Stakeholders’ Perceptions of Social-Emotional and Life Skill Development Issues Characterizing Contemporary High School Sports

Daniel Gould, Sarah Carson, Angela Fifer, Larry Lauer
Michigan State University

Robert Benham
University of Hawaii

Abstract

This study was designed to identify issues and concerns involved in contemporary school sports that are perceived as influencing sports’ potential to achieve educational and developmental objectives (e.g., psychosocial and life skill development). Eleven focus group interviews involving 67 participants were conducted with key constituency groups involved in high school athletics (coaches n=14, athletic directors n=20, school principals n=11, parents of current high school athletes n=11, and student-athletes n=21). Results were content analyzed using a three-person inductive consensus procedure and triangulated across constituency groups. Issues identified as concerns included: inappropriate behaviors in high school sport, increased expectations for success, ramifications of over-commitment, health issues, coaching and administrative issues, and unmet affiliation needs of athletes which impact the motivation. Findings are discussed relative to the professionalization of scholastic sports and threats to its developmental and educational potential. Implications for coaching education are emphasized.
Stakeholders’ Perceptions of Social-Emotional and Life Skill Development Issues Characterizing Contemporary High School Sports

American youth sports are unique relative to many countries around the world. Many of our youth sports programs are housed within our formal educational structure as opposed to programs organized by non-school clubs. Hence, educational athletics are part of the fabric of American society having the potential to contribute to the total development of its youth participants. For example, the mission statement of the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) indicates that educational athletics promote “education-based interscholastic activities, which support academic achievement, good citizenship and equitable opportunities.” It is further stated that scholastic sports participation “enrich student’s educational experiences, …develops good citizenship and healthy lifestyles, and …promote fair play and minimizes risks for student participants.” (NFHS Mission Statement, n.d.). Sports for high school students, then, are sponsored by schools for their educational, physical, personal, and social-emotional growth values. Not only are sports justified because of their educational value, but are valued because they involve substantial numbers of youth. For instance, in the 2006-2007 academic year, over 7 million youth (54.2% of all high school students) were involved in high school sports (NFHS, 2007).

Educators are not alone in their discussions of the developmental value of the youth sports experience. Youth development researchers see sports and other extracurricular activities as having unique characteristics that enhance developmental gains not achieved in classroom settings (Eccles, Barber, Stone & Hunt, 2003; Hellison, 2000; Larson, 2000; Martinek & Hellison, 1997). In particular, sports are seen as activities having intrinsically motivated participants, which require concentrated effort and where participants and other members of society see the consequences of one’s efforts as being highly meaningful.

Recent research has also begun to empirically verify the role sport involvement plays in the development of life skills and personal growth of young people (e.g., Brunelle, Danish & Forneris, 2007; Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Hansen, Larson, & Drowkin, 2003; Petitpas, Van Ralte, Cornelius & Jones, 2005). Results of these studies have revealed that participation in sport is associated with many positive (e.g., goal setting, time management, emotional control, increased school enjoyment, higher grade point average, etc.) and some negative (e.g., inappropriate adult behavior, drinking alcohol, etc.) developmental changes on the part of young people. For example, Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin (2003) studied 450 high school students who reported the developmental benefits they associated with involvement in a variety of extracurricular activities, including sports. It was found that participants reported greater rates of learning experiences (e.g., identity development, initiative, physical skills, teamwork/social skills, interpersonal relationships, adult networks) in extracurricular activities versus comparison
activities (academic classes and socializing with friends). More specifically, sport participation was associated with higher rates of some learning experiences such as self-knowledge (e.g., learned what I’m good at), emotional regulation (e.g., control temper or stress), and physical skills development. However, students involved in sports also indicated higher rates of negative peer interactions (i.e., felt peer pressure to do something they did not want to) and inappropriate adult behavior (i.e., adults encouraged youth to do something they believed morally wrong). Thus, sports were found to be a frequent context for identity work and emotional development, but were also associated with negative experiences like peer pressure and inappropriate adult behaviors.

In a similar series of studies, Eccles and her colleagues (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003) examined risks and benefits associated with participation in several types of extracurricular activities (organizations such as church, after school involvement, performing arts, academic clubs, and team sports). Longitudinal survey data were collected on 1,259 high school students, and it was found that team sports participation was linked to positive educational trajectories (e.g., better liking of school, higher GPA, college attendance) and high rates of involvement in one risky behavior – drinking alcohol. Again, sport participation was found to be associated with both positive and negative personal development experiences.

While strongly believing in the beneficial effects of school sport, many professional educators are concerned that the developmental gains that can come from educational athletics are threatened by societal changes associated with adopting a “professional” versus “educational” approach to sport (Roberts, 2007). In a recent article, for example, Jack Roberts, executive director of the Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) argues that commercialism and professionalism are becoming an increasingly powerful force in school sports causing public pressure for school sport rules to be modified to permit longer seasons, more travel and greater extrinsic rewards. He contends that this results in less emphasis on the educational and developmental aspects of scholastic sports involvement such as self-esteem development, the learning of life skills, increased stress and pressure, and more on winning and external rewards. Similarly, writing about children’s sports in general, Gould and Carson (2004) indicated that youth sports are becoming “professionalized” where a shift (often unintentionally) occurs from a focus on developmental and educational purposes to more extrinsic goals like winning and the results associated with success (e.g., notoriety, earning college athletic scholarships, etc.). Furthermore, professionalization of youth sports is characterized by early sports specialization and year round intense training, private coaching, and a focus on winning, rankings and attaining scholarships versus personal and social development. Finally, the American Academy of Pediatrics (2000) has voiced growing concern that increasing numbers of youth are training year round, specializing in sport at early ages and competing at elite levels. It is their feeling that a number of aversive consequences result from such intensive training and
include injury and growth problems, increased stress and burnout and missed social and extracurricular activities.

Unfortunately, while there is growing concern about threats to the educational and developmental value of children’s sports, little empirical evidence exists to help us understand if professionalization is indeed occurring and what effects it might be having on the educational athletic experience of youth. This is especially important research for coaching educators as the coaches they train need to understand the context that surrounds contemporary youth sports and be prepared to effectively deal with it. A need exists, then, to fill the gap in the literature and determine what is happening in youth sports by asking those currently involved.

The present study was designed to begin to fill this void by identifying the most critical issues and concerns involved in contemporary school sports that are perceived as influencing sports’ potential to achieve educational and developmental objectives, particularly psychosocial and life skills development. Not only will such information help those involved in designing programs for life skills through sport interventions, but it will also provide coaching educators with critical information about the issues characterizing the school sport experience today. This knowledge is critically important, as Martens (1987) has lamented that a gap often exists between the most relevant issues facing practitioners and the topics that receive the most research and theoretical attention by scientists. A first step in better linking theory, research, and practice, then, is to identify the most pressing issues influencing young people involved in sport.

Method

Given the lack of research about issues involved in high school sports, focus group methodology was the method of choice in this investigation. Focus groups were selected for several reasons. First, this method is particularly well suited for discovering new insights and providing more process understanding than outcome measures. Second, like all qualitative methods, focus group methodology is a useful method for obtaining in-depth responses from participants (Morgan, 1998). Third, focus groups allow the investigator to seek clarity and ask participants to verify statements made during data collection (Krueger, 1998). Finally, focus group methodology allows one to understand the background behind the participants’ thoughts and experiences and better learn the rationale for their views.

Participants and Participant Groups

To best capture issues involved in contemporary high school sports, it was important to assess its current context from a variety of perspectives. Hence, our plan involved conducting focus group interviews with many of the key constituency groups involved in high school athletics. These groups included coaches, athletic directors, school principals, parents of current high school
athletes, and the student-athletes themselves. This approach also had the advantage of allowing for the triangulation of identified themes by interview source, an important criterion of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1990). Finally, as part of the process of triangulating data across sources, two to three focus groups were conducted within each participant or stakeholder group, ranging in size from five to 10 participants, and typically lasting at least 60 minutes.

**Athletic directors.** High school athletic directors (ADs) [15 males (75%) and five females (25%)] took part in the focus groups. All were attending a state athletic director’s conference in Michigan and responded to a request for voluntary participation. On average, the ADs were 48.5 years of age (ranging from 25 to 62 years) and 18 were Caucasian (90%), while two (10%) were African-American. The ADs had an average of 8.2 years of athletic directing experience (ranging from a low of 1 to a high of 24 years). Nineteen of the 20 ADs (95%) had been a high school coach at some point in their career. In terms of school size, on average, 1,119 students (ranging from a low of 122 to a high of 3,200) attended the schools for which these athletic directors worked. Finally, the combined respondent estimate of the racial make-up of their schools was 83% Caucasian, 21% African-American, 5% Asian, 4% Hispanic, and 4% indicating other ethnicities.

**Principals.** Eleven middle (n =2, 18%) and high school (n =9, 82%) principals took part in the two focus groups. All were males who volunteered as part of their state association advisory panel meeting. On average, the principals were 43 years of age (ranging from 33 to 54 years). Of the 11 participants, 10 were Caucasian (91%) while one (9%) was Native American. All of the principals had coaching experience, with four (36%) coaching at the recreational level, three (27%) at the middle school level, and all 11 principals having coaching experience at the high school level. Relative to their coaching, four (40%) had coached only boys and six (60%) both boys and girls.

**Coaches.** Fourteen coaching association presidents and active coaches, from different schools attending a meeting at the state association, voluntarily took part in the two focus groups, although demographic data were only obtained for 12 coaches (nine males, three females). On average, the 12 coaches were 49 years of age (ranging from 34 to 59 years) and all were Caucasian. The coaches had an average of 26 years of coaching experience (ranging from 11 to 37 years), with five currently coaching boys’ teams, two coaching girls’ teams, and four coaching both girls and boys (one individual did not respond to this item). Eleven of the 12 coaches were certified teachers, with seven either majoring or minoring in physical education or coaching. At the time of the focus groups, these individuals were teaching a variety of high school subjects including math (n=1), science (n=1), physics (n=1), health (n=1), history (n=3),
One coach taught both science and social studies. An additional individual was a retired teacher, while another was serving as a high school athletic director.

Parents. Eleven parents of high school athletes from one local school district in Michigan were asked to participate in two focus groups. Of the 11, six were male (55%) and five were female (45%). On average, the parents were 48.7 years of age (ranging from 44 to 55 years). Of the 11 participants, 10 were Caucasian (91%), while one (9%) was Hispanic. All parents had at least one child involved in high school sport within the last five years, ranging from one to three children currently involved in high school sport. The participants’ children had an average of 2.7 years of high school sport experience (ranging from a low of 1 to a high of 4 in sports that included cross-country, golf, tennis, basketball, softball, track, baseball, soccer, football, volleyball, swimming, diving, gymnastics, and lacrosse). All but one student-athlete of the parents participated in athletics outside of high school (91%), which included sports like soccer, ultimate Frisbee, AAU, golf, tennis, basketball, indoor soccer, lacrosse, softball, tennis, and diving. Finally, nine parents had formerly participated in high school sport (82%), while only two parents did not participate (18%).

Athletes. Twenty-one high school scholar athletes [11 males (52%) and 10 females (48%)] from different schools from around the state were gathered for an awards ceremony and voluntarily participated in three focus groups after parental permission was obtained. On average, the athletes were 17.5 years of age (ranging from 17 to 18 years), and all participants were in their senior year of high school. Of the 21 participants, 20 were Caucasian (95%), while 1 (5%) was African-American. The student athletes had an average of 4.3 years of sport experience (ranging from a low of 2 to a high of 11). While all 21 participants had some high school sport experience, 11 (52%) played at least one out-of-school sport as well. On average, the athletes played 2.4 sports in school (ranging from a low of 1 to a high of 4 sports) and 1.8 sports out of school (ranging from 1 to 4 sports). The sports represented in this population were cross country, soccer, volleyball, basketball, golf, swimming, field hockey, competitive cheer, tennis, bowling, baseball, wrestling, track and field, synchronized swimming, lacrosse, skiing, gymnastics, hockey, football, water polo, and softball.

Procedures

The focus groups were conducted by experienced qualitative researchers and trained graduate assistants. Both graduate assistants were doctoral students with a background in qualitative methodology and had previously conducted and published qualitative research studies. The training included group meetings to discuss the nature of qualitative (particularly focus group) research and the role of the focus group leader (Krueger, 1997). Students were trained to be cognizant of the fact that the participants of the sessions were given freedom to discuss the
questions with each other while the researcher was a passive facilitator. Focus groups were either held on-site at a professional meeting (i.e., Annual Principal Convention, or Scholar Athlete Award ceremony) or participants traveled to the university for completion of the data collection.

Each focus group consisted of a brief introduction of the researcher and a more specific description of the purpose for the study. Participants then read and signed an informed consent form that was approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board, completed a brief demographics questionnaire, and responded to the interview questions. A consistent set of instructions, procedures, and ground rules of discussion were followed in all groups. Follow-up questions were asked until the interviewers felt the questions were answered with adequate depth.

*Focus Group Question Guide*

All focus groups were conducted with a similar semi-structured interview methodology. Key questions in each group included: (1) what are the best or the most rewarding things about being a high school athletic director, principal, coach, parent, or athlete today; (2) what are the worst or least rewarding things; (3) what are the biggest challenges athletic directors, principals, coaches, parents, or athletes face in high school athletics today; and (4) what are the biggest issues facing high school student athletes today. While the previous research informed the investigators in this study and provided the groundwork for the current study, the interview guide questions were not directly based on this research. In the spirit of qualitative study, the investigators did not want to lead the participants. Instead, we began with some very broad questions that logically tied to the study’s overall purpose and would allow respondents to identify current concerns in high school sport. It is important to note, however, that some of the follow-up probes were driven by the research. For example, if respondents mentioned declining sportsmanship as a concern they might be asked about whether they noticed similar behaviors off the field (a probe driven by our knowledge of bracketed morality in the sport-related moral development research).

*Data Analysis*

Data analysis closely followed the procedures described by Krueger (1998), Patton (1990), and Maykut & Morehouse (1994). Each focus group was audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were reviewed thoroughly against the audiotapes by one of the researchers to ensure accuracy and completeness. Inductive content analyses were conducted separately by the three lead researchers, then compared and discussed until agreement was reached.

Each researcher re-read all the transcripts and, one question at a time, organized individual quotations into codes with a unique meaning. Researchers then organized the meaning units into
categories that were similar in content before collaborating and coming to consensus. When full agreement was met, the grouping served as a lower-order theme; if incongruency was a matter of language, not meaning, the research team agreed upon the clearest descriptor of the theme. If discrepancy in meaning occurred, the researchers discussed the themes until agreement was met.

After a comparison of these groupings was made (with discussion until agreement was reached) by three lead investigators, the groupings served as higher-order themes. The themes were organized based on the interview question, but, in a few cases, researchers double coded similar content across questions for a more thorough representation of the data. Finally researchers reached consensus on the names of lower and higher order themes and double-checked the organization of all data.

Findings

Six major themes emerged across the five participant groupings in response to the major question “what are the biggest issues facing high school student athletes today?” These included: inappropriate behaviors in high school sport; increased expectation and pressure; ramifications of over-commitment; health issues; coaching and administrative issues; and unmet athlete affiliation needs which affect motivation. Each of these themes is described below.

Inappropriate Behaviors in High School Sport

Inappropriate behaviors were described by all five groups of participants. Interestingly, inappropriate behaviors were discussed as exhibited by not only the athletes, but the coaches, parents, fans, and even the media. Three higher-order themes were identified within the general theme and included: athlete inappropriate behaviors and attitudes, poor sportsmanship, and politics and favoritism in high school sport.

Principals, coaches, athletic directors, and parents all identified instances of athletes demonstrating inappropriate behaviors. Many athletes did not show appreciation for the opportunities they received through sport participation, while others seem to need instant gratification without being willing to work. One athlete talked about how the sport culture today forces kids to be self-centered, “…some athletes get very one-track minded, and they think that the world revolves around them.” A principal commented that, “kids think of themselves and not the team and the coaches must constantly battle this attitude.” Inappropriate behaviors also were reflected by athletes portraying a sense of entitlement. An athletic director commented,

“Our athletes feel that they should get special treatment because they’re an athlete, that they should be able to skip class, maybe if their grades aren’t as good the teacher should
help them out a little bit…they think that just because they’re an athlete, that they’re just a cut above everybody else.”

Poor sportsmanship was identified as a problem by all groups except athletes and principals. Other groups identified poor sportsmanship on the part of athlete, by playing dirty and swearing at officials, a parent thinking that poor sportsmanship is not that bad, and even coaches rewarding poor sportsmanship by not having consequences for rude and unsportsmanlike behavior. High school fans were also described as having poor sportsmanship and seeing poor behavior as funny. One athletic director stated, “Students (fans) think it is a game and funny to have the AD come talk to them…they don’t always take poor sportsmanship seriously.” Finally, regarding poor sportsmanship, elite and professional role models were discussed as often depicting “things not to do” for high school athletes. A coach said,

“Like ESPN, our football players watch in the NFL and guys doing dances and spiking it and whatever else they are doing. We’re constantly telling our kids, do not act like that because you’re going to get a penalty, it’s degrading, and it does not represent our school well. There are several sports…in basketball they’re watching the NBA guys act like thugs and they think that’s the way to do it. And those people who are supposedly role models don’t even understand the impact they have on the kids today.”

It is a challenge for athletes to display good sportsmanship when all that is modeled to them by elite athletes, their fans, coaches, parents, and other athletes is poor sportsmanship.

The final higher-order theme reflecting inappropriate behaviors related to the politics and favoritism perceived as often seen in high school sport. Athletes discussed how frustrated they get because of the adult-driven politics that sometimes influence playing time and starting players. One athlete commented, “A lot of politics — dad on school board so someone starts.” Another athlete said, “You get so caught up trying to analyze the politics and you forget about the passion” depicting how politics take away from the purity of sports. Favoritism and politics also were seen across sports in that some sports get more attention or preferential treatment than others. A parent commented about, “optional training in the weight room, but only football can use it – it becomes a requirement.” Athletes also commented on teams who bring in more money receiving more attention, “favoritism as far as student body and community support.”

Increased Expectations for Success

The general theme most cited by the focus group participants’ was increased expectations for success placed on student athletes, a theme that included higher-order themes of increased expectations and pressure, parental issues: expectations and involvement, single and early sport
specialization pressure, over-emphasized outcome/winning, and academic standards for athlete issues. In general, the respondents frequently talked about the pressure placed on student athletes today; pressure not only to perform well and win, but also to produce academically. For example, one coach responded that there are “high expectations from top to bottom, not just on the playing field or court or whatever, we’re talking about their social lives, classroom, the whole thing.”

Some of the athletes themselves also indicated the pressure on students is much greater today than in previous generations. As one student said, “[sports] do force you to grow up too quickly – sometimes I want to have a weekend with my friends, I want to take a deep breath. Twenty years from now I’m not gonna remember every practice.”

Parental issues including problems with attitudes, expectations and involvement were frequently cited across all groups except for athletes. A wide range of sub-themes made up this overall category; some focused on inappropriate involvement (e.g., trying to coach their child when untrained as a coach) and failing to understand one’s role as a sport parent, while others focused on unrealistic expectations placed on athletes and an emphasis placed on earning college athletic scholarships (even in some cases when the child did not have the requisite talent). An athletic director commented on the impact of parental over-involvement,

“I think the parent puts the pressure on the kid to be an all-A student, to be the best athlete, and they also have rose-colored glasses. They think their son or daughter is the athlete that’s automatically going to get a college scholarship. I almost want to tell them, let them be a high school kid, let them enjoy the high school experience.”

It was also interesting to note that parent-to-parent issues were identified as reflected in the following excerpt:

“I think you also deal with the fact that as your kids get older there becomes a separation what other parents you are friends with based on your child’s talent. You were friends with somebody and all of a sudden you find that they’re not socializing with you or they’re less comfortable talking with you. And it’s kind of ridiculous, but it happens. You know. Their kid isn’t getting as much playing time or didn’t make the team and you know that whole thing can change the makeup of the relationship with the parent.”

Respondents from all five stakeholder groups identified single and early sports specialization as a major issue. Historically, school sports have been built on the philosophy that it would be in the student’s best interest to have the opportunity to participate in multiple sports throughout the school year (e.g., basketball, volleyball, and track). The rationale behind this assumption is to prevent stress, potential burnout, and injuries that might be associated with year round training
and to expose youth to different sports and coaches. Coaches also emphasized that multi-sport participation develops well-rounded athletes. For example, ice hockey players that also participate in soccer often are very good at playing the puck with their feet. However, many feel that by training year round one can earn a competitive advantage, and, while schools limit their athletic seasons, some athletes play sport year round by playing both on school and non-school teams. Respondents in this study felt there was a pressure to specialize and specialize early and that pressure can come from parents, coaches and the players themselves. Most interesting were the explanations offered for specialization, which included: the demand placed on coaches to win; coaches who coach school and non-school sports recruit athletes for out-of-school teams; younger coaches’ attitude that it is more acceptable to specialize; pressure to keep up with athletes who specialize; and a lack of understanding of the value of cross-training. In terms of ramifications of specialization, problems getting enough athletes to form teams in minor sports, athletes missing practices because of simultaneous sport commitments and having athletes recruited out of other sports to focus on one were all mentioned.

The presence of an overemphasized outcome/winning focus was also frequently discussed. This category included sentiments that parents and coaches overemphasize winning. In addition, a shift towards an extrinsic motivation orientation was noted with sub-themes centered around an increased focus on extrinsic rewards and the effects of extrinsic rewards. This perspective was nicely expressed in the following quote from one of the principal groups who indicated:

“\You know, that meaningful, personal wealth and glory. I think a lot of that drives all the steroids, sport specifics. I’m going to be on a 7th grade travel team, I’m going to have my personal coach and trainer. It’s all for that immense opportunity of making it to the big time.”

The final higher-order theme reflecting increased expectations for success centered on issues relating to academic standards for athletes. Principals and parents most frequently commented in this theme regarding the lack of standards or potential loopholes for athletes to get away with lower academic standards. One parent said, “Academic standards may be too weak – an athlete can fail a class and still play.” The theme also was reflected by the emphasis on non-educational expectations in the contemporary sports world. A principal stated, “Sport is so important today it takes away from academics – we are part of the problem by encouraging year round training.” Another principal said, “Sometimes there is too much focus on sport. What about ACT scores?” reflecting the relative lack of importance on getting into college based on scores compared to athletic ability.
Ramifications of Over-Commitment

All stakeholder groups discussed the ramifications of committing to so many activities with a high intensity. One of the first consequences for athletes who over-commit was their body breaking down. Athletes talked about being tired, staying up late at night, getting sick, and not taking the proper time to heal. One athlete said, “You can’t skip a day and that takes a toll on your body.” While high school students are typically under the age of 18, most high school athletes work longer and harder hours than an adult with a full-time job.

Given the reports of increased pressure and expectations, it is not surprising that three of the five stakeholder group types indicated that time management issues were critical for today’s student athletes. A general over-scheduling of activities was identified as well and the importance of today’s student athletes learning about time management. One athletic director noted:

“Just think of the time our athletes are putting in. They're in the classroom, they're trying to focus on athletics, plus they're involved in this AAU. Their summers are packed, kids can't be kids. They come into school as a 9th grader and they cloister themselves into this sports world to try to get some kind of reward at the end of it.”

Health Issues

Health issues including substance abuse, steroids, supplements, eating and body image issues were described as a problem that many high school athletes today face. These health issues were also products of the extreme amounts of pressure high school athletes are under to be the best at everything. Some turn to drinking and gambling, some to steroids, and others to eating disorders, all in the pursuit of success.

Four of the five participant groups mentioned substance abuse as an issue facing high school athletes today. Many of the sub-themes simply reported alcohol, recreational drugs, and tobacco use as issues that face young athletes. Potential causes of substance abuse identified by some of the focus groups included parental tolerance of alcohol use and peer pressure to drink. As one group of athletes indicated:

“Substance abuse is a big issue. It’s such a peer pressure thing, because some of the guys at the top of their games are the biggest abusers, especially with soccer. If you’re good and you play on a higher level team as a younger kid, you want to fit in. It kills you when you don’t because you don’t like being the little kid and younger kid, so you do everything you can (drink) to fit in.”
Principals talked about parental tolerance of alcohol in the following quote:

“Parents know what’s happening. They feel it is okay as long as the kids not driving. They condone partying. We wish there were more sanctions for parents who do this... So then the students think, well so and so's mom was there and it's okay to drink, we weren’t driving. Because they weren’t driving that night, it’s okay.”

Finally, some of the parents felt sports participation was not related to drug use. While both coaches and parents indicated that one thing that has changed over the years is that youths face much harsher repercussions for drug use than their counterparts in previous generations.

Four of the five participant groups mentioned steroids and supplements in particular as an issue. However, it is important to note that this topic typically came up in the groups when interviewers probed as a follow-up to discussions on alcohol and recreational drug use. The groups were mixed as to the extent of problems in this area, some indicating that it was an issue for some sports (e.g., football) and for athletes hoping to receive college scholarships or to be able to play in college. On the other hand, others felt performance enhancing drugs were not an issue for the majority of high school athletes. Finally, the general consensus was that steroid use was not nearly as big of an issue as alcohol and recreational drug use.

While only two of the five groups discussed eating and body image issues, athletes highlighted the prevalence of distorted body image perceptions for athletes in certain sports, like running and wrestling. Athletes stated some runners think they will run better if they are thinner, while some wrestlers develop eating disorders to make weight requirements. A parent mentioned unhealthy eating habits during competition for some athletes, “They don’t want to eat before events, which at times, involve considerable wait time and influence healthy eating practices.” Another athlete talked about societal and peer pressures to attain the ideal body shape with the statement, “external pressure to look good creates eating issues.”

Coaching and Administrative Issues

While most of the issues identified in high school sport were athlete-centered, coaching and administrative issues also emerged and included a lack of coaches and officials, a need for better coaching, the time commitment coaching requires, influence of non-school club coaches, school and non-school sport conflicts, financial problems, and issues involved in working with student athletes.
Three participant groups cited a lack of coaches and officials as a major threat to educational athletics. Not only were problems reported in obtaining officials, but retaining them was reflected in the following statement from a coach:

“Keeping coaches in the sport. Coaches don’t coach as long as they once did. For example, one association has a coach’s hall of fame criteria of 15 years of coaching experience but gets few applicants anymore because most coaches do not coach that long.”

It was generally felt that many coaches and officials are discontinuing involvement because of the constant criticism by parents and spectators and the poor sportsmanship displayed.

Not only is there a need for coaches in general, there is a need for better coaching, as cited by four of the five participant groups. It was generally concluded that coaches needed to adopt an educational perspective to athletics in which the focus is on personal development and education first, and winning second. Several groups also indicated that coaches needed to be better educated about such topics as communication and youth development. It was further suggested that coaches (especially males) working with female student athletes must make efforts to better understand females relative to such topics as team building, motivation and communication. Lastly, two groups mentioned the importance of coaches needing to learn how to process feedback from other stakeholders in the high school sports environment. This last point was nicely reflected in the following passage in which one principal stated, “Coaches have a difficult time taking constructive criticism, especially if it’s coming from a parent.” Similarly, another group indicated that “some coaches are too young and inexperienced. They just don’t have the training, or often react with emotions more than classroom teachers do. They don’t know how to work with parents.”

Another issue in getting and keeping good coaches is the time commitment coaching requires. A group of coaches brought up the point:

“You worry more about non-coaching stuff and have less time to coach because of that stuff — like supervision or liability. And transportation concerns, how to handle liability of parents or others when there are no more buses to take kids home. This takes more time from coaching.”

Financial issues were of concern in all five participant groups as an important issue for high school sports. These themes all centered on the lack of funds to run programs and the problems inadequate funding can cause. The sub-themes included: lack of funds for programs; need for fundraising; problems caused by inadequate funding; issues surrounding pay-for-play; and
increased financial burden for parents. It was also interesting that several groups mentioned the need for fundraising and how this issue takes away time from the coach to work with players. This sentiment was nicely reflected in the following quote by one of the high school coaches:

“I’ll tell you budget wise, if I just had the money that the school gave me, I wouldn’t be able to run the program. Wouldn’t be able to do it. I have to do camps, do other things, do yearbook. You’re not just a coach, you’re a fundraiser…things cost twice as much but I’ve got you know, half the money. What are you going to do? You’re going to run a good program you have to get out and do some things to raise some money.”

One principal discussed how differences in funds affect competition between programs when he stated:

“So many parents were wondering why kids on other teams were getting three bats per player and our kids were having to go out and buy their own bats…we’ve worked hard to build fund raisers in athletics so we can provide additional programs, so we can keep our competitive programs…[conversely,] these other schools had a football class, they have comprehensive weight training and money to pay a professional to be in there and do it. And so those kinds of challenges, it gets harder and harder.”

Issues surrounding pay-for-play (when public school districts ask participant families to pay a fee for their child to participate) were identified as a critical topic as well. Specifically, some respondents indicated that even though mechanisms exist for youth of lower socio-economic status to receive scholarships, some youth opt not to participate because of the fees involved for reasons such as pride and not wanting to be a burden to parents.

The final issue of coaching and administrative needs centered around working with student athletes today. Three of the five participant groupings discussed the need to teach character, instill discipline, and deal with the special needs of today’s athletes (e.g., students who act as their family’s caretaker). The following passage from the athletic directors discusses one group’s sentiments on the need for building character.

“We spend a lot of time on character coaching, trying to teach that to our coaches so they can pass that onto the kids. Less stress on the winning, more on character development. It just depends who you have as a coach how successful you are.”

Finally, one group indicated that they felt athletes today are relatively easy to deal with.
Unmet Affiliation Needs of Athletes Impact Motivation

The final general theme was comprised of only one higher order theme, unmet affiliation needs of athletes impacting their motivation. Parents were the only stakeholder group to bring up affiliation needs of athletes. Parents discussed how the time commitment in sport does not allow for socializing with friends. One parent said, “Practice requires so much time; there is no time for kids to hang with friends.” Another parent talked about how an athlete’s motivation to play a sport may decrease if their friends are no longer playing. A parent said,

“High school is tough socially. On the positive side, sport participation helps youth by helping them have an automatic group of friends in school. On the negative side, when the time commitment increases, some friends don’t make it or drop out, the athlete must make new friends or do the same.”

Discussion

It has been suggested that sport for children and youth is becoming more professionalized, characterized by a focus on competitive outcomes and winning with less emphasis on educational and developmental gains that come from the experience (Gould & Carson, 2004). In addition, the professionalized model focuses on intense training, single and early sport specialization, and year round training. Results from this study lend support to these observations. Respondents from the various stakeholder groups clearly indicated their concerns about an overemphasis on results and outcomes, increased pressure and expectations placed on young athletes, single and early sports specialization, parental issues characterized by over involvement and poor sportsmanship, and inappropriate attitudes on the part of participants, all components of the professionalization problem.

These findings should be of concern for athletic administrators, sport scientists, and coaching educators as they could threaten the positive youth developmental gains, which have been shown to come from sport (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles, Barber, Stone & Hunt, 2003; Hansen, Larson, & Drowkin, 2003). The findings also may help explain why, of all extracurricular activities, sport is at times associated with negative developmental consequences. In particular, if a shift occurs from an intrinsic to extrinsic orientation for participation one could expect less motivation to be active and invest in the activity once extrinsic rewards cease (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Similarly, it has been shown that sport motivational climates that are characterized by an outcome versus mastery orientation have been associated with a decline in motivation in children and lower levels of moral development (Kavussanu, & Ntuomanis, 2003; Miller, Roberts, & Ommundsen, 2005).
It is important to note that while these results identify important concerns that participants felt need to be addressed in school sports, not one of the 67 participants felt that high school sports do not have positive benefits for youth. In fact, while not presented here because of space limitations, all the respondents identified “numerous” developmental benefits of participation and felt that school sport participation should be highly encouraged. However, they voiced concern that if issues such as those identified in this manuscript are not addressed, school sports may not achieve the developmental gains associated with them.

Increased expectations and pressure was a major theme identified by the respondents. Not only are these issues a concern in the sport context but they parallel findings that children in Western cultures are perceived to be over scheduled and leading very hectic lives in general (Locker & Cropley, 2004). What remains to be studied are the long term mental and physical health effects of such pressure and expectation? In the sport psychology research increased expectations and pressure have been shown to be associated with burnout in young athletes and withdrawal from previously enjoyable activities (Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1996; Gould, Udry, Tuffey, & Loehr, 1996). However, the related long-term physical and mental health effects have yet to be examined (e.g., do people who burnout of sport less often take part in fitness activities later in life), although health psychology research has shown a clear link between stress and illness and disease in athletes (Perna, Antoni, Baum, Gordon & Schneiderman, 2003). Identifying the most effective and efficient ways to help youth cope with these pressures and expectations is also an important avenue of future inquiry. While stress management strategies would certainly be appropriate to teach young people, some scholars (Coakley, 1992) have suggested that it is the adult dominated and controlled social system of sport itself that needs to be changed to reduce stress. If not, we would be managing the symptoms versus the source of the stress.

It is also important to recognize that factors such as increased expectations and pressure may be misattributed as a scapegoat for ubiquitous achievement pressures (Luthar, Shoum, & Brown (2006). Specifically, Luthar and colleagues (2006) found negligible effects of extracurricular activity participation on affluent eighth graders’ distress and substance use. Parental criticism and a lack of after-school supervision, however, were associated with negative mental health effects. It also suggests that youth development is complex and influenced by multiple factors which interact together. Hence, in examining negative effects of professionalization it is important to look at all the factors that make it up (e.g., sports specialization, over involved and highly critical parents, intense year-round training) and their interacting influences.

Finally, related to the increased expectations and pressure finding, is the literature on the overscheduling hypothesis, viewed as the notion that youth are suffering psychological damage by engaging in too many organized activities as a result of pressure from parents and other external sources (Mahoney, Harris & Eccles, 2006). In their extensive review of the scientific literature
on the topic, however, Mahoney and colleagues (2006) concluded that only a small number of children are actually over-scheduled and that there is very limited support that over-scheduling is related to poor psychological adjustment in youth. In contrast, they feel a more important issue is getting more children involved in activities.

Given the differences between the views of the participants interviewed in this study and the general literature on over-scheduling, pressure, and expectations and over-scheduling as component of it, should be more closely examined in the sport environment because of all extracurricular activities, sport can be one of the most time consuming. Especially important is the need to look at the minority of youth who might participate year round, be involved in other activities, have high academic expectations, and significant others who pressure them.

The parental issues general theme identified by the respondents is consistent with recent literature in sport showing how over-involved parents can negatively affect young athlete’s development and well-being. In fact, recent evidence shows that as many as three of 10 sports parents may be behaving in ways that are counterproductive to their child’s development (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006). This finding is also consistent with the general psychology literature showing that some of today’s parents can become over involved in their child’s lives and negatively influence their child’s independence and autonomy development (Larson, Pearce, Sullivan, & Jarrett, 2007). While a number of sport groups are trying to address these issues through sport parent training (clearly an area needing additional study), little if any literature focuses on the efficacy of such training.

Substance abuse (especially alcohol use) themes identified by these school sports stakeholder groups parallel general concerns identified by youth development researchers (Eaton, Kann, Kinchen, Ross, Hawkins, Harris, Lowry, McManus, Chyen, Shanklin, Lim, Grunbaum, & Wechsler, 2006; Regan & Brookins-Fisher, 2002). It is ironic to note, however, that some state interscholastic sport associations are focusing their efforts on steroid and performance enhancing drug testing (most likely as a result of the revelations revealed in recent years from professional baseball), but ignoring what our respondents and other researchers (Josephson Institute, 2007) reported as a more prevalent problem, alcohol and recreational drug use. This certainly has public policy implications and identifies the need for having evidenced based practice guide sport policy decisions. However, it is not suggested that performance enhancing drug use is not a legitimate and real concern in young people (estimated to be 2 to 4% in males, Regan & Brookins-Fisher, 2002). However, alcohol and recreational drug use are concerns affecting many more youth today (19 to 25%, Eaton et al., 2006; Regan & Brookins-Fisher, 2002), but receives less attention.
Our results also suggest certain psychological skills would be important to develop in youth participating in the school sport domain. These include self-regulation strategies such as goal and priority setting and managing time. It is encouraging that recent research has shown that goal setting is an effective technique that can be taught to young people through sport (Brunelle, Danish, & Forneris, 2007). It would be interesting then to expand this research to examine the most efficacious ways of helping young people balance multiple tasks and priorities and whether programs could be developed to enable coaches to teach these skills. It would also be useful to determine how developmental differences in children and youth influence the efficacy of teaching and using these techniques.

A second psychological skill set to teach high school athletes would focus on emotional control strategies. Research by Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin (2003) has shown that emotional regulation is one of the developmental benefits associated with sport involvement of high school students, while Weiss (2006) has found the these skills can be effectively taught through a life skills golf training program and then transferred to non-sport endeavors. Given the increasing expectations and pressures youth are facing and the propensity of sport for teaching such emotional management skills, these techniques should be more purposefully taught by coaches. Finally, many coaches teach athletes stress management techniques as a performance enhancement skill but do not necessarily stress their use outside of sport in general life situations. Doing so may be critical for today’s scholastic athlete as some evidence suggests that automatically transferring psychological skill use (e.g., goal setting) from sport to other life settings does not always occur (Martinek, Schilling, & Johnson, 2001).

The inappropriate attitudes and sportsmanship themes were certainly disconcerting and question the assumption that sport participation builds character. It is also consistent with recent evidence from the Josephson Institute (2007) that shows that the moral behavior and attitudes of youth are declining. At the same time, however, research shows that the moral development and sportspersonlike behavior of young athletes can be enhanced under the right conditions (Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields, & Shewchuk, 1986). Thus, sports can build character if conducted appropriately. Furthermore, from the data collected in this study it appears that there is a need to do so.

One of many potential benefits of sport participation is helping youth learn how to be a member of a team and learning to take and accept roles. The data collected in this investigation, however, suggests that this lesson may be harder to convey because of the attitudes adopted by fans and leaders alike and feelings of entitlement on the part of the athlete. This reality certainly suggests that the process by which this attitude can be adopted needs further study as team building strategies have not been extensively studied in youth athletic populations.
While these results focus on issues involved for adolescents taking part in school sports today, more developmental research is badly needed. For example, research needs to examine how professionalization of sport occurs and influences children at different ages and stages of athletic involvement. Similarly, it has suggested that sport parenting be examined as a developmental process looking both at how parental involvement may differ between stages of child development as well as on the experience of the parent (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). It is also unlikely that simple sport participation-psychosocial gain effects exist. Psychological characteristics of the participants and their interaction with particular context factors must be examined (Fredrick’s et al., 2002).

Finally, these results have important implications for coaching education efforts. First, coaching education programs aimed at school sport coaches should focus particular attention on many of the issues identified in this study. How to most effectively communicate, strategies to facilitate positive youth development, character education, sports specialization, and ways to receive and process feedback seem to be particularly important to address. New coaches (especially those who are not trained as teachers) must also understand the context of high school sport and how educational athletics differ from other types of sports programs. It is not only important that that coaches understand the context of scholastic sports but be prepared to effectively counter the threats to educational athletics.

Like all studies, the present investigation had limitations. First, the parent focus group was drawn from only one school (compared to the other stakeholder groups that represented individuals working in school districts from around the state). Thus, parent findings may be more specific to one particular context. Second, the other four focus groups while drawn from as statewide pool contained relatively few minority members. There is a need then to conduct additional interviews with individuals representing more diverse communities. Third, focus group research is excellent at identifying key issues characterizing a phenomenon. However, there is no way in knowing how widespread the issues identified. Follow-up survey research with the various stakeholder groups is needed in this regard.

In summary, sport has been shown to be an important vehicle for enhancing positive youth development and life skills. However, the present results provide evidence that supports the contention that the professionalization of youth sports threatens the positive benefits of participation. Hence, efforts must be made to reaffirm youth sports developmental focus while simultaneously instructing sport personnel on how to more specifically and deliberately foster personal growth and teach life skills. Practical interventions must also be guided by developmental and sport psychology research and theory. Finally, coaching educators should use findings to drive the content of their educational efforts.
References


Author Notes

The authors would like to thank Jack Roberts, Executive Director and the staff of the Michigan High School Athletic Association for their assistance in obtaining participants for the study. In addition, we would like to thank Jim Ballard, Executive Director of the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals Association for his assistance. A special thanks is extended to the parents, athletes, coaches, principals, and athletic directors who volunteered to take part in this project.