for the student-athletes to ease the struggles of their experiences. T, a senior participant, explained how her parents and peers support her in her sport experience and growth,

"…ever since I was younger my parents bring me to all my games, come to all my games, support me, after games making sure I'm eating right, making sure that I'm doing the off-season stuff. And your friends too, they're coming to support you and it really helps like if you're having a bad game and you see your friends and your family cheering for you in the stands."

This support of these two groups of other people in her sport world demonstrate their desire to create a positive experience for T, and their effort being spent in using their own *Life Skills* to make her experience run smoothly. This *Support* category aligns with the promotion of positive

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developmental experiences; however, it does not provide the deepest internalization of *Life Skills* for the student-athletes and thus, produces *Growth Without Depth*.

Good Relationships

The subtheme within *Surface Development* representing the nature of the relationships is *Good Relationships*. This subtheme denotes the relationships that the student-athletes had that were viewed favorably by the participants, encouraged positive experiences and development of the student-athletes, but did not facilitate meaningful learning experiences for the participants to engage in *Life Skills* development. Greg provided an example of a *Good Relationship* with one of his coaches who was open to hearing what Greg had to say, but did not follow through with taking action in assisting him in developing further *Communication* skills. Greg said,

> "Like so I say to my coach, 'Yeah, I mean I just feel like we haven't been connecting
>
> lately,' or whatever, something like that, and he says, 'Alright, well we'll try to work on
>
> it.' And then that's it. Like he might say something else the next couple practices but
>
> that's it."

Many of the relationships discussed by the participants mirrored this comment by Greg. Although they were positive relationships in nature, they fell short of fostering deeper development. This *Good Relationships* subtheme is characterized by three categories: *Listening*, *Support*, and *Lack of Action*.

Listening. The first category of the *Good Relationships* subtheme is *Listening*. This category encompassed the experiences and the value that the participants placed on being heard and asked their opinions. While there may have been a lack of follow-up taken based on what the student-athletes said, the act of *Listening* was a clear characteristic of *Good Relationships* that added to their favorability. Especially at the more distant levels of their ecology, having

others listen to their thoughts on their sport experience added to the *Good Relationships*. Molly discussed her appreciation for being listened to at the state association level by stating,

> "…I don't think our opinions are like super, super weighted in the [state association], but it's nice for them just to like hear what we have to say too so they're not just going in blind and then ruining a bunch of sports careers or that kind of thing."

Being heard in some capacity added to the participants appreciative perceptions of the *Good Relationships*. As Molly mentioned, although she felt listened to, the impact of their voices may not have been enough to stir any changes in their sport world.

      Support. The second category of the *Good Relationships* subtheme is *Support*. This category represents the others in the participants' sport world aiming to help the student-athletes succeed in their overall sport experience. This *Support* ranged from aiding in logistics of maintaining their schedules to pushing the participants to improve as athletes. By offering encouragement or helping eliminate stressors, the supportiveness was beneficial to the participants in creating an enjoyable sport experience. Jackson, a senior participant, talked about this *Support* by saying,

> "…I think your parents, or the coaches, whatever, they want to see you succeed at the same time so they kind of push you out there to make you do a little bit better. If it's doing a couple more drills every day than the rest or something like that, I think it's involves the coaches, parents, and individuals playing that sport."

Supporting student-athlete success certainly contributed to the quality of the *Good Relationships*, but did not quite reach the level of depth of those in *Great Relationships*. Often, *Support* in the *Good Relationships* meant favoring the participant's success as a student-athlete over their development of *Life Skills* through facilitating *Anchored Learning* experiences.

Lack of Action. The third category of the *Good Relationships* subtheme is *Lack of Action.* Especially when it came to the development of *Life Skills* of the participants that engaged in *Good Relationships*, there was a *Lack of Action* in creating meaningful experiences intentionally designed to foster the development of those skills. This category encompassed the experiences of the participants that showed relationships where the other people may have been viewed favorably and provided positive sport experiences without demonstrating effort to create deeper learning of *Life Skills*. This was described by Billy as he discussed the others in his world as his development as a whole person not necessarily being at the forefront of their thoughts:

> "I think it's definitely a thought in the back of all their heads. That they think about, um, but I don't think, I haven't seen that as like the primary objective in my life, I guess, with my experience. Even my parents now-a-days, it's just kind of, they expect me to get everything right, they expect me to know everything already, so I don't really see them working on the developing anymore."

Without intentional training, Billy feels a *Lack of Action* by the others around him at developing him further. Those who did not actively work to continue promoting the participants' development, but still provided positive experiences for the student-athletes were considered *Good Relationships*.

Barriers

A subtheme present in *Life Skills*, and placed between *Surface Development* and *Optimal Development*, is *Barriers.* This category still represents the challenges that the participants discussed as potentially limiting the developmental experiences and relationships with others, however *Barriers* in this location prohibits *Surface Development* from reaching *Optimal Development*. The categories of the *Barriers* remain *Reachability*, *Sport Changes*, *Differing*

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Goals, and *Size of Impact*, but the way in which these categories were revealed in between *Surface Development* and *Optimal Development* is in slightly different than between *Resilient Development* and *Surface Development*. An example of the *Barriers* subtheme as the upper limit of *Surface Development* is Jackson's comments about the state association providing opportunities, but being unable to get those opportunities spread to more student-athletes. Jackson used his own position of privilege with the state association, and the *Life Skills,* he has already learned to bring a Positive Coaching Alliance workshop to his school. In regard to the *Barriers,* He said,

> "…when you're running a big state and you got thousands and thousands of students, it's definitely tough to get the word out and not every school participates. So, I just felt like they did some stuff which is great, you know super happy they have stuff that reaches out, but I just thought I needed to give a little push to help them out a little bit so that's what I kind of was trying to do."

Jackson acknowledged that the state association's work was positive and they did provide support to the student-athletes, but the challenge of reaching the large quantity of student-athletes in the state was difficult. This *Barrier* limits the production of *Optimal Development* for the student-athletes within their relationships with the state association. Similar *Barriers* were experienced in other ways that prohibited *Surface Development* from being maximized into *Optimal Development*.

Reachability. As the first category of the *Barriers* subtheme between *Surface Development* and *Optimal Development*, *Reachability* was encountered by several of the participants. This category represents the difficulty of the student-athletes to have access to or direct contact with the other people who are shaping their sport experience. In the *Surface*

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Development subtheme, these people may be providing positive experiences and encouraging the development of *Life Skills*, but are not fostering close relationships with the student-athletes to anchor their development. Even when the participants spoke favorably of the other people in their sport system, they would often express that they do not feel connected to or aided by these others in their development. T expressed this concern with her Athletic Department, saying, "I just think our Athletic Department could do a little better and be a little bit more personable. Just because most people don't really like talk to him (AD) or like talk to the department." Although the Athletic Department was not actively impeding in T's development, similar to many other people mentioned by the participants, the lack of access to the department and inability to form personal relationships with them created *Barriers* of *Reachability* that limited the opportunity for *Optimal Development*.

Sport Changes. The second category of the *Barriers* subtheme between *Surface Development* and *Optimal Development* is *Sport Changes*, which still represents the gap between the previous sport experiences of those in relationships with the student-athletes, who participated in sport in a different era, and the current experiences of participants in sport in the current times. In the *Surface Development* theme, *Sport Changes* came from the participants expressing that even though the people they interact with want to create positive experiences for the student-athletes, the other people may be missing some important issues that have changed since they played. Ryan articulated the benefit of the other people having previous sport experiences by saying, "Yeah, I feel like those departments, since they were like in our shoes once, so they want us to have the best like experience possible in sports that we play." But Greg mentioned that there are areas that they are not really addressing since it was not a part of their experiences, like social media. He said,

"I guess an example would be something that's changed like social media is a big part of everything now. Like maybe somebody is getting bullied online and they just, they don't really understand because when they grew up and they played sports they never had that situation before but now like kids may be affected by that."

The relationships and developmental experiences within the *Surface Development* theme are positive, however the *Sport Changes* category of *Barriers* was a common reason that *Optimal Development* was not reached.

Differing Goals. The third category of the *Barriers* subtheme between *Surface Development* and *Optimal Development* is *Differing Goals*. This category represents the tension between all people in the high school sport system when they did not cooperate to accomplish similar goals for creating positive sport experiences for the student-athletes. Specifically, in the gap between the *Surface Development* theme and the *Optimal Development* theme, the goals of the people may not have been limiting or harmful, but the misalignment of each person's goals meant that the capacity for promoting development did not allow for *Optimal Development* to occur. Jessie explained this clashing of goals by saying,

"There is always going to be headstrong people who feel as if what their beliefs are, how they run whatever operation they are running, they think that they do it the best. And that nobody, no democracy or whatever, is going to do it better than them."

Similar to *Resilient Development*, in the *Surface Development* theme, the problem occurs from the misalignment of the goals. Even if those goals were in the interest of promoting the development of *Life Skills*, when the people in sport had misaligned objectives for sport prohibited the production of *Optimal Development* through the student-athletes' experiences.

Size of Impact. The fourth category of the *Barriers* subtheme between *Surface Development* and *Optimal Development* is *Size of Impact*. This category represents the student-athletes' perceptions of their own ability and the ability of others to influence their relationships and sport system. In the gap between the *Surface Development* and *Optimal Development*, the concern about the *Size of Impact* was usually referring to the student-athletes working to make real meaningful change, but not having the resources to meet the difficult challenge. Especially for these student-athletes and their roles on the advisory councils, many of the participants shared their concern for wanting to help their peers learn valuable skills as well and connect them to the state associations, but this often proved difficult. Betty explained,

"…there are so many kids in the state of [state] and it's just, it's hard to reach every single one of them. Um, but like what we are trying to spread is so important and like we want everyone to know about it, at least hear about it. So, I think maybe just the magnitude of what we have to get out…"

These participants believed in the importance of their goals and had the initiative to pursue spreading their messages of sportsmanship to peers across the state, but did not feel as though it was possible for them to really accomplish what they were aiming to do. Although this is helpful in providing positive experiences for these student-athletes, the lack of success in having the impact they are hoping with their initiatives hinders the participants from anchoring their experiences and reaching the *Optimal Development* level.

Optimal Development

The fourth theme revealed in the data is *Optimal Development*. Like the previous two themes, this theme is also comprised of two co-acting subthemes that represent the developmental experiences and relationships with others: *Anchored Learning* and *Great*

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Relationships. In the *Optimal Development* theme, the participants' development occurred

through meaningful, hands-on experiences that aided the student-athletes in practicing the *Life*

Skills they were encouraged to develop, all while being cared for and guided by others in their

sport world. This theme encompasses the positive relationships that provided initiative support

for the student-athletes as they sought to shape their own sport experiences. Often, the

participants mentioned being seen as a whole person in these *Great Relationships,* and the

development of *Life Skills* was treated as a top priority of their sport experience. Through the

Great Relationships, the student-athletes discussed *Life Skills* beyond simple explanations of

what they are and how they could use them in the future, but provided real examples of ways

they had already anchored their knowledge of the skill in a facilitated experience.

In T's case, she was able to develop *Life Skills* by addressing a problem she saw with

parent behavior in the stands. She used her *Great Relationships* in the advisory council and state

association administrator to help her find solutions and said,

"I actually talked to [SAC administrator] and um the group about it too. So, um, and we

talked through it and like solutions and stuff and I brought that to our Superintendent and

my AD and all that stuff. And it helped a little bit"

Instead of taking the problem out of her hands, the SAC administrator and T's peers allowed her

to continue with her initiative after aiding her in making a plan for communicating with her

school. She said,

"I just kind of went back to my school…and to my Athletic Director and Principal and I

was like, 'Hey, like this isn't okay, um, I think something needs to be done about this' and

I like came in with like research done and like a well thought out message to tell them.

Actually, I was able to go talk to the Superintendent about it too. Um, just because the issue

was so prominent and so, um it actually is cleared up a little bit now since last year. Which

is really great."

These types of experiences provided *Optimal Development* for the participants by fostering

Anchored Learning through *Great Relationships*. The *Optimal Development* theme is shown in

Figure 2.4.

Anchored Learning

The subtheme of *Optimal Development* representing the nature of the developmental

experiences is *Anchored Learning*. This subtheme denotes the development of participants that

occurred through actively engaging them in practicing *Life Skills* in hands-on, meaningful

experiences. Specifically, the development and transfer of *Life Skills* held deep roots in the

mechanism that was utilized to teach the student-athletes: close meaningful relationships.

Though the categories of *Life Skills* that were learned in *Anchored Learning* were not different

than those of other developmental subthemes, the depth with which the student-athletes learned

and enacted the *Life Skills* was much greater. The participants discussed their development

through these experiences with great pride and provided evidence of their competence of the *Life*

Skills that they had gained in the positive experiences. As an example of an *Anchored Learning*

experience, Lauren explained how the student advisory council (SAC) in her state aided them in

their development of *Responsibility, Leadership,* and *Cooperation.* She said,

"Well when we first came to the meeting, we as SAC came up with rules that are

expected of each other. Like similar to high school sport rules, like keep your grades up,

no tobacco or alcohol use, or at least not frequently I believe was our ruling on that. And

we had like 48 hours after they sent an email you had to respond. Like they had us

control the rules that were set and the expectations for SAC."

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Figure 2.4. Results Concept Map – Optimal Development.

Through the hands-on and meaningful experience of creating rules with the other advisory

council members, Lauren and her peers were able to practice and demonstrate their ability to

cooperate in setting the guidelines, lead the group in creating policies, and establish

responsibility for upholding the expectations. Not only were *Life Skills* supported as positive

development for the participants, but the *Life Skills* were learned and anchored in real life

experiences. This subtheme of *Anchored Learning* is characterized in the data by three

categories: *Power (of self)*, *Self-Advocacy*, and *Effort to Help (from others)*.

     Power (of self). The first category of the *Anchored Learning* subtheme is *Power (of*

self). This category represents the student-athletes demonstrating their ability to practice

participating within their sport world in a way that made them active in the system. This *Power*

(of self) allowed them to play a role in shaping their sport environment to some capacity. For

example, one participant, Kenzie, had the chance to participate on a Blue Ribbon Committee

within her state association as the sole student representative. She discussed her sense of *Power*

in getting to contribute to the committee to make real change. She stated:

"I would say just that they love to hear what I have to say. And from what I have to say, it is a slow process, but you get things to eventually be changes so it can help the students later on. Um, from the boards of directors meeting last year we made a few changes in girls and boys golf that helped a lot of girls this season."

Experiences like these, when the participants discussed their *Power* to create change within their sport system at any level, aided them in going beyond discussion of *Life Skills*, but instead actively practice civic engagement within their current sport community. These experiences provided a way to go beyond development of *Life Skills* at the surface level by anchoring them in experiential learning through encouraging the *Power* of the student-athletes.

Self-Advocacy. The second category of the *Anchored Learning* subtheme is *Self-Advocacy*. This category represents the participants using opportunities to practice *Life Skills* through speaking out and working to accomplish their desired outcomes within the sport system. This looked differently for each student-athlete that had an *Anchored Learning* experience, but central to the experience was the ability to advocate for themselves. In one instance, a participant demonstrated his *Self-Advocacy* and practice of *Life Skills* through the process of seeking new tennis courts for his school. Jackson shared his story of working with the others in his sport system to take initiative and accomplish this goal:

"We started a petition to get a brand-new tennis court…but what I did is I went out of my own way and I contacted my superintendent of our school district and you know those guys are at the top of the top, and I said, 'Hey, do you guys got anything' and my coach is totally on board with it, and he was like, 'If you guys want it let's see what we can do' and he kind of gave me full control. Gave me some emails I can use, some different people I could refer to…and just really showing my coach that you know I can do this

and help out the team and help out the school with this tennis court area. It would be

amazing, and it worked, and ever since then, ever since then I've been captain..."

It is important to note that this category of *Self-Advocacy* is more than simply having a space to

voice opinions or to have power to make a change in the system. As demonstrated by Jackson's

story, this category was present in a student-athlete's experience when they took advantage of

the opportunity to drive their own process of accomplishing a goal, as opposed to being heard by

another person and having that person advocate for them. Through these *Anchored Learning*

experiences, the participants actively learned how to apply *Life Skills* and advocate for their own

needs.

       Effort to Help (from others). The third category of *Anchored Learning* is *Effort to Help*

(from others). This category describes an effort from other people in helping student-athletes

shape their own experiences and aiding them through giving them a voice. Although many of

the others mentioned in the data were trying to help student-athletes in some capacity, in the

Anchored Learning experiences, this effort to help kept the student-athletes and their

development at the center of these experiences. These others that assisted the student-athletes in

advocating for themselves and encouraged the student-athletes to exercise power in their

experience operated as guides to the sport system instead of solving the problems for the student-

athletes. Kenzie discussed her experience working with her Athletic Director on her school's

advisory council as an example of *Effort to Help (from others)*. She explained that the Athletic

Director is great at what she does because she "shows how much she cares for both high school

students and middle school students. And just how she wants to hear our opinions and what she

can do to make our lives better." By showing these student-athletes care through providing them

with a voice in their experience and a seat at the table to make their own changes, the

participants were likely to favor those who demonstrated an *Effort to Help* them experience *Anchored Learning*.

Great Relationships

The second co-acting subtheme of *Optimal Development* is *Great Relationships*. This subtheme represents the relationships that the participants described as actively promoting and facilitating their development of *Life Skills* through protecting the student-athletes' well-being and facilitating *Anchored Learning* experiences with the participants. Not only did these types of relationships positively recognize *Life Skills* development, but they fostered meaningful experiences that aided the student-athletes in practicing the skills while creating personal connections with the participants. Pamela spoke fondly of her *Great Relationships* with the administrators at the state association who lead the advisory council in her state. She said,

> "I mean [administrator of SAC] and [administrator of SAC], every single time we have a meeting, like, they always make sure to clearly say like, 'Again, this is yours. We are only here because we have to be here. Literally, because we just have to be here. You guys are running it' and like we just went on for like half an hour talking about how like this idea and like help us, guide us. But in the end, it is our idea and they'll help us get there if we need it. But they want us to come there by ourselves as much as we can."

Most of the participants echoed the favorable comments about their *Great Relationships* with the administrators of the advisory councils in all three states, especially when the administrators aided the student-athletes in acting on their own initiatives within the sport system. Ultimately, these *Great Relationships* fostered more *Optimal Development* for the participants. This *Great Relationships* subtheme of *Optimal Development* is comprised of three categories: *Care*, *Awareness*, and *Advocacy*.

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Care. The first category of the *Great Relationships* subtheme is *Care*. This category encompassed those that demonstrated the creation of a safe, interpersonally inviting experience of being valued, which aligns with the commonly accepted definition of a caring climate in the literature (Newton et al., 2007). Often the participants mentioned that the *Great Relationships* in their world would keep tabs on them personally and "check-in" with them about how they were doing physically as well as emotionally. This *Care* demonstrated the value of the student-athlete's well-being and a desire to know and support them as a whole person. Cody mentioned his baseball coach as an example of a *Great Relationship* and his demonstration of *Care*,

> "My baseball coach is also our AD, and he's also my history teacher, and he's my favorite teacher. And uh so he always checks in, like I had him first hour last year and every morning he would ask how my night was, how I'm feeling after practice, how the weekend was, how I thought the team played. He just would always check in on you kind of thing and have your input on stuff it wasn't just a one sided thing."

By engaging with the participants in this way, the *Great Relationships* allowed the student-athletes to notice the intentionality of the other person and feel as though their development was a priority. Kenzie also said she sees her Athletic Director living out her *Care* for the student-athletes,

> "Like she (AD) works with, um, a lot of the students who are injured. The athletic training office is right next to hers. And she will always go in there and talk to them and see how their schedule is going and see how they are feeling. And they just love that because they can see how she cares about each of us."

This *Care* contributes to the *Great Relationships* that are primary mechanisms for creating *Optimal Development*.

Awareness. The second category of the *Great Relationships* subtheme is *Awareness*. This category represents the understanding of the participants and their needs by the other people interacting with the student-athletes in their sport world. Participants, like Billy, shared stories of being known by others in their sport system and the importance that it carried in shaping their developmental experiences. He specifically instructed the adults in sport to gain *Awareness* of the student-athletes by saying,

> "I mean, know your athletes. If you know them on a personal level, you will be able to
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> tell if something is wrong and will be able to help if something is wrong. Because they
>
> should really be the figure that is there to come to if needed."

Those fostering *Great Relationships* were better able to aid the participants in the development of *Life Skills* in part because of their greater *Awareness* of the student-athletes as individuals as well as the general student-athlete experience. This *Awareness* helped the others create and support *Anchored Learning* experiences that fit the participants needs and desires.

Advocacy. The third category in the *Great Relationships* subtheme is *Advocacy*. This category encompasses the participants being supported by others in initiatives to create change in their sport system or to practice *Life Skills* in a meaningful way. When participants shared their desires of creating change, the *Great Relationships* assisted in ways that advocated for the student-athletes to pursue the changes without overtaking the initiative or solving the problems for them. Jackson shared his experiences with following through his own initiative and how his coach provided *Advocacy* for him while letting him have the control. Jackson said,

> "We started a petition to get a brand-new tennis court. It hasn't happened, but um we so
>
> basically what we did, a lot of people signed it, but what I did is I went out of my own
>
> way and I contacted my Superintendent of our school district and, you know those guys

are at the top of the top, and I said, 'Hey, do you guys got anything' and my coach is

totally on board with it, and he was like, 'If you guys want, it let's see what we can do'

and he kind of gave me full control. Gave me some emails I can use, some different

people I could refer to. Like, 'Hey this guy or this lady help me out', and uh 'just

wondering.' And I think after that and just really showing my coach that you know I can

do this and help out the team and help out the school with this tennis court area. It would

be amazing."

Jackson's tennis coach demonstrated *Advocacy* through providing Jackson with contact

information and initiative support, but stayed as an aid in the process for Jackson as he

developed his own *Life Skills* to make the changes he wanted. Others in the *Great Relationships*

subtheme also enacted *Advocacy* in similar instances that helped facilitate *Optimal Development*.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

The study aimed to examine current student-athletes' perceptions of their high school sport ecology and life skills development through sport. In doing so, this study answered the following research questions: 1) How do student-athletes perceive their development through sport, and 2) How do student-athletes perceive others as helping or hindering their development through sport? To answer the first research question, the participants discussed various *Life Skills* that they had developed through sport, which resulted in the first theme in the data. The participants shared stories of their sport experiences that revealed three levels of development, *Resilient Development*, *Surface Development*, and *Optimal Development*, which became the final three themes from the data. The second research question resulted in the participants discussing the quality of their relationships and the relationship's influence in shaping their developmental experiences. The helping or hindering of others became three subthemes of the levels of development, *Limiting Relationships, Good Relationships,* and *Great Relationships* respectively, and co-acted with the developmental experiences of the participants, *Learning Through Necessity, Growth Without Depth,* and *Anchored Learning*, respectively, to produce their level of development. The participants' responses were not limited to any particular stakeholder and gave a picture of their entire high school sport system from their perspectives in regard to their development. The importance of relationships, and their reciprocal nature with the developmental experiences of the student-athletes, was consistent throughout each layer of the high school sport system. Ranging from the microsystem, with coaches, parents, and peers, to the macrosystem, with the state association and advisory council, the development of the

student-athletes was greatly influenced by their relationships with people in all layers of the system.

Relationships As Mechanisms

As mentioned, the relationships that the participants engaged in were key components in their development and could not be separated from the developmental experiences that occurred. Contemporary findings in sport psychology literature highlight that the people in sport facilitate the development of life skills for student-athletes (Camiré, Trudel, & Bernard, 2013; Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; Turnnidge, Côté, & Hancock, 2014), this study revealed that the depth of the student-athlete's relationship with the other person influenced the capacity for the internalization of life skills. Instead of the person (i.e. coach, parent, peer, etc.) being the tool for teaching life skills, the student-athlete's degree of *connection* with the person allowed for developmental experiences to be fostered in different ways. This is a small, but important distinction, and aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Model (1979) in that the learner may not be separated from the environment in which he or she is participating, or from the mechanisms for development. Thus, separating the student-athletes from the people they have relationships with in sport fails to acknowledge a key part of their ecological system: the interactions among the stakeholders at each layer, including the student-athlete at the center. By examining each person within the system as an individual entity, the people are treated as though they simply act *on* the student-athlete's experience as opposed to acting *with* the student-athlete to shape their world. Regardless of the quality of the relationships, the depth of the connections with the athletes drove the level of development that occurred.

Limiting Relationships, Good Relationships, and *Great Relationships* were found to foster development by creating the space and resources for the developmental experiences of the

student-athletes. For example, in *Limiting Relationships* where the expectations of being a captain were different between the student-athlete and the coach, the strain on the relationship between them provided the obstacle for the student-athlete to navigate using *Resilient Development*. Although the learning of leadership may have been limited by strictly the coach, the tension in the relationship required that the student-athletes learn communication to overcome the challenges. For *Great Relationships*, perhaps life skills were favored and encouraged by the state association administrator, but the depth and meaningfulness of the relationship between the student-athletes and the administrator provided the space for the student-athletes to voice their desire to take initiative and be cared for in the process.

The actions of the people in the student-athletes' system may have supported or hindered the quality of relationships, but the relationships themselves provided the tools for the development. In this sense, the actions of the other people are not unimportant. The literature suggests that when coaches take the time to teach life skills, using strategies like emphasizing the importance of academic success or creating discussion about the value of discipline, these coaches are likely to foster development (Gould et al., 2004; Pierce, Gould, Cowburn, & Driska, 2016; Gould, Pierce, Cowburn, & Driska, 2017). However, results from this study suggest that those strategies may only be as successful as the relationship that is built with the student-athletes to aid in anchoring their learning. It is helpful to note is the reciprocal nature of the relationships and the learning experiences. Although the relationships greatly influence the usefulness of these strategies, the participants suggested that the presence of the strategies to assist in life skills development also benefited the depth of their relationships. In other words, the student-athletes were more likely to have deeper relationships with those who fostered deeper learning experiences, which in turn benefited the initial relationship.

Depth of Relationships & Depth of Development

 Since the relationships of the student-athletes are the primary mechanisms for their

development of life skills, there is a clear connection between the depth of the relationships and

the depth of their individual development. Student-athletes cannot participate in high school

sport without participating in the relationships within the system, making the depth and quality of

their relationships vital to their individual development. This connection between the

relationships and the individual development appears to be as shown in Figure 3.

Given the distinction between the three levels of development revealed in the data, *Resilient*

Development, Surface Development, and *Optimal Development*, each developmental level has a

capacity for depth of learning that matches the depth of the relationships influencing that

learning. As the relationship grows from *Limiting Relationships,* to *Good Relationships*, to

Great Relationships, so does the individual developmental experiences and thus, the student-

athlete's acquisition of life skills and transfer of those skills strengthens.
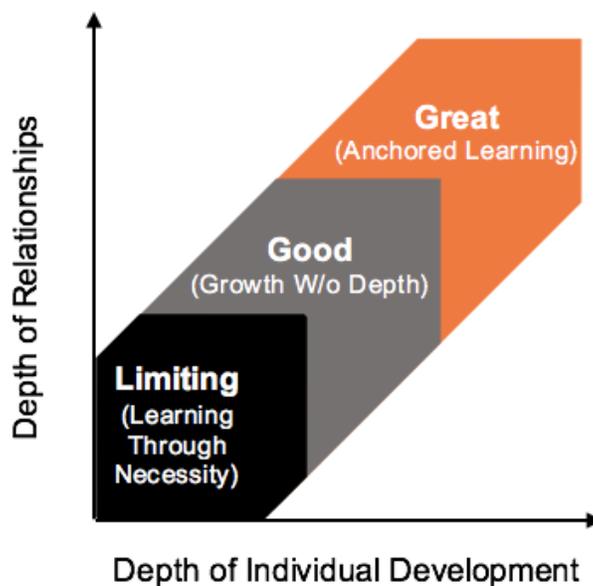

Figure 3. Depth of Relationship and Development Interaction.

As demonstrated in Figure 3, the relationships create a zone of development to indicate that as the capacity for development grows with the depth of relationships, the minimum development of each type of relationship is also raised (i.e. a *Great Relationship* is not going to elicit *Resilient Development* in the same way that a *Limiting Relationship* will not provide *Optimal Development*). This aligns with Larson's (2010) discussion of adults within youth development programs stating that those with relationships built on trust and mutual respect as opposed to authority allowed them to better contribute to the youth's development. Similar to the results from a recent survey that was administered with high school sport coaches, those who were identified has being more efficacious, democratic and supportive (like *Great Relationships*) also had a stronger belief that the student-athlete leaders could learn life skills (Voelker, Martin, Blanton, & Gould, *in press*). Outside of this zone, development still may occur as a result of experiences outside of, or in spite of, the student-athletes' relationships. This was indicated in the data when participants began *Taking Ownership* of their experiences and sought out their own development. In the space below the relational zone of development, this may look like a student-athlete taking initiative without pursuing assistance or support from others and creating their own *Anchored Learning* experiences. In the space above the relational zone of development, this may look like a student-athlete having highly favorable perceptions of the people in their sport world, but not taking advantage of participating in the possibility of anchoring their learning.

Anchored Learning

In thinking about the capacity of the different levels of relationships, it makes sense that only those participants who had *Great Relationships* were able to participate in *Anchored Learning* experiences. In an effort to provide a clearer picture of *Optimal Development* and its

importance, it is valuable to explain *Anchored Learning* as it differs from other types of positive developmental experiences, like *Growth Without Depth.* Although other forms of development were positive in nature and encouraged the use of life skills, the *Anchored Learning* experiences shared by the participants allowed for depth of learning by providing meaningful practice of the life skills through initiative support.

In previous literature, it has been noted that the development of initiative can be fulfilled through youth programs such as high school sport (Larson, Hansen, & Walker, 2005). However, this support for developing the skills needed for initiative and putting them to use must be done in a way that the adults find a middle ground between being authoritative in giving direction and too hands-off in providing little guidance (Larson, 2000). Gauvain and Huard (1999) found this to be true in parents specifically, however in the case of high school sport, parents are simply one piece of the entire ecological system; there are many other stakeholders whose actions influence the sport experience and potential of relationships with the athlete that impact the development and well-being of that young person. Given that other adults may be equally or more direct in their role of shaping the student-athletes' sport experience, it is important to consider the potential value of all relationships. In this study, the initiative support came from *Great Relationships* with coaches, Athletic Directors, and even the state association administrators who did not take over when a student-athlete demonstrated initiative, but provided guidance through their process of achieving their goal.

When the participants demonstrated initiative and had the *Great Relationships* to aid them in the process of using their life skills in a meaningful manner, the student-athletes had a way to root their understanding of life skills in practical experiences. Thus, the term "anchored" was chosen to demonstrate that the life skills were contextualized in hands-on practices that

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provided depth to their development beyond encouragement and discussion of what the life skills were. The participants that shared *Anchored Learning* experiences, such as assisting in making changes to gender equity in sport through participation on a Blue Ribbon Committee or drawing attention to and aiding in problem-solving for handling unsportsmanlike parents at the school, often spoke with confidence about actively demonstrating their success of developing and using life skills by shaping their own sport systems. These participants had explicit examples for their development of life skills because they were anchored in meaningful experiences fostered by their *Great Relationships* with others. This notion of *Anchored Learning* experiences does not challenge, but exemplifies the ways in which life skills development through sport is currently discussed in the literature.

Anchored Learning on the Continuum

Recently, the approach to life skills development and transfer has been posited to occur on a continuum from implicit to explicit (Bean et al., 2018). Implicit approaches include sport programs that do not place intentional effort on the development of life skills in their participants. Explicit approaches purposefully aim to develop the life skills of the participants through discussion and practice using the skills in sport and beyond. This continuum was mostly targeted to sport coaches and their role in shaping the student-athletes' sport experience, however, the continuum can certainly be applied beyond the coach-athlete relationship to the wide range of stakeholders in high school sport (Bean et al., 2018; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). Larson and Angus (2010) explain that although development is not something that adults do *to* adolescents, any adult can certainly facilitate experiences that help learn strategic skills. For example, Bean and colleagues (2018) suggest that coaches should facilitate a positive climate by fostering positive relationships and supporting efficacy through involving

athletes in the decision-making process. These suggestions align with *Anchored Learning* experiences shared by participants that were facilitated by other stakeholders, such as state association administrators or Athletic Directors.

A distinction between the *Anchored Learning* experiences and the suggestions for life skills development and transfer at even the farthest end of the explicit side of the continuum is the previously discussed initiative support. Although practicing life skills and practicing the transfer of the life skills is included on the continuum and incredibly valuable, allowing the student-athletes to have meaningful practice by initiating the pursuit of their own goals to shape their sport experience adds another layer to the development of the life skills. With guided adult support, pursuing their own initiatives may be a key component for student-athletes to internalize life skills further than adult constructed opportunities to practice. These *Anchored Learning* experiences revealed in the data support the explicit end of the continuum and perhaps add further suggestions for all stakeholders in high school sport to consider.

Life Skills for Well-Being

Although the focus of development through sport is often on the acquisition and transfer of life skills, the purpose of these life skills is to contribute to the well-being of the young people as they grow into adulthood. This purpose is supported by contemporary models encouraging the transfer of life skills to contexts beyond sport (Pierce, Gould, & Camiré, 2017). If the true value in life skills development through sport is the promotion of well-being and use of the life skills as a productive adult, then it is important to define and consider all components of well-being.

Components of Well-Being

From community psychology literature, the concept of wellness or well-being has been broken down into the interaction of psychological and political dynamics that meet three different levels of needs: personal, relational, and community. This interaction of psychological and political dynamics that inform environment and well-being is considered psychopolitical validity (Prilleltensky, 2003). Personal needs for well-being include concepts such as feelings of control, hope, physical and psychological growth, and health. Within this study, personal needs were met through individual development, which occurred in some capacity in all three themes of development. Relational needs include having mutual respect, care, and compassion, similar to those with *Good* or *Great Relationships* in the study. Community needs include fair distributions of power and resources as well as participation in democratic processes to make decisions (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2004). These needs were met for the participants when they shared *Anchored Learning* experiences that demonstrated initiative support from their *Great Relationships.* The levels of development revealed in the data greatly aligns with the meeting of these three levels of needs to promote well-being.

According to Evans and Prilleltensky (2005), maximal wellness can only occur when all three levels of needs are met and the individual as well as the community benefits. The participants who experienced *Optimal Development* through *Anchored Learning* and *Great Relationships* are best prepared to continue to use their life skills due to their meaningful experiences with making a difference in their sport community. By having a say in their experience at the community level, the psychopolitical validity of the student-athletes' sport system is greater. This enhanced engagement in the community by these participants, like participation on special committees or working with administrators to upgrade facilities, not only

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provided greater capacities for development of the student-athlete, but benefited their sport community, and thus promoted a more maximal well-being.

The lower levels of development, *Surface Development* and *Resilient Development*, may have provided the student-athletes with the ability to meet their personal or relational needs for well-being, but both fell short of promoting the fulfillment of the community level of well-being. If the ultimate goal of aiding in the development of life skills is that they be used for the well-being of high school sport participants, both now and later in life, then the results of this study show that there is a missing piece to reaching that goal when community engagement is neglected.

Power and Well-Being

In the discussion of fulfilling needs in all three levels of well-being, power must be addressed. Beyond the inclusion of fair distribution of power as a need of the community level of well-being, all components of well-being rely on programs, policies, and values that are influenced by power dynamics within the sport system (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2005). In terms of psychopolitical validity, well-being cannot be separated from the political dynamics that shape the sport world and interact with the psychological factors of those in the system. This study aimed to address this concept of power through the lens of the participants and examine their perceptions of their own ability to have influence in their relationships and sport system at large.

Unsurprisingly, the participants that had more *Optimal Development* and were more likely to share stories that align with maximal well-being were also the participants that indicated larger senses of control and contributions to their sport system. Even though these participants were exceptional in their development compared to the others, power dynamics were still at play in every participant's story. In the *Resilient Development* theme, power hindered the well-being

and development of the participants by being used by others in a way that limited the student-athletes influence over their experience and creating difficult obstacles that the participants had to overcome on their own. In the *Surface Development* theme, the power of the system was used to create positive experiences for the student-athletes, however this dynamic did not allow for a challenge in the status quo and perhaps perpetuated it. When the participants did have a sense of control over their experience in this theme, like choosing the order of practice drills, but had little influence over the larger status quo, their development reached a surface-level capacity. Without social change as a result of their power, their contribution to the system is limited in how deeply anchored their development can become (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2004; Evans & Prilleltensky, 2005).

On a larger scale, the majority of the participants did not reach *Optimal Development,* partly as a result of their lack of power to contribute to change in their system through *Anchored Learning* experiences and thus the status quo was not challenged very often. This generates some concern about the reinforcement of systemic power in high school sport as a whole and its impact on the well-being of the student-athletes. Beyond the lack of systemic power of the student-athletes resulting in a lack of change in the system, it also results in a limitation of their well-being. This, once again, falls short of the ultimate goal of promoting the deepest levels of development of the student-athletes through sport.

Implications

Moving forward, the results of this study should be taken into consideration in future research and programming of high school sport. This new perspective of relationships as mechanisms for the development of youth sport athletes needs to be further studied to better understand the intricacies of the reciprocal interaction of relationships and developmental

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experiences. Quantitative measures should be used and adapted to provide a more objective

understanding of how to qualify the different relationships of the student-athletes. Qualitative

inquiries should continue to be used to reveal the nuances of a variety of student-athletes'

experiences with different relationships and developmental experiences, as well as over longer

periods of time (Kendellen & Camiré, 2019).

As suggested by Vierimaa and colleagues (2012), the Coach-Athlete Relationship

Questionnaire (CART-Q: Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004) may be useful in measuring the quality of

the direct relationship of the student-athletes to their coaches. However, the CART-Q is only

structured to measure a single relationship in the high school sport system. An adaptation of this

questionnaire may be warranted to assess other relationships in high school sport, such as the

Athletic Director or state associations, as they were also discussed at great lengths by the

participants in this study as influencing their sport experiences.

The Youth Experiences Survey for Sport (YES-S: Macdonald, Côté, Eys, & Deakin,

2012) should also be considered for quantitatively measuring the student-athletes' developmental

experiences with consideration to the findings of this study. Specifically, the initiative

experiences subscale and the adult networks and social capital subscale would be useful in

identifying *Anchored Learning* experiences of student-athletes. Using the initiative experiences

subscale acknowledges the benefit of initiative support in developing life skills similar to what

was shown in the *Anchored Learning* subtheme of *Optimal Development.*

To continue investigating the high school student-athletes' development, these results

should be considered in creating research questions that seek to understand the nature of

relationships as a mechanism of the development of life skills. Further research should examine

other populations of student-athletes, like those not on the state association advisory councils or

youth from underserved areas, to gain perspective on the role of relationships in their development. Other research should further investigate the specific levels of development and relationships revealed in this study, such as instrumental case studies of student-athletes with unique sport systems.

While continuing to expand the literature using the results from this study, it is also important that knowledge is disseminated to those that are shaping the high school sport system. A focus on building relationships at all layers of the sport ecology that provide *Anchored Learning* experiences should be a priority for practitioners in the future. By addressing some of the *Barriers* to creating meaningful relationships and internalized development of life skills, those who work in the high school sport system can better provide quality growth experiences for the student-athletes. Practically, adults in the sport system should aim to demonstrate care for student-athletes by spending time getting to know them as whole people in and out of sport and supporting them in their initiatives to influence the system. By giving student-athletes a voice over their experience and aiding them in their own pursuits for engaging in the sport system, they will be better supported in the transfer of their life skills into living as engaged citizens after sport.

Due to the participants in this study's unique positions working with the state associations, there is a potential limitation of the perspectives of the student-athletes and the influence of their own personal connections to the administrators on those perspectives. Although these perspectives may not entirely represent the total population of high school student-athletes, they are incredibly valuable in their insight to the many layers of their ecological system in sport. Due to its qualitative nature, this data may not necessarily be applicable to the general population in the same way that quantitative data would be, and was not

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necessarily seeking generalizability. However, as Smith (2018) would argue, the results from this study may be transferable in the sense that those working with populations outside of these student-athletes on the state association advisory councils would be able to apply the knowledge of these findings to their own domains. In conclusion, this study should be considered in future research and interactions with those working to improve the high school sport system for the further development of student-athletes.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Assent Form – Student (Under 18 years old)

INFORMED ASSENT FORM

Athletes' Perceptions of Their High School Sport Ecology and Their Life Skills Development

INTRODUCTION
You are invited to participate in a research study that explores the experiences of high school athletes and their perceived life skill development through sport. This study is the thesis project of Kylee Ault supported by the University of Tennessee. While sport is believed to promote the development of life skills in those who participate, more research is needed on the actual sport experience of high school athletes.

INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY
Your participation will be in the form of a focus group interview that will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete, and potentially a follow-up, individual interview over the phone. The initial process will consist of a small group, audio-recorded interview. During the interview, the researcher will ask about your perspective of your high school sport environment and your life skill development. Should you agree to participate in a follow-up interview, you will be contacted by the researchers at a later date to schedule a distance interview covering the same topics as the focus group interview.

RISKS
There is no risk to participation greater than that of everyday life. All answers to questions and information shared will be kept confidential. At any point, if you are uncomfortable you may choose to skip a question or leave the focus group interview at any time at no penalty to you.

BENEFITS
Benefits of your participation in this project include: the potential for your responses to drive further research, aiding the researcher's development as a scholar, and potentially impacting the programs and development of the high school sport as a system. You may also find enjoyment in the process of sharing your experiences with your peers in the focus group.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The information discussed in the interview will be kept confidential. Only the researchers will have access to your information and data will be stored in a secure, password protected computer owned by Kylee Ault, the principle investigator. There will be no specific identifiers left in the data upon its collection. All data will be kept for at least four years before being destroyed.

PARTICIPATION
Your participation in this study is voluntary and should be agreed upon by you and your parent or guardian. You may decline to participate without penalty. If you agree to participate, you may withdraw from the focus group interview at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study before the data collection is completed or after the conclusion of the interview, your data

will only be destroyed upon request.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you or your parent or guardian have questions about the focus group interview, or you experience adverse effects as a result of your participation you may contact the following researchers:

Kylee Ault (Co-Principal Investigator): *kault@vols.utk.edu* – (865) 974-3340 (KRSS Office)

Jedediah Blanton, Ph.D. (Co-Principal Investigator): *jblanto2@utk.edu* – (865) 974-8848

IRB Compliance Office – (865) 974-7697

CONSENT

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Please check the box below if you also agree to participate in the follow-up interview process:

• I am willing to participate in a follow-up interview after the conclusion of the focus group.

Phone:_____   Email:_____

Participant's name (please print): _____

Participant's signature _____   Date _____

Investigator's signature _____   Date _____

Appendix B

Parental Consent Form – Parent or Guardian of student under 18 years old

INFORMED PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

Athletes' Perceptions of Their High School Sport Ecology and Their Life Skills Development

INTRODUCTION
Your child is invited to participate in a research study that explores the experiences of high school athletes and their perceived life skill development through sport. This study is the thesis project of Kylee Ault supported by the University of Tennessee. While sport is believed to promote the development of life skills in those who participate, more research is needed on the actual sport experience of high school athletes.

INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY
Your child's participation will be in the form of a focus group interview that will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete, and potentially a follow-up, individual interview over the phone. The initial process will consist of a small group, audio-recorded interview. During the interview, the researcher will ask about their perspective of their high school sport environment and life skill development. Should you and your child agree to have them participate in a follow-up interview, they will be contacted by the researchers at a later date to schedule a distance interview covering the same topics as the focus group interview.

RISKS
There is no risk to participation greater than that of everyday life. All answers to questions and information shared will be kept confidential. At any point, if your child is uncomfortable, they may choose to skip a question or leave the focus group interview at any time at no penalty to them.

BENEFITS
Benefits of your child's participation in this project include: the potential for their responses to drive further research, aiding the researcher's development as a scholar, and potentially impacting the programs and development of the high school sport as a system. Your child may also find enjoyment in the process of sharing their experiences with peers in the focus group.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The information discussed in the interview will be kept confidential. Only the researchers will have access to the information and data will be stored in a secure, password protected computer owned by Kylee Ault, the principle investigator. There will be no specific identifiers left in the data upon its collection. All data will be kept for at least four years before being destroyed.

PARTICIPATION
Participation in this study is voluntary and should be agreed upon by you and your child. You may decline to participate without penalty. If you and your child agree to have the child participate, they may withdraw from the focus group interview at any time without penalty. If

they withdraw from the study before the data collection is completed or after the conclusion of the interview, their data will only be destroyed upon request.

CONTACT INFORMATION
If you or your child have questions about the focus group interview, or they experience adverse effects as a result of your participation you may contact the following researchers:

Kylee Ault (Co-Principal Investigator): *kault@vols.utk.edu* – (865) 974-3340 (KRSS Office)

Jedediah Blanton, Ph.D. (Co-Principal Investigator): *jblanto2@utk.edu* – (865) 974-8848

IRB Compliance Office – (865) 974-7697

CONSENT

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to my child's participation in this study.

Please check the box below if you also agree to have your child participate in the follow-up interview process:

☐ I willingly support my child's participation in a follow-up interview after the conclusion of the focus group.

Phone:_____   Email:_____

Parent of Guardian's name (please print): _____

Parent or Guardian's signature _____   Date _____

Investigator's signature _____   Date _____

Appendix C

Consent Form – Student (18 years or older)

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Athletes' Perceptions of Their High School Sport Ecology and Their Life Skills Development

INTRODUCTION
You are invited to participate in a research study that explores the experiences of high school athletes and their perceived life skill development through sport. This study is the thesis project of Kylee Ault supported by the University of Tennessee. While sport is believed to promote the development of life skills in those who participate, more research is needed on the actual sport experience of high school athletes.

INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY
Your participation will be in the form of a focus group interview that will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete, and potentially a follow-up, individual interview over the phone. The initial process will consist of a small group, audio-recorded interview. During the interview, the researcher will ask about your perspective of your high school sport environment and your life skill development. Should you agree to participate in a follow-up interview, you will be contacted by the researchers at a later date to schedule a distance interview covering the same topics as the focus group interview.

RISKS
There is no risk to participation greater than that of everyday life. All answers to questions and information shared will be kept confidential. At any point, if you are uncomfortable you may choose to skip a question or leave the focus group interview at any time at no penalty to you.

BENEFITS
Benefits of your participation in this project include: the potential for your responses to drive further research, aiding the researcher's development as a scholar, and potentially impacting the programs and development of the high school sport as a system. You may also find enjoyment in the process of sharing your experiences with your peers in the focus group.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The information discussed in the interview will be kept confidential. Only the researchers will have access to your information and data will be stored in a secure, password protected computer owned by Kylee Ault, the principle investigator. There will be no specific identifiers left in the data upon its collection. All data will be kept for at least four years before being destroyed.

PARTICIPATION
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to participate without penalty. If you agree to participate, you may withdraw from the focus group interview at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study before the data collection is completed or after the conclusion of the interview, your data will only be destroyed upon request.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions about the focus group interview, or you experience adverse effects as a result of your participation you may contact the following researchers:

Kylee Ault (Co-Principal Investigator): *kault@vols.utk.edu* – (865) 974-3340 (KRSS Office)

Jedediah Blanton, Ph.D. (Co-Principal Investigator): *jblanto2@utk.edu* – (865) 974-8848

IRB Compliance Office – (865) 974-7697

CONSENT

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Please check the box below if you also agree to participate in the follow-up interview process:

• I am willing to participate in a follow-up interview after the conclusion of the focus group.

Phone:_____   Email:_____

Participant's name (please print): _____

Participant's signature _____   Date _____

Investigator's signature _____   Date _____

Interview Guide

Interview Guide for:

Athletes' Perceptions of High School Sport Ecology and Life Skill Development
Semi-Structured Interview Guide

RQ: How do athletes perceive their own experience in a high school sport ecological system and those experiences' potential influence on their life skill development and transfer?

Script: Thank you again for your time. I really appreciate you talking to me about your experiences as high school athletes. I will be asking you questions about your coaches, parents, peers, athletic department/directors, and the state association and how they may play a role in your experience. It's okay if you do not have an answer to a question right away or if you have a different answer than one of your peers. Anything that you want to share I would be happy to hear. A couple tips before we get started to help making sure the recording is easier to understand. This should feel like a natural conversation, but do your best to speak one at a time and wait until your peers are done before starting a new comment. Also, if you are going to refer to something that one of your peers said earlier in the interview, try your best to refer to them by name. Do you have any questions for me before we get started?

1. Tell me your name, sports you play, and year in school.

2. Tell me a little bit about what being a student-athlete means to you.

3. What are you looking to get out of your sport experience, if anything?

The next few questions are going to ask about how the people in your sport experience influence what you "get out of sport" and your well-being. I define well-being as being "physically and emotionally supported".

4. Who around you in sport cares about your well-being? How do they show this?
    a. Coaches –
    b. Parents –
    c. Peers –
    d. AD –
    e. State Association –

5. Has anyone around you in sport gotten in the way of your well-being? If so, how?

The next few questions are going to ask about any power you may have over your sport experience. I'll use the phrase "sense of control" to ask about that.

6. Who in high school sport has given you a sense of control of your sport experience?
       a. Coaches –
       b. Parents –
       c. Peers –
       d. AD –
       e. State Associations –

7. Has anyone in high school sport made you feel as though did not have a say over your experience?

8. Has participating in high school sport helped you grow as a person? If so, how?

The next few questions will ask you about life skills and how you have developed them. These life skills would include time management, emotional control, goal setting, or hard work ethic.

9. Outside of physical skills, what would you say you have learned from being a student-athlete, if anything? Who has helped you learn these skills/lessons and how?
       a. Coaches –
       b. Parents –
       c. Peers –
       d. AD –
       e. State Associations –

10. Do any people in sport, or policies that they use, get in the way of you developing valuable life skills? If so, how?
       a. Coaches –
       b. Parents –
       c. Peers –
       d. AD –
       e. State Associations –

11. If you have learned life skills through participating in high school sport, have any adults that you interact with while participating discussed how the life skills can be used elsewhere in your life?
       a. Coaches –
       b. Parents –
       c. AD –
       d. State Associations –

12. What do you feel the adults in your high school sport experience are doing well to prepare you for using life skills after sport?

13. What would you like the adults in your high school sport experience to do better to prepare you for using life skill after sport?

a. Do you feel that if you asked for these things, that you would be heard by those adults?

14. Is there anything else you would like me to know about your sport experience and your development of life skills in high school?

Thank you again for taking the time to talk with me about your experiences in high school sport and your own development. I really appreciate you offering your experience and I enjoyed spending time with and learning from you.

Appendix E

Positionality Statement

Throughout my life, I have had the privilege of participating in multiple different sports in a multitude of settings. I started gymnastics at an early age and didn't retire until the end of my senior year of high school (11 years). A much longer 'lifespan' than most competitive gymnasts are privileged with having. Tennis quickly became a method of testing my own mental limits during my high school experience, thanks to the encouragement of my older brothers. Middle school volleyball showed me the joy of being competitive and engaging in a team sport, with only one loss in my two years on the team of rambunctious friends. Track was my after school social hour and gave me a chance to jump high and run fast "for someone who was only five feet two inches." Never forgotten are my two years of softball in elementary school, where I am told that I was an "aggressive player" for a first grader (read: ball hog). No matter what life stage I was in, sport played an important, and time consuming, role. I was, and still am I suppose, a picture of how sport can develop a young person.

It was not until I was an undergraduate student that I came to realize that not all of my peers had a similar experience to mine. Somehow, more than a few of them participated in sport, and even were more successful athletically than I, and still struggled with some key interpersonal and intrapersonal skills that I so clearly could trace back to learning through my athletic experience. Self-reflection, conversations with my friends and family, and the academic classroom helped the scales fall from my eyes; my positive experience and personal development had more to do with those I had the privilege of interacting with in my sport world than it did with practicing flips on a beam or hitting a tennis ball. My coaches, parents, and teammates sharpened me and challenged me to learn important skills like time management, emotional

control, and hard work ethic. I cannot speak enough to how grateful I am for their intentionality in pouring into my development as an athlete and human being.

My own experiences inevitably shape the way I approach my scholarship and this study. I firmly believe that the sport setting holds clear possibilities for the positive development of those who participate in it. I also believe that the adults in the sport experience hold the responsibility of shaping those development possibilities for the young people in sport. While both of these positions are, in part, what guided me to even conceptualize this study, they must be kept in check. In understanding these two beliefs, I must be aware of my biases toward what I consider a "positive" sport experience. When interacting with the student-athletes that I will be interviewing, I should be reflexive in what I ask and how I ask it to be cautious of subconsciously validating only the experiences that I anticipate they are having. I must seek to listen to the truth they are speaking and not only that which aligns with my own.

Another position that I hold leans on the conviction that there is more that can and should be done to leverage the sport experience to develop young people. This conviction fuels my desire conduct this study to potentially discover areas to improve in the high school sport system, however, I must be careful to acknowledge the pieces that are already working to develop the student-athletes and not seek to find holes in the system that are not entirely present. I also see the student-athletes as a key component to exposing how the system currently functioning. This is visible in the importance that I place on giving the student-athletes a voice in their experience through this study. Although I see the student-athlete perspective as valuable, I will work to keep in mind that these young people may or may not be entirely aware of the system around them, similar to my own experience as a high school student-athlete. I must be careful with the

level of importance I place on the student-athlete perceptions and recognize when my own positionality may cloud what I see in the data.

Specific to this study, I must acknowledge my own perceptions about the population I will be working with. First and foremost, it is my assumption that the student-athletes that are participating in the Student Advisory Councils in various states are high quality, well-developed, student-athlete leaders. The selection process of each of the groups is often competitive, and I believe the state associations will select student-athletes showing promise of leadership skills. I also assume that these student-athletes will have a greater understanding of the state association influence on their sport experience than their peers. This connection to the administrators should facilitate a working relationship with those who create the policies in their macrosystem. Although I am hopeful that these student-athletes are as exceptional as I expect them to be, I must be conscientious of casting my own assumption on to their participation and be intentional about providing a space for them to be who they are. The student-athletes may not have as much of an understanding of the state associations that I am accounting for or they may not be as highly developed as leaders as I anticipate. Regardless, their input of their own perceptions holds value.

I recognize that although I have processed some of my own positionalities in regard to sport participation, youth development, and this study in particular, it will be an ongoing process of acknowledging how my positionality influences the way in which I interact with and understand the participants and data. My positionality has laid the groundwork for the study to have been conceptualized, but it must also be known and accepted that it continues to influence me as a researcher, and thus, my research.

VITA

Kylee Ault was born in Toledo, OH to the parents of Tim and Darci Ault. She is the youngest of three children, having two older brothers: Tyler and Trevor. She attended Coy Elementary School, Eisenhower Middle School, and on to Clay High School in Oregon, Ohio where she played tennis, competed in gymnastics, and ran track. She earned a total of 11 varsity letters and was named First Team All-Ohio honors for two years in gymnastics. Even with holding school records in all three sports in which she participated, she views the most valuable part of her high school sport experience as her personal development of transferable life skills thanks to her incredible coaches and parents.

After graduation, she attended Bowling Green State University for two years before transferring to The Ohio State University for her final three years of her undergraduate degree. While she completed her Bachelors degree in Sport Industry, with a concentration in Exercise Science and Health Promotion, she was a member of the cheerleading team all five years. It was during her time as a collegiate athlete that she recognized that not every student-athlete had similar positive high school sport experiences to her own, which sparked her desire to pursue graduate training in an area that allowed her to study student-athlete development. After graduating from The Ohio State University in May of 2017, she moved to Knoxville, TN to pursue her Masters of Science degree in Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior and conduct research on life skills development in youth sport with Dr. Jedediah Blanton. After graduating from the University of Tennessee in May of 2019, she relocated to East Lansing, MI where she is continuing her education at Michigan State University in pursuit of her PhD in Psychosocial Aspects of Sport and Physical Activity and works in the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports with Dr. Daniel Gould.